

UPPINGHAM FIRST Community Partnership

Chair: Robert Wills Vice Chair: Edward Baines Secretary/Treasurer: Ron Simpson BEM

Clerk to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Rural Economy

8.9.2018

Dear Colleague,

Call for Evidence - Response of the Uppingham First Community Partnership

Please find below the consultation response of the Uppingham First Community Partnership.

Regards

Ron Simpson BEM

Director and Company Secretary

Preamble

Uppingham First is the award winning 'all sector' elected Community Partnership for the market town of Uppingham in Rutland and its rural hinterland. It brings together the voices of community, business and statutory sector forums in the area. It incorporated as a limited company in January 2009. The objects for which the company was established are, "To protect and promote the interests of Uppingham Town and its rural hinterland helping to sustain their vitality and economic viability ensuring they remain an attractive place to live work and play." The Partnership comprises a board of thirteen directors made up from the three sectors recognised by central government, these being business, the state sector and the third/voluntary/civil society sector. Uppingham First is recognised by Rutland County Council and is active within the county's Local Strategic Partnership, Rutland Together and the commercial area of the former Greater Cambridge Greater Peterborough Local Enterprise Partnership. The Uppingham First Community Partnership is a member of Locality and the Community Transport Association and is chaired by international businessman Robert Wills. Uppingham First led the very successful Uppingham Neighbourhood Plan, a government front runner and the town has reached the top five in the Great British High Streets Awards. The Partnership was also instrumental in the establishment of a, currently expanding, Gigaclear FTTP broadband network in Uppingham.

Select Committee Questions

General issues

1. What do you understand by the "rural economy"? How has it changed over recent years, and what has been the impact of these changes?

Uppingham's heritage and rural economy is that of a sustainable community having a vibrant high street of 'independent' traders serving around 3000 dwellings in the town and surrounding villages. Its market place heart can be viewed during the day through the online Uppingham Webcam on the Uppingham First website. Over recent years its physical visitor footfall has tended to diminish but its virtual footprint is growing. Business premise occupancy has remained above 90% and Uppingham retains a successful weekly market. In recent years the town has lost one of its two banks (HSBC) and a number of long established retailers have retired. Positive developments include the development of a strong antiques, arts, books and creative crafts commercial skills base, the refurbishment of its historic town centre hotel linked to a developing night time economy and the establishment of a Harley Davidson Dealership. Uppingham is building more homes and is steadily growing. Many regard it as Rutland's success story and it has been visited by a number of Ministers.

2. Could you give examples of notable success stories and good practice in the rural economy? How might rural successes be replicated and better promoted?

Uppingham successes include:

- a) Outstanding engagement with the rural business community and its local customer base through elected business and community forums which meet quarterly. An all sector Vanguard Board meets twice a year to which commercial and housing developers are invited together with the Education, Skills, Health and Blue Light sectors

- b) Successful promotion of the high street and local economy via the Uppingham Webcam
- c) The establishment of a free integrated transport community bus service run entirely by volunteers and funded by the local community, linking employment zones and the high street to residential areas
- d) The attraction of over £200k worth of Community Infrastructure Levy via its Neighbourhood Plan
- e) A developing FTTP Fibre network offering up to 1Gb symmetrical broadband to homes and businesses
- f) The development of a number of rural/commercial tourism trails to raise footfall including a heritage trail, a tree trail and an Antiques, Arts, Books and Creative Crafts Trail
- g) The promotion of electric car ownership, tourism and vehicle charging via a joint private/public sector initiative
- h) The ongoing development of new and existing commercial zones
- i) Attracting private sector investment into its high street.

Many of the above initiatives could be duplicated elsewhere but no market town agency now exists to champion small rural economic centres. Local Enterprise partnerships should be required to develop growth targets for, and allocate finance to, small economic centres and market towns.

3. How do you see the future of the rural economy? Where is the greatest potential for growth, and what might be the impact of technological and other changes?

Uppingham First has submitted an EU Leader Fund bid to support the development of a new virtual high street portal and an associated smart phone app to stimulate rural economic growth, promote rural tourism and create new jobs. A new Town Centre & Business Zones Plan (see www.uppinghamneighbourhoodplan.info) has set a 2% growth target for Uppingham with enhanced housing figures linked to rural skills development. The Partnership believes that the rural economy has a bright future if it embraces technological development and integrates it into strategic projects in the health and wellbeing, transport and commercial sectors.

The voluntary sector is seen as critical to the future of the local rural economy and it has strong democratic voices and messages from civil society in the community's forward plans. Effective localism with funding following devolved services is seen as a key driver in generating sustainable growth. More needs to be done by government to pressure principal local authorities to more fully engage with the policy and financial implications of rural devolution. Government has allocated much time and money to urban city regions and combined authorities, but little has been done to incentivise and stimulate economic growth in rural centres and small market towns. Few LEPs have specific targets for rural centres despite a large percentage of the population living in such areas. FTTP broadband, a guaranteed minimum mobile signal of 4G (but preferably 5G) together with smart phone app integrated rural centre/market town online portals are the way forward for the rural economy. This is the business plan for Uppingham. The Select Committee are invited to further investigate the potential of this area for growth. The Partnership would be happy to offer further oral evidence on the issue.

Infrastructure and services

4. How can access to transport be improved in rural areas?

By government recognising the economic, environmental, health and community safety benefits of locally led community transport. The current D of T enquiry into Sections 19 and 22 permits is relevant here. Rural economies can be invigorated by effective community transport schemes. The volunteer led Uppingham Hopper community bus service, recently featured by the BBC, is an exemplar in this respect being entirely funded by the local community. The government's recent community bus grant scheme should be repeated, perhaps with a bias toward electric vehicles, but also with an emphasis on funded vehicles providing a service to the general public rather than simply the bidding organisation's membership. Promoting (and supporting with grant schemes) electric vehicle ownership will be vital to the future of viable and economically sustainable rural transport. The current, expensive to operate, commercial bus services may not remain viable for much longer without substantial public funding. If this is accepted by the Select Committee, it would be better use of public funds to promote and tax exempt community owned bus companies perhaps operated by community or parish councils. Legislation currently prevents this!

5. What barriers to growth are created by poor digital connectivity? How can connectivity be improved across the board?

Only a full fibre to the premise connected rural economy will meet the nation's needs for the future. The disgracefully wasteful over-building by BT of local fibre networks should be outlawed. Future growth will demand such a response. So will next generation healthcare, education and commerce. The evidence shows

that rural communities which have been proactive in this matter are now starting to reap the benefits. Uppingham is such an example.

6. What can be done to improve and maintain provision for essential services such as healthcare, education and banking in rural areas?

Empower rural economic centres with the infrastructure needed to become next generation communities. Make greater use of the voluntary sector and the localism agenda. Encourage the creation of more rural credit unions and community banks. Devolve more funding and powers to parish councils. Introduce a 'duty' for larger parishes to create and operate a community bank or credit union in collaboration with others. Introduce tax incentives. Legislate to require banks to open 'white' branches in rural towns (branches offering basic banking transactions to customers of all banks at one location).

7. What can be done to support local shops, community pubs and other rural amenities at risk of closure?

Create a tax regime that incentivises community ownership. Create a new level of lower business rate for rural economic centres and market towns. Enable retention of business rates locally. Introduce a new class of community mortgage for rural/market town shops.

Business, employment, skills and demography

8. How can rural businesses be helped to thrive, and how can new industries and investment be supported? How might labour and skills shortages be overcome?

With pump priming/development funding repayable with a low interest rate. Introduce a British Leader Fund post Brexit. Create a rural employment tax subsidy for businesses willing to train/create more jobs. Create a nationally accredited market town traineeship scheme.

9. How can deprivation and inequality in rural areas be tackled?

Build publicly owned housing to rent. Create a legal right to rent as in right to buy. Pass public funding for the deprived direct to where it is needed rather than through principal authorities.

10. How can more young people be encouraged to stay in or return to rural areas and contribute to their communities?

Initiate a major build of prefabricated dwellings for young people to rent as was done after WW2. Create a new community leadership force for the under 35s with the help of Rotary International. Offer a rural retention incentive/grant for the first two years of work in a rural area.

11. What can be done to address the challenges associated with an ageing rural population, such as social isolation and social care provision? What opportunities are there for the older retired population to help support the rural economy?

Ensure support for a social meeting point in every community. Ensure online connectivity. The elderly represent a huge pool of talent to support the rural economy but their skills are undervalued. Charities are being funded to employ paid workers to supervise volunteers doing the actual work. This business model should be reversed. Use volunteers as supervisors/managers and insist that older volunteers are properly valued and paid for what they do.

Rural housing and planning

12. How can the affordability of rural housing be improved? What are the other challenges associated with rural housing and how can these be addressed?

Build low cost prefabricated houses (not expensive brick) of a design that favours the young. Encourage Neighbourhood Plans to include an allocation of land for such housing. Legislate to ensure a landowner receives attractive incentives to release land for such dwellings.

13. How have recent planning policy reforms affected rural housing and the wider rural economy? What changes, if any, are needed to planning rules?

Government is moving in the right direction by creating the opportunity for Neighbourhood Plans. Progress is being impeded by principal authority planning departments. Strengthen the 'right to build' legislation. Encourage larger parish councils to become housing authorities.

Government policy, devolution and local government

14. Do the Government and other public bodies pay sufficient attention to the rural economy and if not, why not? What might be done to ensure that Government and other public bodies hear and act on rural voices?

No they do not, because many do not understand rural economics. Introduce public participation time and the right to speak in all public body meetings as has been done with parish council legislation. Consider extending the concept of directly elected Mayors to Market Towns.

15. What is being done in local government to support rural economies? How effectively do other public bodies such as Local Enterprise Partnerships operate in rural areas, and how might coordination between bodies be improved?

Not enough. Many LEPS have no targets or economic strategies directed at their market towns and rural centres. This should be a mandatory requirement for public funding. Too many local businesses are not engaged with their LEP. Publication of agendas and minutes online should be mandatory. LEPs should be required to publish regular engagement reports.

Summary

We trust the Select Committee finds the above helpful. Please let us know if we can be of greater service.

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