1. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Council agrees that this report be submitted to the Scottish Executive as the response to the consultation on the Rural Development Programme for Scotland 2007-13.

2. BACKGROUND

The consultation paper from the Scottish Executive and which is attached as Appendix 1, invites views on the key themes and priorities for the Rural Development Strategy for Scotland. It is the first of a two-part process, consisting of 'The Strategic Plan' consultation - which will run to March 29 2006 and a complementary consultation on the Programme itself, including more detailed information on delivery mechanisms, to be launched online during week beginning 27 March 2006, and for which a separate response will be prepared. A twelve-week consultation period has been allocated for the second consultation.

The Executive is proposing action under three main themes:

- Underpinning performance and quality in the agriculture, food and forestry sectors
- Enhancing rural landscapes and natural heritage, and
- Promoting a more diverse rural economy with thriving rural communities

The Strategy will guide the use of European Union (EU) funds, and other resources for rural development in the 2007-13 Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP). In addition, it will form part of a UK National Strategy Plan, which must be submitted to the European Commission (EC) prior to submission of the 2007-13 SRDP in summer 2006.

The budget for Rural Development for 2007-2013 is not yet known, and will not be known until decisions are made in Europe about the allocation of resources to Member States.

The report draws on, and includes, the outcome of consultation with the Angus Rural Partnership and Community Planning Partners.

3. PROPOSED RESPONSE

Strategic priorities for rural Scotland

Q1. Do you feel that Paragraphs 14 to 21 provide a fair synopsis of the Strategic Priorities for rural Scotland?
The Strategic Policies for the Rural Development Plan for Scotland, as outlined in paragraphs 14 to 21, confirm that the Scottish Executive recognises that meeting the needs of rural areas requires integrated action from a wide range of agencies, stakeholders and practitioners. Angus Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the widespread consultations on ‘The Strategic Plan’ and (in future) the ‘Programme’.

The Scottish Executive also states that the context for developing a rural strategy is provided by the relevance of certain strategic documents to the future of Scotland’s rural communities. However, the strategic documents cited, do not make explicit reference to the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, and its resulting framework to facilitate better, more responsive public services with its key provisions for best value, community planning, and the power to advance well-being.

Achieving sustainable rural development necessitates policy provision that encompasses a wide range of interrelated priorities. Therefore, an integrated approach is required to the development of policies for rural areas, and the delivery of services to rural communities.

Community Planning, ‘…the structures, processes and behaviours necessary to ensure that organisations work together with communities to improve the quality of people’s lives, through more effective, joined-up and appropriate delivery of services’ is therefore the key mechanism by which Scottish rural policy can be delivered, to engender an ‘equivalent experience’ for those in rural communities as set alongside people in urban areas.

In addition, there are no explicit references to planning, land reform, transport or energy policy, all of which are integral to the well being and sustainability of Scotland’s rural communities. Failure to recognise their importance when formulating a strategy may result in their omission/low priority from the content (Programme) of the Rural Development Plan for Scotland. This is particularly important in view of the increasing numbers of those at risk of fuel poverty. The importance of affordable housing to meet the need of existing residents and to provide an incentive for new residents is not mentioned.

Reference is made in the consultation paper to the Partnership Agreement, published in 2003, which commits the Scottish Executive to maintaining strong, prosperous and growing communities in rural Scotland, and to working to ensure that the rural economy continues to provide jobs and opportunities. Recognition should be given to the issue of people taking up jobs and opportunities in rural areas sometimes perceived to making “quality of life” choices. These jobs are often in sectors offering employment that is habitually short-term, seasonal, part-time, low-paid and lacking in career development.

It is unclear as to how much the current consultation pays cognizance to the impact of demographic change and which might be done to mitigate its implications on rural areas, and to ongoing research and activity ‘on the ground’ in rural areas. Clarity is required as to whether outcomes from other activities such as the Closing the Opportunity Gap initiative, the Rural Services Priority Areas programme, and the Scottish Parliament Environment and Rural Development Committee Inquiry into Rural Development, are being integrated into the strategy formation.

The Strategic Policies for Rural Scotland rightly places the emphasis on sustainable development (encouraging as well as maintaining), and on local service delivery.

Q2. Do you agree that the themes that have been identified match the requirements for implementing Axes 1-3 in the Rural Development Regulation?

The themes proposed by the Scottish Executive for ‘The Strategic Plan’ are structured around the three themes that reflect the EU Axes and which address priorities and challenges facing rural Scotland. The consultation also recognises the cross-cutting principles of:
- An integrated approach to policy delivery (economic, social, environmental activities);
- Flexibility to meet diversity and local distinctiveness across rural Scotland; and
• Promotion of sustainability, resilience and vigour in the rural economy, communities and natural heritage.

Angus Council fully supports the cross cutting principles chosen by the Scottish Executive to guide the approach to the Strategy and the Programme, and offers the following comments:

➢ EU Axis 1 - Improving the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry by supporting restructuring, development and innovation
   Theme 1 - Underpinning performance and quality in the agriculture, food processing and forestry sectors
   Although comparable, theme 1 should incorporate actions that allow for the restructuring of the agricultural sector, with reference to changes arising from the implementation of the CAP Reform (i.e. Single Farm Payment). This would allow increased mobility within the sector (e.g. retirement schemes, and particularly co-ordinated provision of training). Encouragement should also be given to developing, rather than innovating projects, promoting diversification projects that enhance Scotland’s competitive advantage as well as supporting farming families, and to assisting farmers to maximise their contribution to the food industry by adding value to their products/services through increased co-operation. A review of public procurement policies would also assist the farming community. This would more closely reflect the EU Strategic Guidelines for resources devoted to Axis 1 whilst also further addressing the challenges to rural Scotland.

➢ EU Axis 2 – Improving the environment and the countryside by supporting land management
   Theme 2 – Enhancing Rural Landscapes and the Natural Heritage
   Theme 2 recognises the role of Land Management Contracts in maintaining and managing landscapes. The principles underlying Land Management Contracts should also be applied to Themes 1 and 3.

➢ EU Axis 3 – Improving the quality of life in rural areas and encouraging the diversification of economic activity
   Theme 3 – Promoting a more diverse rural economy and thriving rural communities
   Thriving rural communities rely heavily on the in-kind, and financial support of businesses, to the surrounding area and to the vital contribution from the voluntary sector, both at a local and national level. Recognition should be given to the inter-relationship of business and community in rural areas, and support adapted accordingly. Voluntary activity in rural areas is often informal in nature and rural communities need access to financial support that is currently limited to groups with charitable status only.

Recognition should also be given to rural businesses, which are rooted in the diversification of agriculture and forestry activities. Specifically, a clear focus on supporting women’s enterprise, and social enterprise in rural areas is required.

In the summer of 2005, the Scottish Parliament agreed to the creation of a ‘differentiated’ social enterprise strategy. This will not be specific to rural areas, but will, once produced by the summer of 2006, open up opportunities for the growth of social enterprise in rural areas, where communities are organising to provide their own services. Scotland currently has no strategy for development of the social economy as a whole, and the production of the differentiated strategy for the social enterprise part of the sector will bring Scotland into line with England and Wales, both of which have had such a strategy for several years.

It is important to fit in with the Strategic Guidelines for Axis 3, in particular the emphasis given to the development of capacity–building. There is a wealth of work ongoing, and planned, in rural areas in relation to building the capacity of communities in order to encourage action and build social capital. The SRDP makes no provision for training in relation to that capacity, despite such recognition by organisations like the Carnegie Commission for Rural Community Development,
which has invested just under £4 million over three years in action research. The purpose of the Commission’s Rural Action Research Project is to demonstrate and pilot cost-effective community-led solutions, with a shift in focus from reactive, short-term grant-giving, to supporting programmes that will make a real and sustained difference in people’s lives.

Finally, it is critical that rural communities and businesses can rely on consistent, quality digital communications provision in order to learn, collaborate and compete in a variety of environments.

For each of Themes 1, 2 and 3

Q3. Do you agree with the opportunities that are presented?

The challenges recognised, and the opportunities presented, in each of themes 1, 2 and 3 rightly build on Scotland’s strengths. More recognition could be given to offsetting the current weaknesses of rural Scotland (e.g. the transport and communications infrastructure) and to limiting its exposure to internal and external threats. It is helpful that the Scottish Executive is reviewing sectoral (e.g. agriculture/forestry) and thematic (e.g. sustainable development) strategies concurrently. It is crucial that Scotland invests in the human, as well as the physical, capital in order for the people of rural Scotland to operate flexibly in a changing and challenging world.

Sustainable Development
Specific reference to sustainable development for local authorities and public sector agencies exists as part of Best Value, arising from the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003. There is still the question of how this fits within the community planning process and of its importance in a rural context.

Church and Young describe community planning as ‘mainstreaming Local Agenda 21’ or local sustainable development activities (LA21). In reality, both policy agendas share common aims as defined by Lucas et al (2003):

- Improve well-being/quality of life in local areas
- Integrate local delivery activity
- Involve local communities in decision making
- Develop a vision for the local area
- Work in partnership with other agencies

The contemporary reality is that there are now two key messages to communicate - sustainable development and community planning. To achieve truly sustainable communities, one cannot exist without the other.

In Angus, sustainable community planning will be the essence of the new community plan in 2007, and this reflects a sustained effort by partners and local communities to build the principles of sustainable development into daily activities and overarching priorities.

Q4. Do you agree with the strategic outcomes?

The Strategic Outcomes for themes 1, 2 and 3 recognise that rural Scotland is a work-place, as well being as a dormitory for urban populations, and a destination for recreation activities for residents and visitors alike. They highlight the need for conservation of the landscape, and emphasise the potential for rural areas in developing quality products and services.

However, what is more important is that rural areas are not just viewed, or promoted, as a niche proposition. Healthy rural communities value their history, culture and environment. They have a pride in their identity, and use it to enhance quality of life. In developing and maintaining a strong primary sector and diversification in rural economic activity, maintaining
population is key. These communities require sustained support and investment in order to thrive.

It is important therefore, that arrangements and strategies such as City Region Partnerships consider fully rural needs in planning activities, and making allocations from Cities Growth Fund to City Region Partnerships, where urban regeneration may attract the majority focus.

**Q5. Do you agree with priorities listed and the balance that is proposed between them?**

Angus Council supports the priorities identified and the balance proposed between them. It acknowledges the weight given to commitments on biodiversity and water quality and agrees with the emphasis placed on the development of businesses that build on the assets and primary products (agriculture, forestry, food and natural heritage) of rural Scotland.

Rural Scotland should maximise its resources and assets, as well as its primary products. Angus Council supports the intention to promote locally driven projects that build capacity and enhance infrastructure in local communities. It should further be acknowledged that participation in, and development of, community groups is more advanced in some areas of rural Scotland than in others.

**Q6. Do you agree with the proposed balance between the themes?**

Angus Council supports the equal weighting that will be attached to themes 1 and 3 and recognises the necessity to honour existing funding commitments to theme 2.

*For Themes 1, 2 and 3 together*

**Q7. Do you have any proposals on how the priorities outlined in the three Themes can be implemented to reflect priorities in local areas?**

Responses in questions 1 and 3 set out our views in relation to community planning as a mechanism for joining up local and strategic priorities, as well as engaging communities. In addition, making links with the work of the National Park Authorities in identifying local priorities will be of great importance.

Engaging rural communities in community planning is a complex challenge and there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution. In Scotland, Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 provides a framework and guidance from which to seek genuine community engagement through the community planning process. General conditions for success contained within the guidance include commitment to, communication with, and support for communities, coupled with the recognition that research and identification of key issues in a particular area is essential.

However, for rural areas, where needs are diverse, and local communities may be hard to reach, particular considerations must be made. These include understanding the nature of community, assessment of the geography and identity of an area, and utilisation of task-based approaches, where the community work with the community planning partners, taking part in the delivery of service improvements, in a manner in which they are at the centre. Additionally, partner agencies should consider their own structure and assess resource provision for delivery at a local level, as well as communication methods, and links into the wider community planning process.

Explicit monitoring of and reporting on the community planning process in rural areas may be critical for community planning partnerships to ensure they are favourably placed for success.

It is important throughout this learning process to recognise the wide range of quality ongoing work with rural communities. For those involved in the formal community planning structure, ensuring that experiences and knowledge gained are communicated from the bottom up and via all staff involved is vital.
The potential benefits associated with effective engagement with rural communities are many. Building the capacity and confidence of communities to enable them to contribute positively to the development of local community plans, and become active in their delivery, is a realistic target.

**LEADER**

**Q7. What are the opportunities and risks presented by incorporation of LEADER into the SRDP?**

Opportunities
This will present an opportunity for the different rural interests to work together and in a new way, towards what are common aims, but currently not seen as such i.e. improvement of the rural economy and rural services and opportunities. Farming and community interests are often perceived as having to compete for grant allocations. If changes result in funds being allocated through EAFRD and accessed through a common means, opportunities will exist for the different groups to work more closely together, gain common understanding and share experiences. Given that no specific Measures have been identified for LEADER, rather Objectives, there is undoubtedly wider scope for action.

Risks
There are questions over how grants will be assessed and delivered. The current Leader + LAG system, a mixture of statutory and community representation, works well in some areas, and has had additional benefits such as networking opportunities, building longer term relationships between agencies and community group reps, the social “glue” achieved by a partnership that meets regularly, leading to greater trust and easier co-operation.

However, under new arrangements, the joint working built up over 3 generations of LEADER programmes is likely to be lost. If there is to be a LAG-type group, it will need to include representatives and professionals from the agriculture and forestry sectors. The size could become unwieldy. Current LAG members do not feel qualified to assess grants for agricultural and forestry projects and future members with agriculture/forestry interests may require intensive training in grant assessment issues.

**Q8. How should LEADER be applied in order to maximise its added value in terms of capacity-building and locally driven development?**

Although Angus is a predominantly rural county, LEADER+ coverage, while extended from the previous Leader II coverage, was still patchy, with the south of the county being ineligible for funding. Despite smaller resource allocations for the forthcoming rural development funds, it is the view of Angus Council that the whole county be eligible. Postcode-based eligibility is not a favourable basis for allocating funding, resulting in areas that are currently disadvantaged and have missed out on a number of funding streams.

In areas eligible for LEADER+, groups that have already been grant recipients, and wish to develop projects and build on their success are the ones that are in most need. In the latter stages of the LEADER + Programme, resources have been targeted at groups to develop new elements of previously funded projects, thus further increasing their capacity.

The appointment of rural facilitators/animateurs to assist development of groups towards funded project and beyond to sustainability has been suggested. At present this role is largely carried out by LEADER+ programme managers, who spend a great deal of time with groups assisting the progress of their application. Locally, specific local officers (e.g. Community Learning and Development workers, Rural Facilitators, Community Planning Officers etc...) also work in rural areas, building capacity and facilitating activity. Any new appointment must complement, and not overlap, with existing agencies, programmes and activities.
**Internal and External Consistency of the Strategy**

**Q10. How can consistency and complementarity with other EU and domestic funding streams be achieved most effectively?**

There are currently a number of grants aimed at feasibility studies for new ideas – (Communities Scotland - New Ideas and Seeing is Believing, Big Lottery Fund – Investing in Ideas and Scottish Executive – Rural Development Small Award Fund for example). However, concerns exist that the accessibility of first grants such as these raise expectations, when continuation or development funding can be difficult to source, resulting in the dissolution of groups, dispersal of any capacity building achieved, and general malaise in the community.

New grants should take into account what other major grant givers are offering, and either fill gaps in terms of project coverage, group eligibility and amount of funding offered, or provide a stepping stone towards another grant source or from another grant source. In addition, groups that have run a successful project should not have to reinvent their ideas to attract ongoing funding. See reference to Carnegie Commission for Rural Community Development Rural Action Research Project in question 2.

There is a need to ensure that the programme is developed to complement the development of new ERDF and ESF Priorities post 2006, particularly in ERDF where a rural dimension has been identified for Priority 3.

The difficulty in acquiring match funding has been a problem for most LEADER + areas in Scotland. Where this has been addressed, as in the Cairngorms LEADER+ by the Cairngorms National Park Authority being able to match fund projects, the LEADER+ has been notably more successful in its ability to distribute grants.

Current funding is widely recognised by practitioners as unsustainable for fragile rural communities, supporting short-term initiatives with less than comprehensive coverage e.g. LEADER. In addition, where there are a lower proportion of community bodies (and/or more or less partnership working in local service delivery agencies) to draw down funding such as this, whole areas of rural Scotland are at risk of disadvantage.

A large volume of the activity in rural areas is undertaken and/or coordinated by the voluntary sector and volunteers. Axis 3 of the SRDP does not make adequate provision for supporting the voluntary sector. Current information in the SRDP suggests that public agency services are the only recognized means/method of service delivery in rural areas. It does not explicitly reference the voluntary sector, volunteers and community planning as a key mechanism for delivery of rural services.

Inherent in this plan must be the need for recognition of, and support for, the differing levels of rural community development in existence and avoidance of a blanket solution to cover all issues. Building capacity and social capital - to result in a strong voice for rural communities – is critical in encouraging open and active networks with links across NGO’s business and public sector, and good links with the outside world.

**Rural Network**

**Q11. What should be the key outcomes from setting up a rural network?**

- Provide opportunities for rural practitioners, communities, policy makers and funders to network – virtually and by meeting.
- Provide a forum for the development and exchange of rural policy ideas
- Provide a place for accessing rural research
- A place where best practice can be found and replicated
Q12. What approach do you consider to be the most effective and practical for establishing a rural network?

It is important to ascertain the proposed membership of a rural network before considering which approach might be most effective. For rural development professionals, a virtual network, and regular seminars, might suffice, but a wider rural audience should benefit from a more robust structure, with adequate resources and strategic commitment.

The model suggested in the document appears to favour a minimal approach, in both monetary terms and degree of effectiveness, and lacks a robust structure. In practice, virtual networks are only likely to be successful when they cover a very narrow field of interest, when those accessing information have adequate time to take part and to do so is of high importance to their work. For the general user, accessing the network regularly is likely to quickly tail off.

There is a need to look at all existing rural networks and ensure there is no duplication with any new network. Important to this should be learning gained from the rural gateway website team and evaluation. In addition, UHI PolicyWeb has been commissioned to lead and coordinate an examination of the feasibility of establishing, on a long-term basis, a Scottish Academy of Rural Policy (SARP).

SARP is seen as an academy built on ‘distributed excellence’, drawing on the best Scottish (and non-Scottish) expertise on the wide range of policies impacting on rural and remote parts of Scotland. The expertise of UHI in developing ‘connectivity not centralisation’ is seen as central to this idea of an inclusive networked organisation. Although social science led, it aims to be inter-disciplinary, and to draw on local, national and international practice knowledge. It seeks to ‘join up’ people working in these different fields from academia, policy and practice, and to facilitate links with similar groups working in other countries. In these ways it aims to build capacities inside and outside academic institutions, and to create new agendas. It aims at independence, high standards, providing open public domain access to core knowledge and information.

Q13. What, if any, are the benefits of a Scotland network?

Currently, there are a number of rural pressure groups, rural community development models and a Scottish Parliament with rural representatives, unlike when a sole Rural Forum existed in the 1980s.

In time, some of the Rural Forum’s functions were hived off to other agencies e.g. rural housing, and others were not replaced. Since then, there has been a proliferation of rural bodies, but few opportunities for them to work together, network, discuss common issues, and debate opposing views. Some higher profile and well-resourced groups have gained the attention of the media and are more likely to be heard in government. They are not necessarily a majority, yet there is little way of assessing view and concerns of “ordinary” rural people. A Scotland network could and should have this role, as well as that of education and training.

In addition, investment in and commitment to rural development must include input from viable, unbiased networks of those with an active interest/involvement. Open and active networks, with links across NGOs, the private and public sector, and good links with the outside world, are a clear way in which to engender greater understanding, common knowledge and partnership working.
4. **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no financial implications arising from this report.

5. **HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS**

There are no human rights implications arising from this report.

6. **CONCLUSION**

A quarter of Angus’ population live in small rural settlements and Angus Council is committed to identifying ways in which the development of those settlements and delivery of public services to those communities can be improved and achieved in a sustainable manner.

Angus Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Executive consultation on ‘The Strategic Plan’ and (in future) the ‘Programme’. However, a number of observations and suggestions have been made in relation to ‘The Strategic Plan’ and Angus Council anticipates with interest, an indication as to how they might be integrated following the end of the consultation period.

**CONSULTATION**

Members of Angus Community Planning Partnership and all Directors of Angus Council have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

**David S Sawers**  
**Chief Executive**

Note: No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information), were relied on to any material extent in preparing this paper.