

TEST VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMMISSION OF INQUIRY – VISION FOR HAMPSHIRE 2050

THEME 6 RURAL HAMPSHIRE

Rural Hampshire: how economic, social, technological and environmental changes are likely to affect rural communities and the potential for a rural renaissance and new opportunities for rural communities.

The changing profile of rural communities and the impact that technology and connectivity has had on the rural population how this translates to the potential future profile utilising the social and demographic theme evidence. How services are provided in rural communities and the opportunity for future self sustaining rural communities.

Rural Connectivity and Communications

- Transport

The Council considers it important to retain a public transport service within rural communities to ensure residents do not suffer from social exclusion and to enable a mix of residents to live within these areas. New technologies could provide new opportunities for demand responsive transport to help meet needs, and potentially improve communications between local residents to operate self help groups more efficiently

Alternative means of transport such as electric cycles are enabling more people to cycle greater distances meaning greater scope for this as a means of transport in rural areas. Advances in the use of autonomous vehicles, could also in time lead to better connectivity for some rural communities.

- Broadband

Test Valley is the district with the highest proportion of premises without access to superfast broadband (7-11%) even after the third wave of Hampshire Broadband contract ends. Broadband should now be considered as the fourth utility and essential to the effective functioning of both modern living and business. It is vital for environmental, social and economic reasons. Adequate digital connectivity helps reduce rural isolation especially for the young and elderly. This is compounded as public services increasingly go online and are less readily available by other means. It can provide an alternative to long car journeys and/or need for good public transport to reach certain services and facilities. Good broadband can also encourage more tourists to visit helping to support local services and facilities.

The Council considers the provision of broadband is important for the rural economy as it provides opportunities for home working and for rural businesses to function, providing employment locally without the need to travel. Changes in the economy mean more flexible working practices and working from home are increasing, enabling a sustainable alternative to travelling, as well as balancing home and work life. Inadequate and poor broadband connections serve to frustrate this approach, making rural communities less attractive to live in, or becoming dormitories as residents commute long distances to work.

Rural businesses that rely on broadband for their business lack opportunities to thrive and diversify without adequate digital communications. Lack of decent broadband stifles creativity and innovation as people are forced to travel long distances to work.

- **Phone coverage**

There is a lack of 4G coverage in Test Valley, and in addition for parts of the rural area which do have coverage, this is restricted to service by only one mobile network provider, which limits consumer choice and competition.

A poor mobile phone signal is also often in areas where there is similarly poor digital connections, which compounds issues of sustainability of rural communities and businesses and stifles innovation and creativity.

The Council considers that good mobile phone coverage can improve the opportunities for businesses within rural areas and make working easier. It can also help with reducing social isolation, and improve resident's access to other services and facilities. Improved phone coverage may encourage tourists and assist visitors to the rural areas as well.

(See also broadband comment above)

Rural Enterprise & Economy

- **Farming and land based sector**

The third and final round of EU LEADER funding has been a great success in Test Valley and engagement by the local authority with businesses has been an important element to its success. The Council considers it crucial that a UK replacement scheme is put in place through the proposed UK Shared Prosperity Fund. The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) has expressed concern that in the absence of a replacement scheme, there would be nothing available in terms of comparable funding to support small rural businesses.

- **Tourism**

This should continue to grow in size as a rural economy sector, with the quality of the rural areas and their: landscapes, historic environment and biodiversity its unique selling point. The countryside is therefore a key tourism asset. Hampshire is well placed to broaden its attractiveness for tourism, particularly for day trips and short stays due to the quality of its countryside and its geographical location in the UK. Tourism should continue to be supported.

Better use of technology in the future with improved interactive websites etc. could also be used to encourage more sustainable tourism within rural areas. This could be further supported by appropriate infrastructure to encourage walking and cycling and access by bus/train, with access to real time information, interactive mapping etc. making journey planning easier.

The rapid growth in new technologies, notably Airbnb and demand-aggregation sites such as booking.com etc. present significant challenges. With the former temporary tourism accommodation is being generated outside the scope of both existing

regulation (e.g. planning) and can have other negative impacts (as many tourism cities are now experiencing) and happens at the individual level outside existing support networks such as Tourism South East (TSE).

- **Market towns**

The Council has a concern that market town's provision of services and facilities could be 'hollowed out' due to polarisation, resulting from the two trends of services moving online, and of moving further afield to locate in larger settlements. These trends exclude those that who don't have access to online services and/or don't drive. Market towns could in future lose facilities in the same way as has been happening in villages.

- **Employment (both within and as high value hinterland to drive attractiveness of high end employers across Hampshire)**

In should be noted that 10% of jobs are in rural areas, and only 10% of these (1% overall) are in land based industries.

The quality of the countryside is also key to supporting the attraction of Hampshire to high net worth individuals.

- **SME's**

The Council has no specific comments on this issue.

- **Home working**

There will likely be greater scope for this to continue to grow in the future with the opportunities that new technology will afford.

(See also broadband and phone coverage comments above).

Rural Living

- **Farming**

The Council considers that the post Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) farming and land management support regime, with farmers as land managers as well as food producers will be crucial. Efficient and productive agriculture should operate alongside maintenance and opportunities for enhancing environmental assets.

- **Land management**

The Council has no specific comments on this issue.

- **Protected and historic landscapes**

These are considered to be key assets and vital to maintaining the quality of the rural environment.

- **Climate (medium term climate impact modelling/predictions?)**

Whilst the impact of climate change should be minimised and measures taken to mitigate adverse affects, there will also be potential opportunities for new and expanded crops e.g. vineyards, from which tourism may also benefit.

- Natural Environment and natural capital approach

The Council supports this approach in so far as it can be delivered through available mechanisms when opportunities arise.

Rural Communities

- Profile

The Council has no specific comments on this issue.

- Social impacts

Housing – many rural communities have a need for affordable housing and/or more types and sizes of housing to meet local community needs as the population changes. Affordable housing, particularly social rented housing (given affordability constraints), is needed in order to meet housing need, retain mixed communities and avoid social polarisation of villages. Whilst the Council can help identify need by working with rural communities, one of the biggest challenges is the availability of land that is connected to the existing community.

The mix of housing is important as the preponderance towards large houses in new developments creates pressures and does not best meet local housing needs. Starter homes and smaller homes that would allow older residents to downsize and stay in their own communities should be a priority if we hope to keep villages sustainable and not become dormitories.

- Role

Rural communities perform a variety of functions. Land based or agricultural industries have their base in rural communities. In many cases, rural communities accommodate rural workers associated with local agri-industries.

Villages are increasingly attractive places to live due to the quietness and perceived sense of community. Increasingly, villages with historic buildings/parks and gardens are becoming tourist destinations. This results in both opportunity for local businesses but also represents a potential impact (e.g. increased traffic, parking etc.)

Villages should not become dormitories. Local councils have a key role in mediating between community needs and market demand for community facilities e.g. through planning policies to protect shops, public houses etc. from changes of use, where these remain commercially viable. Six-eight rural public houses in Test Valley have either recently closed or are at threat of closure. Test Valley has the highest number of community shops (six) in Hampshire and these should also be supported.

- Health and wellbeing

The closure of public houses and shops, which in small villages or hamlets may be the only facility in existence, has a major detrimental impact. For many this will have a detrimental impact on wellbeing and serve to increase the sense of isolation. The Council support the Importance of community facilities for maintaining sustainable rural communities. Future reform of business rates should recognise the social value of shops, public houses and other community facilities.

Walkability – rural communities are often subject to ‘rat runs’ for local traffic making walking between different parts of a village dangerous or difficult. With an ageing population and to encourage walking as part of a healthy lifestyle, many rural communities need footpaths.

- *Community resilience e.g. environmental/service challenges*

The Council with partners has established a Test Valley Resilience Forum which meets twice a year and sees a number of representatives from town and parish councils and local resilience forums come together with representatives of Test Valley Borough Council, Hampshire County Council, the Environment Agency, Hampshire Constabulary and Hampshire Fire and Rescue to discuss preparations for major incidents. It is therefore a partnership between communities and statutory agencies. A number of our parishes already have local resilience plans in place (the most in Hampshire), and other parishes are encouraged to develop their own. The Council has a member who a resilience champion chairs the forum. The origin of the forum is the floods in 2014. The communities that were the best prepared to deal with the floods were those who had already created resilience plans of some nature. Communities learn from each other the forum goes from strength to strength.

- *Role of voluntary/community based organisations*

Voluntary and community based organisations are perceived as filling the gap in services available to rural communities and which continue to face increasing demand from a rising older population. Services like Unity (formerly Test Valley Community Services) who provide community transport, provide a crucial service to the elderly and disabled in terms of transportation, particularly where bus services are no longer available or are so infrequent so as to make a simple return journey onerous and time consuming.

Overall, district and parish councils provide a valuable means of engaging most effectively with both businesses and communities through this current period of intense change.