

Swindon Special Local Policy Forum: Meeting 10 Rural (Green) Group 1

The green group discussed rural issues, and how these issues might be targeted.

1. Rural Clusters (Identified as a key issue)

Should the Core Strategy identify individual Secondary Rural Settlements or would clusters of settlements be more effective in enabling the availability of rural services such as shops and public transport?

- The group were not keen on the term 'rural cluster' because they felt that it takes something away from the individuality of each parish. They agreed that instead of rural clustering, there should be an emphasis on co-operation between neighbouring parishes.
- It was thought that some services and facilities had been unfairly centralised with other parishes being left out, and in some cases there is about a 36 mile round trip to reach certain facilities. The idea of improved public transport was linked to solutions of improved co-operation between the rural parishes.
- It was felt that there was no need for clustering as long as each parish contains the essential basic facilities such as a convenience shop, and as long as there are good public transport links in place, so that essential facilities that are not able to be provided in every parish, such as doctors surgeries and post offices, can be easily reached by everyone.

2. Employment Creation

Should there be a more flexible approach to employment creation, such as giving priority to small business uses where conversions are proposed – such as redundant farm buildings?

- The group felt that there are opportunities for employment creation within many of the rural parishes, and that more working from home and small businesses could be encouraged to start up by Swindon Borough Council.

3. Affordable Housing (Identified as a key issue)

Should thresholds for affordable housing be lower, or more flexible, in villages than in towns, such as a community bus or organised car-sharing?

- Affordable housing was identified as one of the key issues and should be given particular attention in the rural area.

4. Transport (Identified as the main key issue)

Is it practical for villages or clusters of villages to arrange public transport to suit their needs, such as community bus or organised car-sharing?

- The group felt that poor transport links has big social implications in terms of residents who cannot drive/don't like driving long distances being confined to their areas.

- The general consensus was that the rural areas are not well served by public transport, buses do not go to the right areas at the right time, and it was mentioned that Swindon Borough Council needs to consult with Parish Councillors about where bus routes are most needed and at what times.
- Residents are told that bus services to rural areas are not always viable, but there was uncertainty amongst the group regarding what criteria was used to determine viability.
- There is a hospital voluntary service (unpaid) available, but this is dying out because not enough people are volunteering, and 3 or 4 people may be picked up on the same journey, leading to lengthy, uncomfortable journeys. Incentives are needed to encourage people to volunteer.
- The group felt that car sharing already takes place on an informal basis in terms of helping neighbours out for the occasional trip. However car sharing on a more formal and organised basis would be difficult to implement unless a specific group of people were going to the same destination on a regular basis.

5. Boundaries

Should rural issues be addressed on a local – i.e. Swindon Borough Council – basis, or would they be better addressed across administrative boundaries?

- The group felt that rural issues should be addressed on an administrative level, especially in terms of public transport, because rural residents without cars may not want to be confined to Swindon, and therefore co-operation between towns and parishes in Wiltshire is essential, as well as co-operation between Wiltshire and it's neighbouring counties.

6. Other Issues

- There are currently lists of people wanting land for allotments in some of the parishes (e.g. Blunsdon St Andrew), but there has been no land allocated for this purpose, and no money appears to be available for obtaining land for allotments. Residents' gardens are not a solution because they don't tend to be big enough.

Green Group

Doreen Dart, Councillor

Andrew Bennett, Councillor

Stuart Boyd, Blunsden St Andrew Parish Council

Rachel Smith, Clerk, Blunsden St Andrew Parish Council

Dave Grant