**Version 4. 01/11/16**

**Business Opportunities Working Group Report**

1. **Vision Statements**
2. opportunities for small businesses to remain in the parish will be created
3. new businesses will be established through the redevelopment of unused brownfield sites with access to the A1
4. The Parish will benefit from complete coverage of high speed broadband and mobile phone connectivity.

**2. The Objectives**

BOO1 To identify and support new opportunities for businesses to expand and increase their workforce.

BOO2 To liaise with landowners regarding their intentions to redevelop unused units

BOO3 To identify usable brown field sites with easy access to the A1 thus reducing heavy goods traffic through our villages

BOO4 To explore methods of improving broadband coverage and mobile phone connectivity

**3. Introduction**

The National Planning Framework specifies that local and neighbourhood planning policies should support economic growth in rural areas in order to create jobs and prosperity by taking a positive approach to sustainable new development. It suggests that plans should:

* support the sustainable growth and expansion of all types of business and

enterprise in rural areas, both through conversion of existing buildings and

well-designed new buildings;

* promote the development and diversification of agricultural and other

land-based rural businesses;

* support sustainable rural tourism and leisure developments that benefit

businesses in rural areas, communities and visitors, and which respect the

character of the countryside.

These themes are further developed in the CBC Local Plan (2009) with the addition of

* Safeguarding rural employment sites unless it can clearly be demonstrated that they are unfit for purpose and unable to be redeveloped for employment use.
* Providing for new small-scale employment allocations in the rural area where appropriate and there is demand locally.

The Business Opportunities Working Group was tasked with the remit of initially following up the business-related issues and aspirations identified by parishioners in the consultation workshops and household questionnaire. As well as testing out the desirability and feasibility of the suggestions made by parishioners, the working group also set out to see what further issues, if any, were deemed important in enabling local businesses to continue to function effectively and support their continued expansion where appropriate.

The principal means of researching the issues identified was through consultation with local employers and members of the local business community. A questionnaire was designed, trialled and modified for this purpose.

The business survey attempted to reach a cross-section of businesses by type, size and location. See Appendix 1 for the spread and distribution of business types across the parish and Appendix 2 for the types and sizes of businesses that were contacted and those who replied to the questionnaire.

A number of parishioners commute outside the parish to London and substantial commercial centres in local and regional towns and cities for work, nevertheless within the parish there are a very high number of small businesses considering the size of the population. Many of these are of an entrepreneurial nature and either sole traders, family businesses or employ small numbers of staff on a full or part-time basis. A considerable number of people therefore both work and live in the parish.

A small number of businesses employ more than 15 people and in some instances their places of work spread beyond the parish boundaries.

Several large businesses including a Sainsbury’s Supermarket and Petrol Station and the CBC “Tidy Tip” Recycling Centre are also located within the parish boundaries.

Reliable wi-fi and superfast broadband connectivity is patchy across the parish and where it is lacking, it is at best a frustration and at worse a constraint on business efficiency .Because of the importance of this to local businesses based in the areas where only low speeds are available and the complexity of this issue, a separate report is appended analysing the problem and indicating possible solutions and options.

1. **Evidence**

**4.1 From public consultations**.

Although there were some respondents who didn’t want to see further expansion of any kind, from those who did great weight was accorded to supporting the continuation and future development of local employment opportunities as being essential to the maintenance of a thriving community.

**Themes that emerged from the public consultation workshops were:**

* Creating additional employment opportunities for parishioners
* Small business premises for home workers to rent and encouraging new start-ups
* Keeping new business developments small-scale
* Turning derelict brownfield sites into productive use
* Concerns that new businesses be developed with easy access to the A1 so village roads do not have to bear the brunt of additional heavy goods traffic.

**When parishioners were asked in the household questionnaire what additional provision for businesses they would like to see in the Parish, the responses were:**

Eating places 38%

Starter units 30%

Tourism businesses (e.g. bed & breakfast) 30%

No additional 29%

Shops and retail 27%

Light industrial units 22%

Offices 16%

Factory/manufacturing units 5%

**When asked which sites they thought were most suitable for new businesses, priorities were defined as:**

Redeveloping unused sites (brownfield sites) 63%

Sites near the A1 58%

Expanded existing small units 36%

New sites 14%

**Common themes that emerged from a request to identify any further issues were:**

* The need for improved internet/mobile phone network connection.
* The requirement for local village stores.
* A number of respondents noted that they would like a local pub.
* Concerns about the impact on local traffic.
* Some opposition to any business development in the parish

**Other recurring themes were:**

* suggestions that local farming and agriculture industries should be supported,
* any new developments should be located close to the A1
* business development should be encouraged due to the employment and skills opportunities business development could provide for the parish.

**4.2 From the survey of local businesses**

39 replies were received overall .The majority of businesses who replied were small or medium sized businesses or sole traders most of whom currently had sufficient staff to meet the needs of their business. Several of the larger businesses expressed a difficulty in attracting sufficiently skilled or qualified staff from local sources and/or staff who could afford to live in the parish.

One of the larger businesses indicated they had plans for expansion but could only do so in conjunction with the building of suitable affordable accommodation to retain existing staff and attract additional staff into the parish.

Several of the smaller businesses could entertain limited expansion if further permission were granted for extended premises. For example a local farm was considering setting up an educational centre and a local fishery building a café to attract walkers and fishermen.

Several businesses with considerable land suggested they could provide small business units if required but would need support for planning permission to do so as some had experienced difficulties with this in the past.

The principal concerns identified by at least 50% of respondents were:

* continued ease of access to the A1
* broadband issues
* difficulties in recruiting local workers with appropriate skills
* need for a register of local businesses possibly with website access would be useful

**Other views expressed were:**

* three businesses with considerable public footfall would consider opening a café
* advertising facility on parish website
* some form of business club or social hub for businesses would be useful
* communal facilities for small businesses would be useful
* improved public transport to and from Biggleswade
* further traffic calming measures at pinch points
* connection costs to mains drainage remains high
* Thornecote Road too narrow for couriers, footpaths needed

1. **Analysis**
2. There are indications that insufficient broadband speeds and wifi connectivity is a major issue for businesses based in Northill and Ickwell and surrounding areas .These constraints must be eliminated as quickly as possible in order for businesses to conduct their affairs , communicate effectively with clients and maximise their efficiency. As noted earlier the appended report deals with this separately.

2. There may be some limited opportunities for developing new businesses or expanding existing enterprises in the parish, although a significant number of parishioners who responded to the household questionnaire did not want to see any further development. Starter units, B&B and eating places were most required. However there was no interest shown in developing B+B provision on the business survey and B&B’s exist both locally and in the surrounding area

3 .Plans have already been submitted to Central Bedfordshire by one landowner to create a small number of dwellings for market garden workers on a brownfield site off Biggleswade Rd, Upper Caldecote near the A1. Difficulties in recruiting sufficiently skilled staff could still be exacerbated by lack of affordable housing in the parish. This should be considered when formalising the housing policy in the neighbourhood plan

1. There are some indications of the need for some further job opportunities for parishioners within the parish.
2. Apart from the broadband/wi-fi issue most substantive businesses surveyed don’t identify any other major constraints to conducting their affairs.
3. Specific issues affecting smaller businesses or sole traders are connected with greater networking and advertising opportunities and space renting or sharing possibilities.
4. There could be a match of providers of small units for rent or purchase with those wishing to do so.
5. The possible national infrastructure project of re-siting stretches of the A1 could have a major impact on local businesses. In light of possible re-routing away from the parish, there are concerns relating to the need for continuation of proximity and access from larger businesses and worries that footfall volumes may decrease from retailers .This may also have a possible impact on leisure service providers. We advise that a close eye needs to be kept on the progress of this project and likely implications of decisions taken communicated to local businesses as appropriate.
6. **Conclusions**

1 Overall Northill Parish appears to have a thriving and healthy economic profile but meeting concerns for the future will play apart in its continuity.

2 Broadband and wi-fi is a crucial factor limiting many of the businesses in Northill and Ickwell and must be resolved by considering the solutions put forward in the appended report.

3 Small entrepreneurial businesses would benefit from greater networking opportunities, availability of shared or rented accommodation and support in advertising and promoting their services.

4.Businesses wishing to expand and those with an unfulfilled staffing shortage need to be given further support through housing and other NP initiatives and policies to fill their vacancies and continue to expand.

5 New employment opportunities within the parish need to be explored with those businesses able to provide them to enable those currently seeking work to become gainfully employed.

6. Closer working relationships between the parish council and local businesses would advantage the community as a whole in enabling sustainable development to be planned over time, new employment opportunities to be created and reduction of perceived constraints to be tackled.

7. Provision of one or more new cafeteria outlets needs to be further explored with those businesses who have expressed interest in the idea.

1. **Recommendations**

1 For broadband and wi-fi delivery, in addition to the recommendations of the separate report we suggest a working party of representatives of local businesses the NPC and interested parties is formed to further investigate costs, timings, speed offers and alternative modes of delivery, produce an accurate picture of local needs and then propose “overall provision” or “buy-in” options for those affected.

2 Housing policy in the NP needs to consider how joint planning initiatives between local businesses, developers and builders could be approved to meet needs for expansion. The availability of affordable housing including rural exception schemes, multiple tenancy, part ownership and low rental opportunities should be considered

3 .A local business register is set up and maintained on the Parish/Villages websites to enable productive networking and further local business opportunities to be attained.

4. Planning guidance and positive support of business development through new premises and rental units needs to be incorporated into the NP to encourage planning decisions in favour of sustainable business development and provision of small units for those who need it.

5. Local representation on consultation groups which may be set up to consider proposals to re-route the A1 should be attained and the NPC should ensure that full consultation with local businesses is undertaken when appropriate to ensure the views of these groups are fully represented in any decision-making that takes place.

**Appendix 1 Approximate division of businesses in Northill Parish**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Types of businesses** |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| 19% | 13 | Agriculture/Horticulture |  |
| 17% | 12 | Domestic/Gardeners |  |
| 16% | 11 | Professional/Consultancy/Property |  |
| 14% | 10 | Construction/Engineering/Manufacturing | |
| 10% | 7 | Wholesale/Retail |  |
| 10% | 7 | Animal Services/Equestrian |  |
| 7% | 5 | Leisure/Education |  |
| 4% | 3 | Garage/Haulage/Drivers |  |
| 3% | 2 | Other (Phoenix & Tidy Tip) |  |
| 100% |  |  |  |
|  | 70 | Total Businesses |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  | **Size of businesses** |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| 2% | 2 | Over 15 employees |  |
| 19% | 12 | 5 to 15 employees |  |
| 31% | 22 | 2 to 5 employees |  |
| 48% | 34 | Homeworkers & Self Employed |  |
| 100% |  |  |  |
|  | 70 | Total |  |

**Appendix 2 Businesses contacted and businesses replied**

We contacted 58 businesses which 83% of total 70 identified.

Of the 58 businesses we had 49 replies which 85% of those contacted.

Of the 70 businesses identified 12 not contacted which is 17%.

**High Speed Broadband Report**

**Background**

Neighbourhood planning has identified a need to deliver high speed broadband (HSBB) to the villages of Ickwell and Northill. Upper and Lower Caldecote, Brook End and Hatch are already catered for by BT Open Reach and Virgin Cable. Government’s aim is to provide superfast broadband (speeds of 24Mbps or more) for at least 95% of UK premises by 2017. Current progress indicates that this target will not be met.

Average broadband speeds in Ickwell and Northill are 2-4Mbps. This may be adequate for the occasional Email, but is far from satisfactory for the majority of users. Broadband speeds in Upper Caldecote can reach 200Mbps and usually manage 50 Mbps.

**Project Objective**

To establish our options for delivering a minimum of 24Mbps to households in Ickwell & Northill and to assess the time scale and cost involved for such options.

**The Options in Outline**

BT’s failure to achieve its original time brief has encouraged commercial operators like Voneus to step in and offer to link rural communities to high speed broadband by connecting to the nearest provider (BT or Virgin) and broadcasting wirelessly via masts to these communities. There are costs involved and a commitment from 60 households at least to sign up to buy the service. Dunton will go live in September 2016.

Central Beds Council is working with BT to deliver HSBB to Central Bedfordshire communities on a phased basis. Ickwell & Northill is in Phase 3 of CBC’s programme and work will start in July 2017 with a completion date of March 2018 latest. CBC will provide funding for these roll-outs. (Phase Map Appendix 1.)

CBC does work with other providers like Voneus in areas where no other roll-out is scheduled; in these cases, CBC will not provide funding. We noted that Voneus is an accredited supplier to Central Beds and are in discussion with James Cushing of CBC about delivering improved broad band to rural communities in Southill, Haynes and Houghton Conquest parishes. Redraw is another commercial provider, though recent research indicates a poor delivery.

In summary, we have the CBC/BT no cost option scheduled for end 2017, with the probability that this date will see some slippage. Alternatively, we have Voneus who started the Dunton installation in May 2016 and expect this to be functioning during September; so delivery may be quicker than BT, but there are costs and commitments involved.

There are other routes; a local resident has tried to improve mobile signal using a 4g antenna and booster box. He gets internet of 30mb/8mb but it's capped at 16gb per month and the signal gets weaker when it rains so it's only really used in an emergency.

**Voneus in summary:**

Voneus uses wireless transmission from the nearest Virgin or BT source using a transmitter which must be within 10 km of the targeted community.

Voneus requires a commitment of a minimum of 60 households to justify the programme. There will be an installation fee of £150 per house. Voneus will deliver 100Mbps with a download limit of 20Gb per month at £20 per month. Unlimited usage at 100 Mbps will be £35 per month. Users can also have a land line rental at £12 per month.

Voneus has taken the opportunity to look at the geography of Ickwell & Northill and concluded that a mast on the Northill church tower would do the job; but this is just preliminary survey work. Voneus has been advised that we will be in contact if the Neighbourhood Planning Team and the community decide to go down this route.

**CBC/BT Open Reach:**

A member of the group has been in discussion with BT and reports as follows:

The term ‘fibre rollout’ is perceived as some vastly expensive, labour intensive, cable laying exercise.  For those that don’t know what the BT fibre rollout entails apparently most if not all Telecom Exchanges have a gigabit connection to the rest of the network already.  Fibre rollout involves siting the green boxes (the fibre boxes) outside of the exchange and it is this that households make the connection to.  The connection from the green box to each home is carried over the existing copper wires to the BT socket already in our homes.  It is not the case that roads need to be dug up to lay new fibre cables to each home.  There will clearly be work involved in re-patching each connection, taking it out of the Exchange and routing it through the fibre green box, but this is a relatively quick task.

CBC does provide funding, so there should be no installation costs for our households. CBC confirms of course that actual speeds involved will vary by distance from the “Green Box”; but the minimum speed will be 24Mbps.

**Summary:**

The choice is delivery time versus local investment. This decision is for the Neighbourhood Planners; but I would question investing in alternative commercial technology only to have this rendered redundant by a BT Fibre rollout in 18 months. Admittedly, there could be delays, so if the CBC/BT option is chosen we would need to keep the pressure on BT and CBC.

An additional step that could be taken to ensure that developers and builders of new properties and business units should take note of guidance that is in the NP regarding access to HSB (See Arlesey Draft Neighbourhood Plan).

**Appendix**

