

Rural Proofing

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To inform members of the work that has been carried out by the Countryside Agency and other organisations on the rural proofing of policies and services and the guidance that has been given and to recommend the appropriate adoption of this by the District Council.

2. Recommendations

It is recommended that Members:

- 2.1 **Agree to the inclusion of rural proofing under the new committee report heading of 'Equality and Diversity Issues'.**
- 2.2 **That the guidance notes produced are circulated to senior officers throughout the District Council**
- 2.3 **The issue of rural proofing is brought to the attention of the North Wiltshire Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and the Wiltshire LSP.**

3. Links to the Corporate and Business Area Objectives

- 3.1 Links to two of the Council's Corporate priorities which are as follows:
- i) Buoyant economy – aims to have a diverse and flexible local economy. Put in place mechanisms to identify the needs of urban and rural communities and work with community groups and partner organisations to respond to those needs. A key action under this heading is to incorporate rural proofing into the delivery of council services.
 - ii) Equality & Diversity (including young and older people) – to embrace and promote equality of access and opportunity within the communities of North Wiltshire and to celebrate diversity by responding to the needs of diverse groups & individuals.

4. Background

- 4.1 Rural proofing is the process of assessing the different impacts that a policy might have in rural areas and where necessary making adjustments or compensations to reflect rural needs and circumstances.
- 4.2 Rural proofing should be a mainstream activity, not a policy in its own right and should be integrated as part of the development process for all strategies produced
- 4.3 The Rural White Paper 'Our Countryside: The Future' (2000) introduced the Governments Commitment to rural proofing policy development. Government Departments and Government Offices for the Regions have been required to report annually on how their policies have been rural proofed since 2001. Local authorities are not subject to the same requirement, but it is considered good practice to carry out rural proofing of policies.

5. The Countryside Agency – Think Rural

5.1 In March 2004 the Countryside Agency and the Local Government Association conducted a survey to assess local authorities existing knowledge and application of rural proofing (See Appendix 1). Findings were:

- That the majority of those surveyed felt that rural proofing could be useful.
- The survey re-enforced the message that transport/access to services and housing are considered to be the most significant issues facing rural communities.
- The importance of having a member and officer acting as advocates for rural issues.
- There is a need to increase the promotion of the benefits of rural proofing to Local Strategic Partnerships.
- A good start has been made by authorities on rural proofing within Best Value and CPA.
- It appears to have a good fit with the work of scrutiny committees.

5.2 The Countryside Agency also commissioned consultants to carry out a project that assisted 5 district council's in the East Midlands to carry out rural proofing activities. Lessons learnt common to all authorities were as follows:

- The introduction of rural proofing is best achieved by utilising existing corporate processes.
- The best method of introducing rural proofing into an authority is to use common corporate service and project planning process template that can be used as a standard template.
- Such a process would dovetail with the council's performance management framework. This could then be transferred to the LSP.
- Embed rural proofing at the very beginning of the policy or project planning process.
- Good rural data is a vital part of rural proofing.
- Members need to be directly involved in the process.

5.3 The Countryside Agency has also produced a Rural Policy Makers Check List (see Appendix 2) and a separate check list for LSP's and community strategies.

6. Rural Proofing of North Wiltshire Policies

6.1 There are various definitions of what is considered to be rural. The Countryside Agency's Ward Level Definition of Rural Areas defines 76% of North Wiltshire wards as being rural. What is not considered rural are most of the wards together with North Wootton Bassett.

6.2 As all policies and services are agreed through the Committee process in North Wiltshire, it is felt that a good starting point for rural proofing would be to include the subject under the new heading shortly to be added to all committee reports of 'Equality and Diversity Issues'. Guidance notes will be produced that will outline what is to be considered under this heading will be produced when the new report format is agreed.

- 6.3 The author would then need to confirm in the report that the rural proofing questions had been considered and note any adjustments made to take into consideration the rural impact if necessary.
- 6.4 The rural proofing committee report guidance will take the form of 6 questions (see appendix 3) that must be asked when formulating policies. These have been chosen using the Countryside Agencies Policy Makers Checklist.
- 6.5 A full copy of both of the check lists formulated by the Countryside Agency will also be forwarded to CMB and all Section Heads within the Council as guidance so that rural proofing can be embedded into all council services. In particular, it should be considered when preparing the Local Development Frameworks.
- 6.6 SOLACE and The Commission for Rural Communities have jointly produced a document entitled 'Rural Proofing the Shared Priorities: a Decision Makers Guide. This framework is intended to help local authorities understand the rural dimension of the shared priorities that have been agreed by central and local government. This will also be circulated throughout the council to officers and members.

7. Financial Implications

- 7.1 There are no direct financial implications.

8. Community & Environmental Implications

- 8.1 Understanding the rural dimension in what is predominately a rural district, will improve services for the community.

9. Equal Opportunities Implications

- 9.1 There are no equal opportunity implications.

Documentation used in the preparation of this report

- Background papers

REPORT OF THE COMMUNITY & ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIC MANAGER TO THE EXECUTIVE – 2nd FEBRUARY 2006

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