

**ENDORSEMENT OF NEW ARRANGEMENTS AND *AGENDA FOR ACTION* FOR  
THE HERTFORDSHIRE RURAL FORUM**

*Report of the Director of Environment*

Author: Tony Hurley, Projects Manager, x5257

Executive Member: I.E.M. Tarry

**1. Purpose of the report**

To seek Cabinet approval for the new structure and arrangements of the Hertfordshire Rural Forum and to seek endorsement for the Forum's *An Agenda for Action 2000-2005*.

**2. Summary**

Following a process of review the Hertfordshire Rural Forum has, over the last 12 months, emerged as a streamlined and effective organisation to represent the rural interests of the county at local and regional level.

The review has resulted in a more inclusive Steering Group for the Forum, a wider membership and established a new *Agenda for Action* to guide the Forum's activities over the next five years. This agenda addresses not only the environmental issues on the countryside but also the economic and social priorities of rural communities.

The Forum is also emerging as an independent body through which partnership bids for project funding can be prepared.

**3. Conclusions**

It is clear that the continued support of the County Council and its endorsement of the *Agenda for Action* is vital if the Hertfordshire Rural Forum is to develop further its role as the county's key voice on rural issues.

County Council policy will need to reflect the new *Agenda for Action* and the future plans brought forward as part of HCC's service plans will have to take account of emerging priorities

## 1. Background

- 1.1 The Hertfordshire Countryside Forum was established in 1989 based upon the County Council's Countryside Sub-Committee and involved a wide range of partners interested in rural issues. The Forum's Countryside Strategy was produced in 1991 and updated in 1996 to cover the period to 2001.
- 1.2 The Countryside Forum comprised 60 organisations including representatives, both officers and members, from each of the ten District Councils and, until recently, nine nominated county councillors, one of whom acted as chairman of the Forum. The Environment Department of the County Council has, throughout, provided the Forum with secretarial support.
- 1.3 In 1999, the County Council sponsored a major review of both the Forum and the Countryside Strategy. The review comprised work undertaken by the Environmental Management Group and research by the consultancy Griffiths Environmental Planning, which included interviews with a number of the Forum members.

## 2. Analysis

- 2.1 It was clear from the review that the Forum was in need of both revitalisation and a new strategic direction. However, the interviews carried out by the consultant confirmed that the Forum was still valued by many people as a mechanism for bringing together a wide range of organisations and individuals concerned with all aspects of rural life. The work of the County Council in facilitating the Forum was also identified as important to its success.
- 2.2 One of the earliest changes to take place as a result of the review was the renaming of the Forum as the **Hertfordshire Rural Forum** to reflect its broad interest in economic, social and environmental issues.
- 2.3 **A New Agenda for the Rural Forum.** A key element of the review was a major Conference held during 1999 entitled 'The Future of Rural Hertfordshire'. This was attended by over 80 delegates representing a much wider range of organisations than had previously been involved in the Forum's activities, such as the health authorities, police and social services. At the Conference nine themes were identified by the delegates as representing the key rural issues in Hertfordshire:
  - \* Affordable housing
  - \* Farm economy
  - \* Access to services
  - \* Needs of young people
  - \* Community identity & involvement
  - \* Transport / traffic
  - \* Biodiversity / landscape
  - \* Social exclusion
  - \* Recreational pressures on the countryside
- 2.4 These priority themes form the basis of the Forum's new guiding document ***An Agenda for Action 2000-2005*** (see attached) which has now been sent for endorsement to all the Forum's members. Once adopted by the Forum, the Agenda will be pursued through the publication each year of a detailed Action Plan, clearly demonstrating how the issues will be tackled.

- 2.5 The Forum has already begun to tackle some of these issues and has run seminars in partnership with the East & North Herts Health Authority, the Hertfordshire Anti-Poverty Partnership and the Hertfordshire Prosperity Forum. One of the seminars addressed the issue of health and wellbeing in rural areas and the ideas emerging from the seminar have been incorporated into the Health Improvement Programme for east and north Hertfordshire. More recently the Forum has run a very successful briefing session on the implications of the Rural Development Plan.
- 2.6 It is one of the key purposes of this report to present the Forum's *Agenda for Action* to the Cabinet for consideration and hopefully its subsequent formal endorsement.
- 2.7 **A new Structure for the Rural Forum.** The review has also resulted in a new structure for the Forum, a key element of which is the **Steering Group**. This involves representatives from the County Council as well as the key regional agencies:
- Countryside Agency,
  - Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
  - Government Office for the East of the England
  - East of England Development Agency

Other organisations regularly invited to send representatives to the Steering Group include:

- Community Development Agency for Herts
  - Herts Chamber of Commerce and Industry
  - Officers (mainly responsible for economic and community development) from the 3 most rural Districts/Borough Councils: North Herts, East Herts and Dacorum.
- 2.8 The County Council nominates five councillors to the Forum, one of whom is nominated by the authority as the Forum chairman (currently Cllr Keith Gray). It has been suggested by the Forum's Steering Group that, in future, the chairman will not necessarily need to be a member of the County Council but could be selected from elsewhere in public life. Such a move would reiterate the independent nature of the Forum and encourage wider 'ownership' of the organisation.
- 2.9 Another change prompted by the review included the enlargement of the Forum's membership. Many more organisations were invited to take part in the Forum's activities and the membership now comprises over **170** separate contacts including representatives from:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Herts County Council (various departments)</li> <li>• Health Authorities</li> <li>• Primary Care Groups</li> <li>• Herts Association of Local Councils</li> <li>• Councils for Voluntary Services</li> <li>• Community Development Agency</li> <li>• Citizens Advice Bureaus</li> <li>• Wildlife Trust</li> <li>• District/Borough Councils (various departments)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local societies (mainly environmental)</li> <li>• Age Concern</li> <li>• Womens Institute</li> <li>• Countryside Alliance</li> <li>• National Farmers Union</li> <li>• Country Landowners Association</li> <li>• Lea Valley Regional Park Authority</li> <li>• National Trust</li> <li>• University of Hertfordshire</li> </ul> |
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- 2.10 **National and Regional Context.** The need for a vibrant Rural Forum is particularly great as, over the coming year, major new national policy and funding initiatives will have significant implications for the countryside.
- 2.11 This Autumn, the new Rural White Paper is expected to be published, setting out the government's policy framework for rural areas. This document will clearly have significant implications for rural communities and the Rural Forum is now working in partnership with the Countryside Agency to host a major regional conference in November 2000 to consider the implication of the White Paper.
- 2.12 In addition, the region's Rural Development Plan and the LEADER+ programme will be approved by the European Commission thereby confirming major new areas of funding for rural economic and community development. Some of these funds are now available for the first time in Hertfordshire. It is already likely that the Rural Forum will act as the umbrella organisation through which the various partners in the public and voluntary sectors will put forward a LEADER+ bid for Hertfordshire.
- 2.13 In order to assess trends and patterns in the countryside, the Countryside Agency are in the process of developing a series of *Indicators for Sustainable Development in Rural Areas*. These indicators will be reported in the national and regional 'State of the Countryside' reports to be produced annually by the Countryside Agency. However, information will only be collected and published for those rural areas within districts considered by the Agency as 'rural', and in Hertfordshire only East Herts District falls into this category. There is a need, therefore, to lobby for the collection of data from other rural parts of the County.

### **3. Conclusion**

- 3.1 A dynamic, flexible, and more inclusive Rural Forum has emerged from the review process through good partnership working over the last 18 months between the County Council, the District Councils, regional agencies and the voluntary sector. Many of these partners now see the Forum as the key independent voice on rural issues.
- 3.2 With its countywide strategic remit, the involvement of the County Council in the work of the Rural Forum is essential. The County Council's endorsement of the new structure, aims and the *Agenda for Action* of the Rural Forum is, therefore, sought.
- 3.3 The County Council could also make greater use of the Forum for the 'rural proofing' of its policies and strategies, to ensure that they are equally applicable to the communities and environment of rural parts of the county.

### **4. Financial Implications**

- 4.1 At present the County Council provides administrative support for the Forum and pump-priming for the Forum's regular programme of events and seminars. These services are estimated to cost £10,000 per year and are contained within existing budgets, chiefly in the Environment Department. This level of support is not expected to increase.
- 4.2 Financial implications arising from implementing the policies set out in the *Agenda for Action* will be reflected in future service plans and their resulting programmes and budget bids.

*Background information referred to by the author during compilation of this report.*

An Agenda for Action - attached