
REPORT TO: Environmental Services
Committee

AGENDA ITEM:

5

DATE OF MEETING: 28 March 2002

CATEGORY:
DELEGATED

REPORT FROM: Councillor T Southerd

OPEN
PARAGRAPH NO: N/A

MEMBERS' CONTACT POINT: Councillor T Southerd

DOC:

SUBJECT: Rural Commission

REF:

WARD(S) AFFECTED: All

TERMS OF
REFERENCE:

1.0 Recommendations

1.1 To note report.

2.0 Purpose of Report

2.1 To update members on the current position.

3.0 Detail

3.1 The Commission was asked to decide on the option it wished to adopt for the appointment of office holders for the Commission for 2002/2003. The options were as follows:

- (a) Use the General Assembly (and Urban Commission) system of weighted voting.
- (b) Apply the convention which applies to the LGA itself ie the Chair of the largest party becomes the Chair of the Commission
- (c) Agree that the Chair and Office Holders could be rotated on an annual basis.
- (d) Ask the LGA Group Leaders to decide on the chairmanship and vice-chairmanship of the Executive as part of the decisions made in respect of all other executives. The person would also chair the Commission.
- (e) No change to the current system of elections.

3.2 These options were put to the vote (using a preferential voting system). 153 votes were cast with the following result:

Option D received 149 votes
Option B received 3 votes
Option A received 1 vote

3.3 As Option D gained more than 50% of the first preferences that option won outright.

3.4 Members were invited to attend the following breakout workshops

- From Subsidy to Prosperity? The Local Authority Case for Cap Reform.
- Council Tax: Proposed Changes for Second Homes and Long Term Empty Homes
- The Future of Farming and Food – Reconnecting for Recovery after Foot and Mouth Disease
- Supporting Rural Tourism

3.5 The Rt Hon Alun Michael MP, Minister for Rural Affairs, Department of the Environment, Food and Rural affairs addressed the meeting. He spoke of the effective joint working between DEFRA and local authorities, particularly in relation to the foot and mouth outbreak of last year, the Haskin's report, and the work of the Rural Task Force. Mr Michael paid tribute to the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Commission, and to the LGA officers, who contributed to the report of the Rural Task Force. In relation to the foot and mouth outbreak, Mr Michael referred to the speed and efficiency with which most local authorities reopened footpaths following the end of the outbreak. 99.5% of footpaths were now open and Mr Michael asked that DEFA be informed of any problems that local authorities might be aware of in relation to difficulty of re-opening footpaths.

3.6 The Minister referred to the success of the "Your Countryside – You're Welcome" campaign which was supported by the LGA, English Tourism and the National Farmers Union. Mr Michael spoke of the importance of local initiatives helping to take the campaign forward and the partnership they generated. He also spoke of the importance of planning, transport and housing issues and was pleased that other government departments were engaged in the rural agenda.

3.7 The Minister then answered questions from representatives relating to several issues:

Members' concerns that there was not a public enquiry following the foot and mouth outbreak;

the sustainability of magistrates' courts in some rural parts of the country;

the steps that government were taking to control the illegal importation of meat into the UK.

3.8 Delegates received a presentation from Pam Warhurst, Deputy Chair, the Countryside Agency, on the Agency's and English Tourism's joint strategy for rural tourism in England 2001-2005. The four key aims of the Strategy were:

quality of employment
quality of visitor experience
quality of the environment
spreading the tourism gain

3.9 Ms Warhurst spoke of tourism as being increasingly seen as part of the answer to supporting the rural economy and communities, at a time of significant change in the countryside. She said that, handled sensitively, tourism could also be a creative force in conserving the rural heritage, biodiversity and landscapes on which it depends. However, rural tourism needs good co-ordination between the rural enterprises and organisations involved, which local authorities were in an important position to facilitate. This could also be done through engaging the Local Strategic Partnership.

3.10 Ms Warhurst stressed the role the Countryside Agency was playing in developing programmes to assist creative rural regeneration eg Vital Villages and the Market Towns Initiative.

3.11 Ms Warhurst answered questions from delegates relating to several issues:

- the need for the strategy to address transport, social inclusion and community safety;
- interconnectivity between urban and rural environments;
- concerns that the data used for the pilot mapping projects under Countryside Rights of Way Act was dated although the best was available.

3.12 The meeting concluded with brief reports back from each of the four workshops sessions, to share the main discussion points with all delegates.

4.0 Background Papers

4.1 Discussion Notes – Rural Commission

Notes of the four workshops are available on request from Councillor Southerd.

