

SUPPORTING FENLAND'S COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN

To: Fenland Strategic Partnership Board
Date: 09 July 2009
From: Paul Medd, Chairman, Fenland Economic Development Partnership

1. PURPOSE

1.1 The purpose of this report is to update the Fenland Strategic Partnership on the impact of the economic downturn on Fenland's communities. An increased understanding of the impact of the downturn on communities will lead to a better response and all partners have a role to play in sharing this information to inform decision-making and action.

2. BACKGROUND/CONTEXT

2.1 In order to view the impacts of the downturn in the context of the work of the partnership, this report will look at examples relevant to the delivery of the Sustainable Community Strategy which subsequently aligns with the agreed priority themes.

2.2 It is also important to note at this stage the work of Fenland Strategic Partnership (FSP) links in with the vision, objectives and initiatives supported by the Cambridgeshire Together (CT) board for example the Weather the Storm project. The priorities and focus of both the FSP and CT are complementary to enable effective outcomes for the community.

3. EVIDENCE BASE

FENLAND'S FUTURE GENERATIONS

3.1 The impact of the economic downturn has started to be felt by young people; for example, the County Council is seeing an increase in the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training. Figures from the Eastern Regional Public Health Observatory, Child Health Profile for 2008 found this affects 840 16-18 year olds in Fenland. The Learning Skills Council are reporting that new apprenticeships were still being offered but there was evidence that existing ones were being withdrawn.

HELPING PEOPLE TO LIVE HEALTHY, INDEPENDENT LIVES

- 3.2 Whilst there are no figures available at present it is believed that there is a clear link between the economic downturn and impacts on public health. The effects of the current recession on physical and mental health are likely to operate by a number of linked pathways, with unemployment and increased personal debt being especially associated with mental health problems.
- 3.3 Reduced household income and loss of work may have a wide range of effects – including poorer nutrition, less exercise, increased alcohol consumption and the increased likelihood of entering debt, as well as placing additional strain on marital and family relationships.

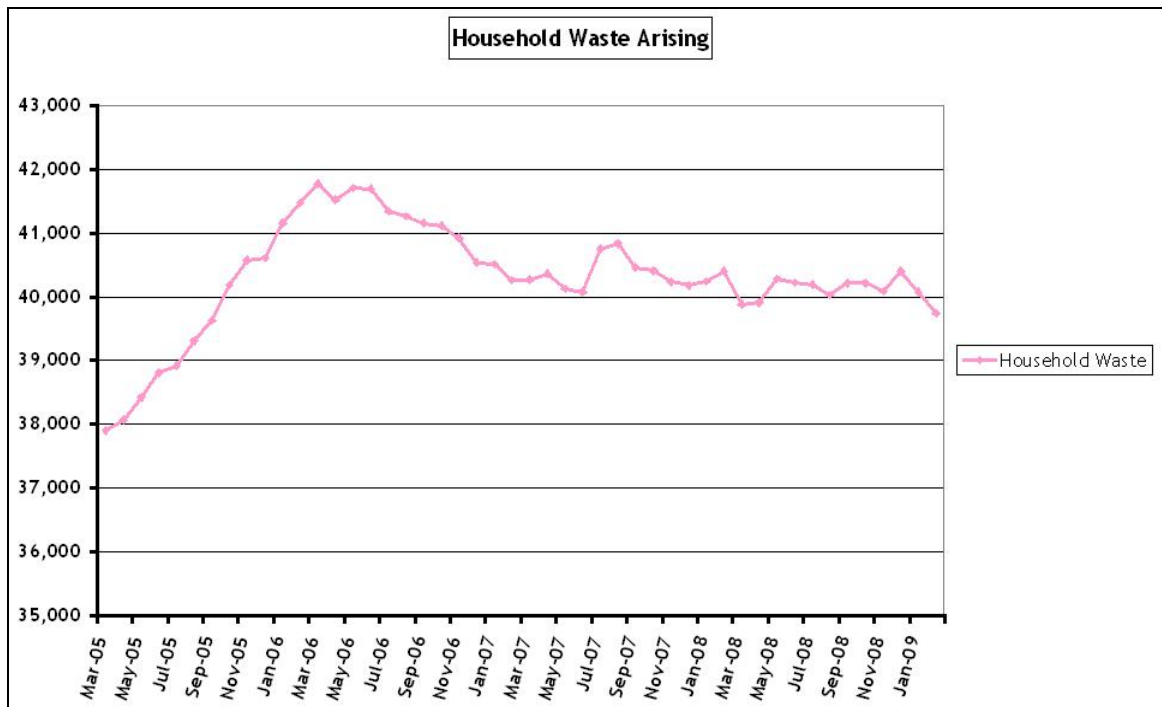
MAKING COMMUNITIES SAFER AND STRONGER

- 3.4 Within this theme partners have agreed that there is anticipation that there will be an increase in acquisitive crime as a result of the downturn. Acquisitive Crime is defined as theft, including theft from the person and from vehicles. Burglary is classified as Acquisitive Crime. At present there is no direct link that can be made between the economic downturn and the levels of crime committed in the county. There may be an increase in outlets for cheaper stolen items but again, there is no evidence for this.
- 3.5 For instances of domestic violence there is no hard evidence linking the issue to stresses caused by the economic situation; it is all anecdotal. This is an area of crime in which the police are particularly keen to encourage reporting.
- 3.6 Under the Stronger element of the theme, the focus is on supporting the voluntary sector to ensure the advice and information people require is available to them. Many voluntary sector organisations are struggling financially at present; however, many of them were in a similar financial situation before the onset of the economic downturn.

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENT

- 3.7 The economic downturn has presented a number of opportunities and challenges within the theme of Environmental Sustainability. For example, it provides an opportunity to promote pro-environmental behaviours that save households and businesses money but also the challenge of making sure the focus on climate change and environmental sustainability is not lost during the recession.
- 3.8 Reduced consumption may result in less waste, fewer greenhouse gas emissions and less pressure on resources. As the following graph shows, household waste in Fenland peaked between January and March 2006 and has been going down since. Whilst the economic downturn may have had an impact subsequently, the trend of waste reduction was already established.

Total Waste – Fenland District Council



- 3.9 The number of lorries on UK roads has fallen dramatically. Figures from the Department for Transport show that the total fell 12% in the first quarter of the year and 7% in the previous quarter. The company Trafficmaster has recorded 18 consecutive months of reductions in average congestion on motorways across England.
- 3.10 The “green” job market seems to be performing relatively well compared with other sectors. For example, job opportunities in the UK’s renewable energy, energy efficiency, sustainability and corporate social responsibility sectors grew by 58% in the past year. Companies pursuing more sustainable technologies seem to be more resistant to the recession and are still seeing their businesses grow.
- 3.11 The recession may also provide an opportunity to expand local environmental volunteering, which is known to improve health and wellbeing and maintain skills for unemployed people and to promote pro-environmental behaviours in the community.
- 3.12 There may be greater challenges to securing climate resilience, lower carbon and environmental benefits through new development because of increasing pressures on Section 106 funds and developers seeking to reduce obligations where possible.
- 3.13 It is essential that during the economic downturn we do not lose focus on climate change and environmental sustainability and that we seek to maintain those effects that are beneficial as the recession eases.

BUILDING COMMUNITIES WITH DECENT HOMES, A SENSE OF PLACE AND PURPOSE

- 3.14 The Latest data from the Hometrack database that the Cambridgeshire Housing sub region uses shows the average price of a property in Fenland has fallen 11% in the last year and now stands at £137,723. The following table shows the average prices for the different types of property in Fenland.

	Average Price Nov 07 - Apr 08	Average Price Nov 08 – Apr 09	Difference	Change
Detached	£201,742	£176,046	-£25,696	-13%
Semi-Detached	£134,063	£119,772	-£14,291	-11%
Terraced	£119,301	£102,524	-£16,777	-14%
Flat/Maisonette	£82,463	£76,227	-£6,236	-8%
All	£154,928	£137,723	-£17,205	-11%

- 3.15 Although the economic downturn has caused house prices in the district to fall, there is still an issue of affordability due to the relatively high cost of homes, a decrease in the availability of mortgages and increasing unemployment causing problems in paying existing mortgages.
- 3.16 The impact of the economic downturn has started to be seen in the progress of housing developments with a reduction in completions and a dramatic fall in the number of starts. However, to combat this slow down the Cambridgeshire Horizons board has agreed to the allocation of the Housing Growth Fund (HGF) monies for 2009/10 and 2010/11. Through the Housing Growth Fund, Cambridgeshire Horizons hop to kick start housing delivery and the associated infrastructure to encourage developers to reinvest in housing.

HELPING PEOPLE INTO WORK AND ENCOURAGING INNOVATION AND ENTERPRISE

Unemployment

- 3.17 In April 2009 there were 2,252 Fenland residents claiming Jobseeker's Allowance compared to 1,171 in April 2008.
- 3.18 Table 1 shows the male, female and total claimant count unemployment rates across Cambridgeshire for April 2009 as well as those for the East of England and England. The unemployment rate for April 2009 in Fenland was 4.2%, up 0.1% on the previous month.

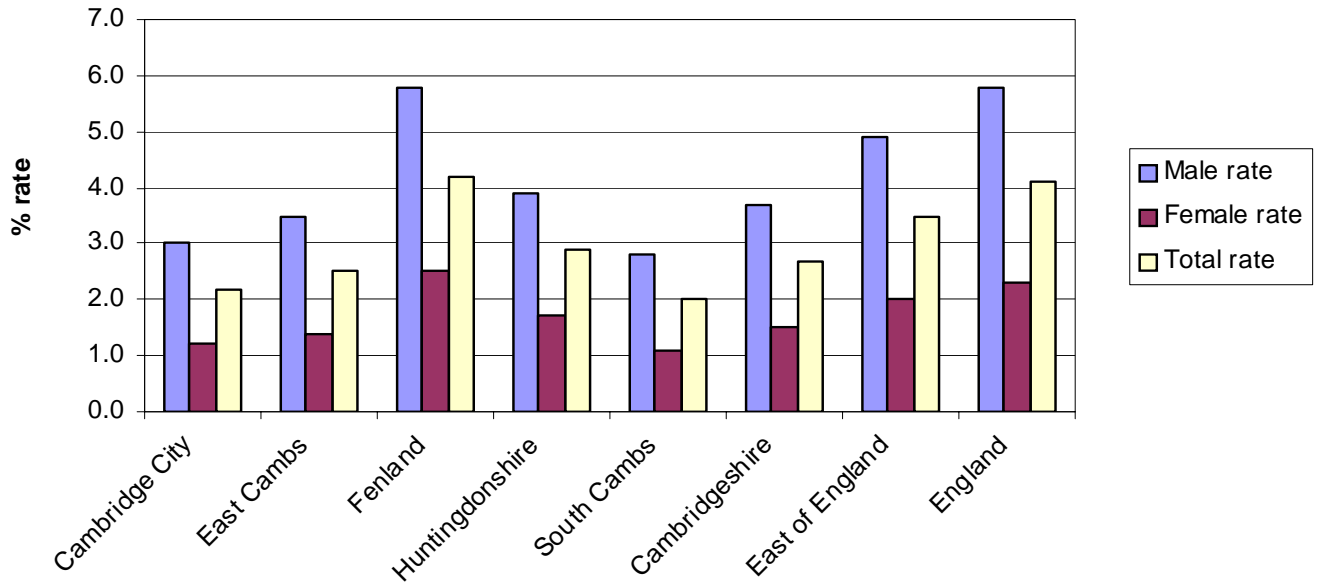


Table 1: Unemployment rates in Cambridgeshire by District – April 2009

3.19 Table 2 gives the total numbers unemployed by district and the associated unemployment rates and makes comparisons over the year. Figures for the County, East of England and England are also included. Unemployment rates rose in all five districts over the year to April 2009. In the districts Huntingdonshire saw the greatest numerical increase with 1,828 claimants representing a rate 1.8% higher, Fenland had the highest rate rise with 2.0% or 1,081 people.

3.20 Fenland remains as the only district to have an unemployment rate higher than the regional figure and now also has a rate above the national figure of 4.1%.

	April 2008		April 2009		Apr08 – Apr09	
	Number	Rate %	Number	Rate %	Change in number	Change in rate %
Cambridge City	1,166	1.3	1,891	2.2	725	0.9
East Cambridgeshire	506	1.0	1,234	2.5	728	1.5
Fenland	1,171	2.2	2,252	4.2	1,081	2.0
Huntingdonshire	1,197	1.1	3,025	2.9	1,828	1.8
South Cambridgeshire	631	0.7	1,657	2.0	1,026	1.3
Cambridgeshire	4,671	1.2	10,059	2.7	5,388	1.5

East of England	58,670	1.7	121,355	3.5	62,685	1.8
England	695,260	2.2	1,304,456	4.1	609,196	1.9

Table 2: Unemployment figures for April 2008 and April 2009

3.21 The current economic climate continues to lead to higher volumes of benefit claims being received as more residents ask for help paying their rent and council tax. For example, in Fenland the benefits service are averaging 100 new claims each week and the number of customers receiving benefit is also increasing, currently 8,998 overall, an increase of 8.55% (709) since April 2008.

3.22 Performance in this area is remaining in the upper quartile:

MEASURE	TARGET (2007/2008- upper quartile)	ACTUAL (2008/2009)
Average time for processing new claims	21.3 days	14.4 days
Average time for change of circumstances	7.4 days	5.1 days

N.B. Please note that actual performance for 2008/2009 is compared to quartile data from 2007/2008 as data for 2008/2009 quartiles is not released until December 2009. It is anticipated that the quartile data will not vary greatly from the current figures and so still highlights the high performance of the Benefits service.

3.23 From the figures it is clear that whilst unemployment is affecting the whole of the County, the issue is more widespread in Huntingdonshire and Fenland. Cambridgeshire Together has asked partners to consider ways of working in partnership to help address the issues of worklessness in Huntingdonshire and Fenland.

3.24 The rise in the number of people claiming Job Seekers Allowance has lead to increased demand for services at Job Centre Plus. Recognising the impact of the Economic Downturn, the government has pledged to give the Department for Work and Pensions an extra £2.8 billion over the next two years. Some of this money has meant Job Centre Plus has been able to recruit additional staff. In April 2008 there were 240 members of staff at Job Centres in Cambridgeshire and there are now 294.

3.25 It has been reported that uncertainty in the job market had caused people to consider going into business themselves as a response to fears of lay offs and redundancy. Business Link reported that one call

in every six was from individuals looking for advice on starting their own business.

4 **FENLAND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP RESPONSE**

4.1 Across the county a number and range of initiatives are being delivered through the county wide approach either directly by the Fenland Strategic Partnership, in partnership with others or by our partners. It is vital to continue to monitor the impact of the economic downturn in Fenland, and adjust our responses accordingly, whilst remaining committed to the continued delivery of excellent services in priority areas.

4.2 The list below demonstrates the breadth of response's to date:-

- Most **fees and charges have been frozen** to help local people through the economic downturn, including entrance to leisure centres, submission of planning applications etc.
- Residents will be offered **free swimming for the over 60s and under 17s** from April 2009. This scheme should make a significant contribution to encourage children and older people to take more regular physical exercise and help reduce levels of obesity and heart disease within the district.
- A new position in recognition of the economic downturn to promote benefits assistance for entitled Fenland residents has been created. The benefits take up officer has been very successful and is currently working with external partners such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, local businesses, clubs, societies, the voluntary sector and PCT to **promote the take up of benefits** particularly focusing on Housing Benefit and Council tax Benefit in this difficult economic time.
 - A great example of her work has been the visit to the Woolworths store in March town centre. When store closures began Fenland offered benefits advice to staff that were being made redundant. This was carried out with the Department for Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus to help the staff gain other benefits that are administered by the Government directly.
- Over 100 Fenland households have benefited from a full interrogation of the Department for Work and Pensions records in relation to **Pension Services in the district**. This highlighted households in Fenland who should have been receiving assistance and are now signed up to the help they need.
- Business Link have provided training to FDC staff so they are better informed when **supporting local businesses**. The team was recently 'Highly Commended' at the IRRV (the associated professional body for

benefits) National awards for the most improved team of the year which is testament to the partnership efforts in this area.

- Partners have supported an increase in Golden Age in recognition of a greater demand for benefits provision. The Fenland Ferret, a computer package designed to assess entitlement is in operation at every Golden Age event which has led to £630,000 of unclaimed **benefits for older Fenland residents**.
 - Attendees can also pick up energy saving light bulbs, free bus passes, smoke alarms, heating grants and undergo blood pressure checks. 97% of attendees were satisfied with the last Golden Age event, which has led to improved quality of life for Fenland's over 60's. The fairs have grown in size and are going from strength to strength. At present, we have over 30 partner organisations attending the Golden Age Fairs, including Age Concern, St Johns Ambulance, the Fire Brigade Alzheimer's Society, British Legion, Lung Foundation plus many more. The Golden Age website provides helpful advice targeted to the over 60's.
- Double the number of Fenland households have been assisted by Warmfront grants than any other district in Cambridgeshire through effective targeted marketing of the programme. The grants are aimed at priority groups - people with disabilities, families with children under 16 and people over 60 who are also in receipt of a benefit payment. This meant **1100 vulnerable households benefited from the Warmfront programme**, which includes grants for insulation and solar water heating to reduce energy bills. One key ingredient to this was Fenland facilitated a top up grant to the vulnerable householder to ensure that the work could go ahead when the grant required did not cover the costs of the improvement works. The outcome for each household is a warmer and healthier home.
- In partnership with Kings Lynn and West £1.1m has been secured for a regionally funded external **solid wall insulation** pilot.
- £700,000 of funding from the Communities and Local Government (CLG) Places of Change programme has been successfully drawn down to contribute to a new accommodation facility in Wisbech for **homeless people from across the district**. The refurbishment of the hotel will deliver 24 accommodation units, a function room for hire (using the old ballroom), Café, an assessment centre for vulnerable people, wider community services such as learning for skills development. The outcome will be a vibrant community hub. The £1.2 million project includes £200k of Social Housing Contingency funding and is anticipated to reach completion in May next year.
- The Foyer Project, which opened its doors to 17 young people in December 2007, plays a vital role in providing accommodation, training

and mentoring under one roof to help break the cycle of no home – no job – no home that faces many young people. This was a collaborative project with social housing provider Axiom Housing to create a beautifully-designed, modern **accommodation and training facility for homeless young people**, several of whom have now gone on to study at university.

- The Department for Communities and Local Government have awarded a grant for £10,000 funding to provide a **Court Desk service** to enable residents to be represented in court at time of eviction and to find solutions to their debt issues. In partnership with Citizens Advice Bureau, and since July last year, over 65 families have been prevented from becoming homeless due to this scheme. Such is the success of the scheme, CLG have awarded another 2 years of funding.
- Residents facing problems paying their mortgage have been assisted through partnership working. The **Mortgage Rescue Service** provides financial advice and support for those who are risk of repossession. People are eligible for this program if they earn a combined household income of under £60,000 and their property is valued under £190,000. This helps to ensure the most vulnerable residents are offered help. Residents can choose two options if successful in their application which enables them to either have a shared equity arrangement or full sale to a housing association reducing mortgage payments.
- A rapid increase in applicants registering for affordable rented accommodation has been seen due to the downturn and as a result options for our residents are currently being drawn up. Following discussion with Roddons Housing Association and developers that are proposing to turn market sale homes into affordable rented homes to create cash flow a solution should be seen soon. A bid to the Homes and Communities Agency has been made to grant fund the change of market sale homes to **affordable rented accommodation**.
- In order to help stimulate housing development the Homes & Communities Agency (formerly Housing Corporation & English Partnerships) recently launched a funding initiative called '**Kickstart**'. Kickstart seeks to support local authorities and their existing/prospective developer partners to progress projects like the Nene that have run into difficulties as a result of the downturn of the economic market. Fenland have submitted an expression of interest for the scheme to help "Kickstart" the development. The outcome will be known at the end of July.
- In partnership with local parish councils we have signed up for the "**Saving Villages Campaign**" whereby commitment to work collaboratively through an action plan to encourage the development of more affordable housing in local villages ring fenced for local people will be achieved. This campaign will encourage partnership working to

empower rural Parish Councils who are concerned with the lack of affordable housing for their local community. This work has already started in Parson Drove ward.

- The **concessionary fares programme** is a large project for Fenland due to our older population. As more bus passes are issued, we have received feedback that it was difficult for older people to reach hospital appointments because the bus they needed to catch is outside of the bus pass scheme. Fenland jumped into action and negotiated an agreement with bus company Stagecoach to accept bus passes on these early hospital services. Furthermore, due to a lack of public transport in the area, Fenland's concessionary fares scheme has been extended to include community car schemes and has brought forward a commitment to include concessionary fares on Dial-a-Ride services.
- In partnership with Business Link, **advice to local businesses** is being offered to combat the economic downturn, such as funding and grants available to them. A programme of seminars and workshops have been held jointly with Business Link East, The Cambridgeshire Chamber of Commerce and Fenland Council to improve business activities and offer skills training to assist businesses in the economic downturn.
- The Greater Cambridge Partnership is undertaking a range of direction actions to **help mitigate the effects of the recession on local businesses**, including:
 - Meeting with and lobbying local senior bank managers to encourage them to continue to support local businesses financially
 - Delivering a series of breakfast briefings to local businesses on Olympics and public sector procurement opportunities
 - Bending the Investing in Communities Programme to help individuals and companies in the recession.
- The East of England Development Agency and Business Link have developed a resource called **The Business Map**. This is an interactive resource which outlines a full range of business support available across the region, for example women in business and training. This resource is supported by Fenland DC and promoted to businesses across the district in a joint marketing campaign.
- The Boathouse opened for business in November 2008 and to date, six knowledge-based companies, mostly from outside Fenland, have moved in and are now doing business, and there is a steady stream of enquiries. It is also a measure of the **success of the Boathouse** that, despite the current difficult economic conditions, the occupation level has already passed the forecast for the first 12 months of operation, reaching 20% in just 3 months.

- To help support businesses in reducing energy costs and become more energy efficient a **Green Business Club** was launched in April 2009. This will provide small business Capital grants to achieve energy efficiency as well as offering Fenland Green Business accreditation.
- The Wisbech **Yacht Harbour has proved a huge success** despite the economic downturn, both commercially and as a tourist attraction. The harbour was created adjacent to the derelict land that had been acquired for development. A total of 128 state-of-the-art berths have been created by installing pontoons that are able to adjust to the six metre tidal range of the River Nene. The yacht harbour was created to attract boating enthusiasts in the East Anglia and the Midlands, who were mooring their boats expensively on the south coast or as far east as Ipswich and Gravesend. As of January 2009, 76 berths are occupied, ahead of projections with 12 related jobs created locally, ranging from chandlery and marine servicing to sea fishing trips. Annual local spend (excluding mooring fees) from berth holders equates to over £100,000 along with £10,000 associated land borne visitor spend.
- Cambridgeshire Together has provided a County wide campaign supported by the FSP called 'Weather the Storm'. This provides **useful advice to households and businesses** during the economic downturn. The website and literature produced for this campaign details contact numbers for organisations that provide support and advice on a wide range of issues.
- **'Future Jobs Fund'** - There will be a strong preference for partnership bids and Cambridgeshire Together has tasked the relevant strategic thematic partnerships to develop a cross-county bid with a strong focus on Huntingdonshire and Fenland. The bid is being developed by a steering group comprising of District and County Officers as well as representatives from Job Centre Plus and the voluntary and community sector, supported by the Innovation in External Grants team at the County Council.
- The "Future Jobs Fund" is a project of around £1 billion to support the creation of 150,000 jobs for long term unemployed young people and others who face significant disadvantage in the labour market. This will support the guarantee that from 2010 everyone in the 18-24 year old age group who has been looking for work for a year will get a job or training lasting 6 months. 50,000 jobs will be created in unemployment hotspots and around 10,000 of the 150,000 jobs will be green jobs.
- The steering group developing the bid for the 'Future Jobs Future' met on 15 June and agreed that in order to attract more "job placement" offers and bring more organisations into the joint application, it would be necessary to develop a model for how the Future Jobs Fund would work in Cambridgeshire. A key element of the model is trying to make sure that the Fund is accessible to both large and small organisations, enabling a wider range and number of job placements to be offered

through the programme. The model aims to build firmly on the expertise and support that already exists in Cambridgeshire.

- Once the model is finalised the “offer to employers” will be widely distributed. Job offers will be collected and evaluated by the steering group to ensure they adequately target the unemployment hotspots in Fenland and Huntingdonshire. It is intended that the final application will be submitted on 12 August 2009 and the first jobs will begin in November 2009.

- **The Big Lottery Fund (BIG)** has announced that an additional £43 million is to be invested across the UK to tackle the longer term effects of the recession on the UK’s communities. BIG is working closely with stakeholders to determine what form the support will take, but it is thought it could include targeted funding for specific services such as debt advice and support to help train increasing numbers of volunteers. Fenland’s ‘Personal and Community Development Learning Partnership’ (formerly Life Long Learning Partnership) with work with the Cambridgeshire Learning Trust to explore local options / potential.

- Fenland District Council in partnership with Cambridgeshire County Council and Cambridgeshire NHS have invested additional funds of £38,806 (combined) into **Fenland Council for Voluntary Service (FCVS)** until March 2010. This is to help them sustain their core services of helping community and voluntary organisations with training, funding and advice and support.

- Job Centre Plus through the FSP network have been offering additional help for customers by working in partnership with recruitment agencies to offer customers specialist jobs and providing a rapid response service to provide help to people facing redundancy before they leave their job.
 - Newly unemployed people have also been given extra help through new group sessions, one-day seminars and immediate access to programme centres for job search and skills development.
 - A jointly branded campaign has been launched to promote recruitment and training opportunities and incentives to fenland residents.

- Job Centre Plus have also offered employers additional help, for example, since April, employers who recruit and retain staff for over six months have been able to get a recruitment subsidy of £1,000 and may also be able to get help with training.

- Vocational skill centres have been set up across Cambridgeshire helping young people **close the skills gap and find employment** by offering vocational courses. Two of the centres can be found in Fenland at the Neale-Wade and Thomas Clarkson schools. The centres are a result of a partnership between the Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) and Cambridgeshire schools who invested £250,000 in 2007/2008 and is investing a further £250,000 in 2008/2009.

5. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

5.1 Fenland Strategic Partnership is asked to:

- Note the evidence and analysis of the impact of the economic downturn and the actions being taken to mitigate against its effects.