

Our commitment to working with rural communities

1. Introduction

This document reflects our commitment to work with our rural communities in a way that celebrates their uniqueness, sense of belonging and the ambitions people have for the places where they live. The Council is committed to working at the most local level within communities and has invested significantly over more than a decade to work in this way to help develop a deep understanding of what matters most to communities to help shape what we can do together in response.

Around a quarter of our population lives in rural communities across the borough. With 57 parishes, from Vernham Dean in the north to Wellow in the south, Barton Stacey in the East to Shipton Bellinger in the west; these are many individual communities each with their own aspirations, ambitions and priorities.

Forums such as the Test Valley Association of Town and Parish Councils and the Test Valley Community Resilience Forum are exemplars in enabling rural communities to come together on a regular basis to share practice and knowledge and focus on issues that matter most to people. Recognising and celebrating the value of what is already happening, alongside well-established relationships is a strong foundation in which to help identify what more we can do together to develop shared aspirations, learn from best practice and deliver on the ambitions of our rural communities.

The council has developed a national reputation for its approach to working with local communities with much of the innovation and learning coming from our work with our rural communities over many years. This includes:

- The development of our community team who provide dedicated resource to local councillors in their role as a community councillor to support parishes and local communities in undertaking community engagement and the development of local action plans. This also includes the creation of our Community Planning Toolkit.
- Establishing funding schemes open to local communities such as the Community Asset Fund which allows local organisations to apply for up to £25,000 funding for projects that improve local infrastructure.
- Being one of the few councils where the Community Infrastructure Levy has been set aside specifically for communities which enables parishes and community groups to access funding to support key projects.
- Developing a nationally renowned approach to community resilience and wellbeing, shaped by the council and parishes together to support learning and ensure that communities have the right support at the right time.

- A focus on rural business and enterprise. The creation of the Village Shop Network, the investment from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to support Rural Net Zero, and the investment into small businesses through the Rural England Prosperity Fund are all examples of practical financial support and investment into the rural economy.

Over the coming years we want to continue to build on the longstanding successful ways of working in partnership with rural communities, tapping into the many vibrant community networks that are in place, supporting community planning and being a champion for rural communities within the wider geographies that impact them.

To achieve this, we have sought to set out the support we can provide as part of our ongoing commitment to work in a place-based way.

2. Context / Background:

Test Valley is a borough made up of different communities, each with their own strengths and challenges. Our Corporate Plan 2023-27 identifies four broad geographical areas, with the 'rural' being the largest. These areas are made up of small villages and numerous different communities.

Over a quarter of our residents live in wards where the population density is less than 120 people per square kilometre, and the central wards of Mid Test and Harewood, and Bourne Valley in the north, contain fewer than 50 people per square kilometre.

Of the borough's rural population, around one in four people is retired. Almost twenty percent of the borough's rural residents are under eighteen, and around three-quarters of Test Valley's rural population own their own homes.

One in eighty employed residents in the borough work in the traditionally rural sectors of agriculture, forestry or fishing. Test Valley's rural areas are not just economically dynamic, but ecologically and aesthetically valuable; to the north, is the North Wessex Downs National Landscape, and to the south, the edges of the New Forest National Park.

Rural Test Valley has a diverse economy with traditional sectors playing an important role in the economy, but there is a concentration of small professional, scientific and technical employers in comparison with England and other areas of rural Hampshire. The rural geography links us to our neighbouring authorities, Winchester and East Hampshire.

The rural economy is expanding with employment growth across Mid-Hampshire being twice as fast as in urban areas. The character and landscape of Test Valley also makes it attractive to the tourism sector especially given our location, close to national attractions.

It is this uniqueness of our rural communities however, that often means they face quite acute challenges in ways that more urban communities do not. For example, delivering the supply and access to housing that is appropriate and meets the future needs of rural communities is a key issue as is the development of the rural economy alongside addressing issues of rural isolation for both younger and older people.

Following extensive community engagement, our Corporate Plan sets out five strategic priorities: Connection, Sustainability, Prosperity, Inclusion and Environment.

We remain committed to delivering these priorities in a way that best reflects the different needs of our communities.

3. Working in partnership with our rural communities

We will continue to work with our rural communities and other organisations to ensure they have the right resources to deliver their priorities. To make this a reality, we intend to deliver an action plan of support based on the following four key areas that sit at the centre of our ongoing commitment to working with villages and rural communities over the next three years.

Theme 1: Support village and rural communities to identify and plan for their future priorities, building upon their strengths, connections and sense of pride in the place where they live.

Working together to identify and build on the unique strengths of each community will continue to be achieved by working together to deliver priorities where there is a clear need and by enabling access to support and resources.

We know that by supporting local community action planning, we can help bring together communities and the right organisations and agencies to develop projects that deliver positive change. Our community councillor approach underpins how we work locally, strengthening democracy by enabling our councillors to be at the heart of decision making within their communities, hearing local voices and helping them to improve quality of life.

We are committed to inclusive community engagement, based on a desire to serve all our residents and not just those who shout the loudest. Inequalities can often be hidden, especially in rural areas, and we recognise the importance of engaging widely to bring communities together and build strength in connection and connectedness.

Over the next two years we will continue to;

- 1.1 Be proactive in supporting the development of local action plans in order to help local communities prioritise their key issues and for TVBC to assist in delivering these priorities** by working closely with our Community Councillors, parish councils and other community stakeholders, to understand and deliver local priorities which are informed by evidence, insight and a full range of voices from across the community.
- 1.2 Provide meaningful community engagement support and access to resources** (data, experience / expertise, intelligence) to support local led action planning activities.

- 1.3 **Promote access to funding to help deliver local priorities** through our Councillor Community Grants, Community Asset Fund and access to Community Infrastructure Levy.
- 1.4 **Support and develop networks** that build upon the success of the Test Valley Association of Town and Parish Councils and the Community Resilience Forum to innovate, share practice, and address needs.
- 1.5 **Continue to support action to protect, promote and enhance rural community assets.** Explore opportunities to work with villages and rural communities that provide access to spaces for recreation (that are so important for residents' wellbeing) including important environmental and/ or climate related projects.

Theme 2: Support villages and rural communities to plan for their future development and housing needs, to ensure the long-term sustainability of their communities.

New development is often a challenge. Encouraging more homes to be built of the right type in the right location will help meet local affordable housing needs as well as helping to sustain the vibrancy of existing facilities and services to ensure that rural communities continue to thrive and grow.

The Council has a statutory role as the local planning authority with responsibility for producing the Local Plan. The Council is committed to working with rural communities to consider how best to meet this challenge. Through taking part in the Local Plan process and through neighbourhood planning, this ensures that decisions are informed locally.

Over the next two years we will:

- 2.1 **Refresh and continue to develop our Community Planning Toolkit and provide direct support including funding to enable communities to undertake neighbourhood plans.** This will support villages and rural communities to pro-actively plan for their future development and housing needs, to ensure the long-term sustainability of rural communities, so that the needs of all are understood.
- 2.2 **Seek to enable access to affordable housing, support the sustainability of rural village communities,** supporting hubs that bring people together and/or provide essential services through the ongoing development of our Local Plan. Support Parish Councils and community organisations in bringing forward proposals which meet local housing need.

Theme 3: Work with villages and rural communities to strengthen community resilience and wellbeing, that enables people to live well, and to mitigate the impacts of rural isolation.

Over a number of years, our rural communities have led the way around community resilience. They have a deep-rooted understanding of what they need to do to ensure they are prepared for emergency scenarios such as flooding, and as a result

of their hard work the Local Government Association and National Preparedness Commission has highlighted them at a national level as examples of good practice.

Whether this has been working together to put local resilience plans in place, influencing partners, or sharing good practice - going forward, it is all about working in partnership to build on this.

This means helping them to prepare and plan for an emergency, but it also means continuing to work with our rural communities and with partners to grow volunteering capacity, improve access to services and support communities to develop and grow their local networks.

Over the next two years we will;

- 3.1 **Work with local people and partners to strengthen community resilience**, by supporting community to community learning and sharing of experiences that help develop relationships across agencies and within communities.
- 3.2 **Bring people and organisations together, share good practise and promote support networks**, harnessing action around issues of interest – approaching ways to respond to common issues such as transport, connection and accessibility.

Theme 4: Support the rural economy, to deliver prosperity by supporting rural businesses, skills development and helping to unlock future investment.

The rural economy includes land-based industries as well as businesses from a range of sectors that are located across the rural areas in the borough. In addition, our village shops, pubs and wider community infrastructure, provide important services to rural communities - from the landscapes that support tourism to the services provided to isolated communities.

The Council will support rural economic development, to deliver prosperity, and enable communities to thrive by supporting rural businesses, skills development and helping to unlock future investment.

Over the next two years we will;

- 4.1 **Help to create the conditions in which our rural economy can flourish.** We will do this through developing networks, providing access to resources and grants, engaging with external organisations such as Hampshire Prosperity Partnership and Board (HPPB) and the National Farmers Union (NFU).
- 4.2 **Focus on rural enterprise.** Establish a new grant scheme and make use of external funding initiatives that support our village shops, the sustainability and development of rural businesses (including free business support to all our rural businesses), and the rural visitor economy.

- 4.3 **Seek to quantify the economic value of the River Test** through identifying all the interconnected sectors and its impact on the environment and development.

Action Plan;

Actions to deliver against each of the commitments in our renewed offer are captured in the following action plan.