

Economy and Growth Committee

Date of Meeting:	13 September 2022
Report Title:	Rural Action Plan
Report of:	Peter Skates, Director of Growth and Enterprise
Report Reference No:	EG/14/22-23
Ward(s) Affected:	All

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1.** Following a report to the Economy and Growth Committee on 16th September 2021, Committee approved the preparation of a Rural Action Plan to cover the period 2022/23 to 2025/26, the workstreams to be addressed, and 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.
- 1.2.** The report summarises the approach and describes the priorities outlined in the Plan.
- 1.3.** 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 and adopt the Rural Action Plan 2022/23 -2025/26

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 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 in the Corporate Plan 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. By the nature of rural affairs, the action plan needs to be able to reflect changes in national policies and local priorities. The Plan sets out the actions that the Council is taking to address issues and opportunities for Cheshire East from a rural perspective. It builds on the work of the Rural Action Plan 2018/19-2021/22.
- 3.4. The economy in rural areas 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.
- 3.5. Therefore, while the primary focus is on the economy in rural areas, input was sought from a range of services with the intention of developing a baseline from which the refreshed plan could be developed. The previous Action Plan was reviewed to identify progress against the actions identified for the period to 2022. Based on that review, feedback from the Member Advisory group and identification of significant rural issues, opportunities and priorities, the Plan was 'refreshed' to cover the next three-year period of 2022/23 – 2025/26.
- 3.6. While the core priorities of the original plan remained valid, it was assumed that the emphasis and detail of actions would need to consider 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, where relevant.

- 3.7.** 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, a digital connectivity programme and, as part of bus review, to deliver improved accessibility to services and employment opportunities.

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.** 148,400 people, nearly two fifths of Cheshire East's total population (386,700), live in rural areas. 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.** A Rural Action Plan was first adopted by Cheshire East Council 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 plans as part of meeting the Council's strategic outcomes, to support the economy in rural areas and to identify priorities regarding the rural area. This is 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.** Under the guidance of a Member Advisory Group appointed by the economy and Growth Committee, officers representing services across the Council have drawn 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 are identified and their contribution considered against four themes of connectivity, economy, community (life chances and choices) and environment. As stated previously, the intention is 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. As such, responsibility for delivery of actions relates to services across the Council, with the Rural Action Plan collating those that have a particular bearing on the rural area and its economic performance.

5.5. The focus of the current Plan is aimed at how the Council could help to build a strong and resilient rural economy with strong, supportive rural places and communities. Actions relate to:

- Digital Connectivity: Broadband and mobile
- Access for residents, business, and visitors
- Rural Housing
- Strong, supportive rural places and communities
- Planning for a green and sustainable place
- Visitor and cultural economy
- Rural based businesses

5.6. The overriding key priorities identified in the original action plan remain largely relevant and appropriate. The only exception was 'Neighbourhood Planning', which, because the initial emphasis on developing new plans has been largely met, is not addressed as a separate section, being covered within 'Planning for a green and sustainable place' instead.

5.7. The plan sets out actions that relate to the Council's plans and strategies that are in place or will commence during the period of the Rural Action Plan. These reflect the following strategic priorities:

5.8. Digital Connectivity: Broadband and mobile

5.9. Digital and mobile connectivity is essential to a successful economy in rural areas, particularly taking account of the fact that self-employment is both higher than in urban areas and higher than the national average and where the Covid pandemic has led to a greater shift towards home or hybrid working. However, rural businesses and communities can often be harder or more expensive to reach than their urban counterparts. The Council continues to address these issues through a sub-regional 'Connecting Cheshire' programme, ensuring that the area can benefit from national funding programmes to improve connectivity. The focus of Government broadband infrastructure support is via BDUK (Building Digital UK).

5.10. Alongside this, the Council has adopted a Digital strategy to guide digital approaches to service transformation to benefit customers, residents, businesses, rural communities, and community sectors. It recognises that there are still challenges for connectivity in rural areas, but recognises that these are increasingly important to address, not only for the economy, but for healthcare and the delivery of a range of other services. The overarching Digital Strategy will be supported with detailed plans a series of measures against which our performance can be assessed.

5.11. Access for residents, business and visitors

The Local Transport Plan (LTP) was adopted in 2019 and covers the whole borough. The LTP has a key role to play in supporting the economy of the borough. It also recognises that the LTP supports the provision of high quality, attractive environments which encourage walking, cycling, and public transport whilst also effectively mitigating potential negative impacts of transport infrastructure. It also has a role to play in encouraging sustainable connectivity between our urban centres and their surrounding rural settings. This is due to be refreshed in 2024, taking account of new Government guidance to be published by the end of 2022.

- 5.12.** The Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2011 -26 (ROWIP) is closely integrated with the LTP. The Public Rights of Way (PROW) service is responsible for managing the borough's 1952km network of public rights of way. This is a primarily rural network and includes a number of medium or long-distance routes which are entirely within or pass-through Cheshire East on its public rights of way network.

5.13. Rural Housing

- 5.14.** The Council's priorities are guided by its Housing strategy, which will be renewed in 2023. Current priorities for rural housing include increasing the number of good-quality, mixed tenure, smaller type family homes, maintaining a housing delivery enabling role in town centres, villages and neighbourhoods, increasing provision of affordable housing where a need has been identified through working with parish councils and local communities and improving the housing offer for an ageing population.

- 5.15.** The Council has also adopted planning policies that underpin approaches to housing issues in the rural area including rural exception sites. Opportunities to provide affordable housing to enable local residents to remain living within their communities will be considered as part of the Housing strategy to be developed in 2023/24.

5.16. Strong, supportive rural places and communities

- 5.17** Cheshire East Council uses an asset-based approach to bring together and build upon our assets (organisations, places/buildings, knowledge, and enthusiasm) in our communities. Cheshire East Council will support and engage with communities including the voluntary, community and faith sector and the many active volunteer-based partnerships. This is articulated through the Connected Communities Strategy which covers the period to 2025.

- 5.17.** The Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) will be undertaken to understand variation in the current experience of poverty across Cheshire East to consider likely future needs, while will include those of the rural areas.
- 5.18.** In education there will be a focus on ensuring that appropriate support is available to smaller and rural schools through training and addressing relevant governance options, including Trust status.
- 5.19.** Family hubs will be developed for parents/carers of children of all ages, to ensure that they can access support across a range of services using existing community venues. Services within the family hub network will also be accessible in a number of other ways including virtual, physical, and via outreach in rural areas.
- 5.20. Planning for a green and sustainable place**
- 5.21.** During the period of this Rural Action Plan important measures will be taken in respect of the Local Plan. The Sites Allocation Policy Document of the current Local Plan Strategy will be adopted, and the review of the Local Plan will commence in advance of adoption for the following period from 2026. There are significant changes planned to national planning policy which will need to be reflected in the new Local Plan strategy. In the meantime, national policies related to Biodiversity Net Gain, Local Nature Recovery Strategy (a mandatory element of the Environment Act that will impact on the approach to ELMS), nutrient neutrality regulations, waste strategy and waste and minerals policy will impact on the rural area during the life of this plan.
- 5.22.** The Council's own Environment Strategy, Carbon Action Plan commitments related to a commitment that the Council will be carbon-neutral by 2025 and its pledge to support the borough being carbon-neutral by 2045 will positively influence plans and projects in the rural area. By the nature of their land-use needs the Carbon action Plan's Low Carbon Energy Supply and Natural Capital offsetting programmes will have a particular focus on Council-owned land in the rural area
- 5.23. Visitor and cultural economy**
- 5.24.** A tourism recovery plan is in place to address significant issues such as the shortage of hospitality staff and cultural recovery projects have helped support the arts and heritage organisations. From 2023, the tourism recovery plan will give way to a new Visitor Economy Strategy and a new Cultural Framework will guide the Council's priorities for culture, arts, and heritage.

5.25. Rural based business

5.26. Rural-based business revolves around more than agriculture and land-based industries, whether in the visitor and hospitality sector, creative and digital, science and technology or manufacture. There are a number of significant employers based in rural areas, a large number of SMEs and a high level of home-based working.

5.27. The Council's work with business organisations and support for businesses is borough-wide and does not currently have a specific focus on rural-based businesses. However, the Council does recognise some of the specific issues for the rural area. For example, there a variety of policies in the Site Allocations and Development Policies Document that specifically address or support rural businesses. In addition, some programmes (eg Connecting Cheshire) have projects targeting rural business needs and some strategies (eg Visitor Economy Strategy) have a strong relevance to rural based business.

5.28. Other considerations

5.29. The Plan is intended to provide a framework that would inform further consideration of policy and strategic direction with a rural focus. There are a number of emerging challenges that may affect the rural area over the period of the plan but will not necessarily have plans in place to address them. Therefore, an appendix to the Rural Action Plan identifies issues or opportunities that may require further consideration over the period of the Plan. These issues have been identified during the plan development as ones that may need further consideration over the life of the plan and are not necessarily addressed by existing or intended plans, strategies, or projects.

6. Consultation and Engagement

6.1. 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. A Member Advisory Group was set up by the Economy and Growth Committee to provide further engagement and guidance in drafting the Plan. The opportunity was also be taken to engage with the sub-regional Rural Strategy Group, as this offered an opportunity receive guidance from a range of rural interests that support the long-term physical, social and economic development of the rural area.

7. Implications

7.1. Legal

7.1.1. There are no direct legal implications arising from the report and its recommendations.

7.2. Finance

7.2.1. 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 anticipated 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.

7.3. Policy

7.3.1. 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.

7.3.2. 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 provides a framework for consideration of future policy and strategic direction in the context of changes in national policy and related funding.

7.4. Equality

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

7.5. Human Resources

7.5.1. There are no direct implications for human resources.

7.6. Risk Management

7.6.1. There are no direct implications for risk management.

7.7. Rural Communities

7.7.1. A significant proportion 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.

7.8. Children and Young People/Cared for Children

7.8.1. 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.

7.9. Public Health

7.9.1. 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.

7.10. Climate Change

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

Access to Information	
Contact Officer:	Brendan Flanagan Head of Rural and Cultural Economy brendan.flanagan@cheshireeast.gov.uk 07802583903
Appendices:	Rural Action Plan 2022/23 -2025/26
Background Papers:	Cheshire East Rural Action Plan