

## **Economy and Growth Committee**

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**Date of Meeting:** 16 September 2021

**Report Title:** Rural Action Plan

**Report of:** Peter Skates, Director of Growth and Enterprise

**Report Reference No:** EG/07/21-22

**Ward(s) Affected:** All

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### **1. Executive Summary**

- 1.1.** The report sets out the background to the Rural Action Plan approved by Cabinet in March 2019, and arrangements to update and refresh the Plan for the period 2022 to 2025. The report provides an opportunity for the committee to discuss the priorities going forward and inform the development of the Plan.
- 1.2.** The Rural Action Plan sets out an approach to building a strong and resilient rural economy with strong, supportive rural places and communities. It aligns with the strategic aims and objectives in the Council's Corporate Plan 2021-25:
  - **Open** – Through its contribution to the economy of Cheshire East, the rural area supports a sustainable financial future for the council.
  - **Fair** – The economy in rural areas supports the wellbeing of our communities.
  - **Green** – The economy in rural areas contributes to Cheshire East being 'A thriving and sustainable place', particularly in relation to it being a great place for people to live, work and visit, contributing to thriving urban and rural economies, the environment and our quality of place as well as thriving and active rural communities.

## **2. Recommendations**

- 2.1.** To approve the preparation of a Rural Action Plan 2022 -25
- 2.2.** To approve the workstreams identified in paragraph 6.2.
- 2.3.** To approve the setting up of a Member Advisory Panel, to provide guidance on the scope and priorities within the workstreams and drafting of the Rural Action Plan.
- 2.4.** To note that the draft Rural Action Plan 2022 -25 will be brought back to Committee in 2022.

## **3. Reasons for Recommendations**

- 3.1.** Cheshire East is defined under the Rural Services Network SPARSE rural classification as 'predominantly rural', while the Defra Rural Classification for the Borough is 'urban with significant rural'.
- 3.2.** The Rural Action Plan (2018/19 - 2021/22) sets out measures that help to achieve the aims and objectives of the Corporate Plan in a predominantly rural area. The Plan supports the aim of being a thriving and sustainable place and priorities such as providing a great place for people to live, work and visit, reducing the impact on our environment and supporting thriving urban and rural economies with opportunities for all. There is a specific action to deliver a Rural Action Plan to support *Thriving and active rural communities*.
- 3.3.** The Rural Action Plan relates to the whole borough and deals with a range of matters. The Plan is due for a refresh for 2022/23 onwards so the opportunity exists to review the current position and set out the priorities going forward. By the nature of rural affairs, the action plan needs to be able to reflect changes in national policies and local priorities.

## **4. Other Options Considered**

- 4.1.** There are no other options to consider other than a decision not to proceed in the review and refresh of the Rural Action Plan.

## **5. Background**

- 5.1.** Just under 180,000 people, live in rural communities in Cheshire East, including the rural towns. Therefore, there is a need to ensure that delivery of our corporate outcomes meet the needs of rural communities and continue to support Cheshire East's quality of place. Cheshire East is a member of the Rural Services Network defined under its SPARSE rural classification as a Council considered predominantly rural, while the Defra Rural Classification for the Borough is 'urban with significant rural'.

- 5.2.** Cheshire East Council's Rural Action Plan was adopted in January 2019 with the aim of helping to inform strategic choices and identify priorities regarding the rural area, based on the Council's strategies and plans at that time.
- 5.3.** The overall aim of the plan is to help inform strategic choices as part of meeting the Council's strategic outcomes and to identify priorities regarding the rural area. This was based on the Council's existing strategies and plans along with the related evidence base. It does not replace those strategies and plans, but rather provides a rural focus on them to help decision makers ensure that the rural community, economy and environment are understood and to help to co-ordinate actions.
- 5.4.** In 2018/2019, under the guidance of a Cabinet sub-group, a working group representing services across the Council drew on research, external advice and service experience to identify a number of key priorities and suggested actions across a number of strategic issues. Several Council strategies and plans that relate to rural priorities were identified and their contribution considered against four themes of connectivity, economy, community (life chances and choices) and environment. As stated previously, the intention was to enable Council strategies to have a rural focus to help decision makers ensure that the rural dimensions are understood and to help to co-ordinate actions.
- 5.5.** The focus of the current Plan was aimed at how the Council could help to build a strong and resilient rural economy with strong, supportive rural places and communities. Actions related to:
- Digital Connectivity: Broadband and mobile
  - Access for residents, business and visitors
  - Rural Housing
  - Strong, supportive rural places and communities
  - Neighbourhood planning
  - Planning for a green and sustainable place
  - Visitor and cultural economy
  - Rural based businesses
- 5.6.** The Plan is intended to provide a framework that would allow further consideration of policy and strategic direction with a rural focus. It was recognised that this would be part of an ongoing process that needs to be able to adapt to reflect changes. For example, since its publication, the Council has adopted a new Corporate Plan, committed to be carbon neutral by 2025 and to influence carbon reduction across the borough, and has had to respond to the impact of the Covid pandemic on the economy and communities.
- 5.7. Refreshing the Plan**

- 5.8.** The rural economy does not sit in isolation from other factors: Planning, affordable housing, public transport, access to health facilities, education, older people's services, fuel poverty, viable local services, character/quality of environment and community engagement are all part of an associated matrix.
- 5.9.** Therefore, input will be required across a range of services with the intention of developing a baseline from which the refreshed plan can be developed. It is proposed that the current Action Plan will be reviewed to identify progress against the actions and the identified performance indicators. Based on that review, feedback from the Economy and Growth Committee and identification of any further significant rural issues, opportunities and priorities, it is intended to 'refresh' the Plan to cover the next three-year period of 2022 - 2025.
- 5.10.** It should also be noted that in the 31 months since the Action Plan was approved by Cabinet, 19 months of which have been impacted severely by the presence of the pandemic. The Rural community has seen increased challenges with lockdowns, restrictions, and isolation.
- 5.11.** Having regard to the pandemic, and with actions having been impacted or interrupted by the pandemic, it is currently assumed that the original priorities for action listed in 5.5 will remain valid for the period to 2025. However, it is also assumed that the emphasis and detail of those actions will need to reflect economic recovery from the pandemic, the impact of changes due to Brexit (eg changes to agricultural payments and a move to Environmental Land Management schemes) and climate change policy.
- 5.12.** In addition, since the original Rural Action Plan, the Council has a new Corporate Plan for the period 2021-2025, an Environment Strategy and Carbon Action Plan. Specifically, the Corporate Plan identifies the need for 'Thriving and active rural communities', and the need for a Rural action plan, digital connectivity programme and, as part of bus review, deliver improved accessibility to services and employment opportunities.
- 5.13. Links to sub-regional and wider work**
- 5.14.** Rural issues and opportunities rarely follow administrative boundaries and there may be common cause with adjoining Authorities on some matters. At sub-regional level, the economic strategies of the Cheshire and Warrington Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) can also have a bearing. The three local authorities and the LEP have also established a Sustainable and Inclusive Growth Commission to advise on Economic Growth, Health, Sustainability and Inclusivity.

- 5.15.** In order to address the need for a specific rural focus, a Rural Strategy Group was set up in 2020 as an advisory body, providing guidance and support to Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester and Warrington Councils in developing and implementing strategies and action plans to support the long-term physical, social and economic development of the rural area. In doing so, the Group can also inform and influence the wider sub-regional agenda, including advising the Local Enterprise Partnership on the economy in rural areas.
- 5.16.** Membership of the Rural Strategy Group, through appointment by the Councils, consists of individuals and representatives of organisations who possess the appropriate skills and knowledge relating to rural matters to provide expertise, guidance, and support. This group offers an opportunity to access additional advice as the Council reviews the current Plan and considers the priorities going forward.
- 5.17.** At a national level, the Council is engaged in a number of networks with interest in the economy in Rural issues. For example, the County Council's Network is addressing the needs of rural and large county areas in the levelling-up agenda through its campaign 'Counties: Leading Recovery, Delivering Renewal'. Meanwhile, 'Revitalising Rural, Realising the Vision' is a campaign run by the RSN, which sets out a number of policy asks in 14 key subject areas to help support rural areas to achieve their full potential, and to 'level-up'. Also, the Countryside Climate Network is a subnetwork of UK100 representing local authorities in predominantly rural areas who pledge to secure the future for their communities by delivering on the promise of the UK's Net Zero goal.

## **6. Going Forward**

- 6.1.** The overriding key priorities identified in the current Action Plan remain relevant and appropriate, and therefore officers consider that these priorities should remain as the key workstreams to form the foundations of the refreshed updated Rural Action Plan.
- 6.2.** These workstreams are:
- Digital Connectivity: Broadband and mobile
  - Access for residents, business and visitors
  - Rural Housing
  - Strong, supportive rural places and communities
  - Neighbourhood planning
  - Planning for a green and sustainable place
  - Visitor and cultural economy
  - Rural based businesses
- 6.3.** Approval from Members is sought to progress with these workstreams.

## **7. Member Advisory Panel**

- 7.1.** To progress the drafting of the Rural Action Plan 2022-2025 and provide further guidance to officers, it is proposed to set up an informal Members Advisory Panel of three Members drawn from the Economy and Growth Committee. This will be subject to nominations received and appointments approved by the Head of Governance and Democratic Services in line with the relevant protocols in the Constitution, with further terms of reference to be agreed.
- 7.2.** The final draft of the refreshed Rural Action Plan will be brought back to Committee for discussion and endorsement.

## **8. Consultation and Engagement**

- 8.1.** No additional consultation is proposed as part of this process as the Rural Action Plan is primarily intended to provide a rural focus for the delivery of plans and strategies, each of which would normally be consulted on separately. It is proposed that a Member Advisory Panel be set up to provide further engagement and guidance in drafting the Plan. The opportunity will also be taken to engage with the Rural Strategy Group where relevant, as this offers an opportunity to engage a range of rural interests. It is there to provide additional guidance and support to Cheshire East and other Councils when developing and implementing strategies and action plans to support the long-term physical, social and economic development of the rural area.

## **9. Implications**

### **9.1. Legal**

- 9.1.1.** There are no direct legal implications arising from the report and its recommendations.

### **9.2. Finance**

- 9.2.1.** Actions covered by the rural action plan will be delivered within existing service budgets, normally related to the lead service identified in the plan. While the future of funding arrangements for agriculture, the environment and rural development is currently unclear, it is hoped that the plan may continue to provide the Council with an approach to what shapes the character and nature of the rural area, in preparation for any future changes to policy and funding. Although variously defined as Rural (see para. 5.1), the Council is not in receipt of a Government Rural Services Delivery Grant as the grant is allocated on the basis of population super sparsity, which measures the proportion of an authority's population that resides in output areas with fewer than 0.5 persons per hectare.

### **9.3. Policy**

**9.3.1.** Cheshire East Council's rural action plan is set in the context of how existing strategies deliver on the rural agenda and at the same time, helping to identify those gaps that need to be addressed in the future. A number of Council strategies and plans that relate to rural priorities contribute to delivery of the Plan.

**9.3.2.** The economy in rural areas and its contribution to 'quality of place' play an important role in Cheshire East, contributing to economic well-being. The Rural Action Plan will provide a framework for consideration of future policy and strategic direction in the context of changes in national policy and related funding.

### **9.4. Equality**

**9.4.1.** Given that the proposal does not represent any change of policy an EIA has not been conducted. There are no direct implications for equalities.

### **9.5. Human Resources**

**9.5.1.** There are no direct implications for human resources.

### **9.6. Risk Management**

**9.6.1.** There are no direct implications for risk management.

### **9.7. Rural Communities**

**9.7.1.** Half of the Cheshire East population live in rural communities including the rural towns. The action plan will help to ensure that delivery of our corporate outcomes meet the needs of rural communities and the economy in rural areas.

### **9.8. Children and Young People/Cared for Children**

**9.8.1.** The action plan includes proposals that relate to strong, supportive rural places and communities, including life chances and choices that may relate to children and young people.

### **9.9. Public Health**

**9.9.1.** The action plan includes proposals that relate to strong, supportive rural places and communities, including life chances and choices that may relate to public health.

## **9.10. Climate Change**

**9.10.1.** The action plan includes proposals that relate to the environment, with actions related to environmental sustainability and promoting healthy lifestyles.

<b>Access to Information</b>	
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Appendices:	
Background Papers:	<a href="#">Cheshire East Rural Action Plan</a>