

**Rural Regeneration in Worcestershire
Report of the Rural Regeneration Scrutiny Task Group
November 2006**

**Response from the Cabinet Member for Planning, Economy and
Performance**

1. Opening comments

The Task Group's scrutiny of rural regeneration support in Worcestershire is timely. Although the Foot and Mouth crisis in 2001 had a limited effect on the farming sector, the crisis had a much broader impact on the rural economy and rural communities. This highlighted the need to support the modernisation and diversification of the rural economy, and regenerate the County's towns and villages. Building on work undertaken with Warwickshire on the Vital Villages programme, the Rural Action Plan was developed to co-ordinate the activity of all the partners who can help deliver social, economic and environmental regeneration. The role of the County Council's Planning and Economic Regeneration Unit in ensuring delivery of the Plan is crucial – helping support the capacity of partners to deliver (for example through our support for the development of the Rural Hub), and undertaking monitoring and review to ensure that the Plan remains 'fit for purpose'. Unlike comparative Units in other Shire County Council's, the Unit does not get involved long term in the direct delivery of projects – this encourages sustainable activity that will continue without our direct support, and allows limited resources to be used more widely. However, other service areas within the County Council are directly involved in delivery (for example through developing rural transport). With over two years of delivery under the Rural Action Plan, it is timely to scrutinise whether this 'capacity building' approach is effective in achieving sustainable regeneration, and whether the Council's services are being used as effectively as they can be to support that work.

There are also fundamental changes taking place in national and regional policy that will have an impact on the County's rural areas. The City Region agenda, and the requirement for the County (through the Regional Spatial Strategy) to absorb its share of regional housing growth, will have a fundamental impact upon the rural economy and rural communities. The re-organisation of the Countryside Agency and DEFRA, and the formation of Natural England has been an attempt to rationalise the plethora of funding streams supporting rural regeneration, with delivery now co-ordinated through a regional framework. However, there is a concern that rural issues have slipped down the government and regional agenda since 2001. It is therefore also timely to scrutinise how partners can work together to provide a unified voice for Worcestershire.

Rural regeneration is high on the agenda of the Council, and the opportunity for independent scrutiny to inform how we support that work is very welcome. The breadth of the issues facing the Task Group was challenging, and the decision to focus upon key issues of the needs of young people, employment

opportunities, affordable housing, was sensible. The Task Group took time over a 12 month period to talk to a wide range of stakeholders, and comparator authorities, to inform its conclusions and recommendations. This work is appreciated and there is a strong desire to respond to the Task Group's recommendations for the benefit of rural Worcestershire.

2. Overall outcomes

The terms of reference for the scrutiny exercise were:

- i) to examine progress with the delivery of the Rural Action Plan
- ii) to scrutinise the County Council's role in regeneration and how we work with delivery partners
- iii) to examine how that approach compares with similar authorities.

From such an examination I would have hoped for an overall judgment on how effective our approach is (and recommendations on how that approach could be made more effective) informed by best practice from elsewhere. In other words, an examination of the effectiveness of our processes. I feel that the report concentrates too much on specific actions, many of which are beyond the remit of the County Council, and I am particularly disappointed that recommendations from comparative study are limited to the suggestion for themed Unit business plans. I appreciate that the Panel found the breadth of the topic complex and chose to focus on the needs of young people in rural areas, but I felt that this could have been used to draw general lessons about the effectiveness of our approach. The Rural Action Plan was based upon extensive consultation with stakeholders - the scrutiny process has tended to duplicate this rather than constructively challenge our approach.

3. Recommendations

Worcestershire County Council facilitate an information session between rural communities and local planning authorities to further understand the process and possibilities for rural Worcestershire. The intention would be to have a uniform approach across the County.

I suggest that CADPOG (the County and Districts Planning Officers Group) is the appropriate body to take this forward, particularly since the focus is on housing which is a District Council planning responsibility

The County Council should ensure that local support for business start ups is co-ordinated when Business Link becomes a regional body.

The County Council (through Worcestershire Partnership) has made representations during consultation on the new business support arrangements on this issue. However, the Authority is not in a position to ensure that this is delivered.

The Worcestershire Rural Hub should be encouraged to develop its role in providing initial information to rural businesses - alongside its assistance with grant applications.

I understand that signposting to, and information on, business support, is already part the Hub's role (supported by the County Council). However, the Hub would not wish to become a deliverer of direct business advice.

The County Council should ensure that the central contact centres of the Worcestershire Hub Partnership, are informed of Business Link's details so that they can help people wanting information such as starting a business, signposting for funding etc.

Once the new Business Link service becomes operational, the County Council will ensure that contact details are available through Worcestershire Hub.

Continue to financially support the Rural Housing Enabler for Worcestershire.

I suggest that the continuing support of the County Council is conditional upon District Councils (as housing authorities) continuing to provide the bulk of the funding, and a business plan that shows how the post can be sustained without our support in the medium/long term.

Further investigate and identify County Council owned land that could be used for affordable housing.

Actively explore leasing County Council owned land for the purpose of affordable housing.

I will ensure that the Head of Property Services is made aware of these recommendations. However, most rural exception sites have a relatively low value and leasing is unlikely to make development more attractive to social housing providers.

Ensure there is a corporate approach to rural regeneration activity with each directorate understanding the role they play.

One way of doing this would be to introduce theme based unit business plans, rather than the traditional directorate based business plans. We recommend that this approach be considered.

The Rural Action Plan currently performs the role of co-ordinating the rural regeneration activity of all partners, including County Council Directorates. Cross cutting issues are currently identified in higher level plans (community strategy, corporate strategy, directorate performance plan) that feed into actions in Unit performance plans - giving clarity to staff on what the objectives and targets of their Unit are. Theme based unit business plans would make Unit targets and priorities less clear – for example the Planning and Economic Regeneration Unit's targets would be contained in a number of different business plans (sustainability, spatial planning; economic development, community support, etc..).

Strengthen and provide more co-ordination to rural regeneration activity by asking Worcestershire Partnership to create a theme group on rural regeneration

The Economy and Transport Theme Group currently has responsibility for rural regeneration on behalf of Worcestershire Partnership. Regular progress reports are provided to this Group on delivery of the Rural Action Plan. Rather than establish another Theme Group, the Group could be asked to consider

establishing a rural regeneration task group if the added value of such a group were identified.

The County Council works proactively with District Councils to ensure effective partnership working

The Economy and Transport Theme Group involves both County and Districts at a senior officer level in the strategic coordination of rural regeneration in the County (through the Rural Action Plan), with Worcestershire Economic Partnership (a group comprising County and District economic development officers) co-ordinating operational delivery.

Other issues

The report puts forward the view that Advantage West Midlands doesn't fully understand rural issues, and that Worcestershire's needs are overlooked. I am concerned at how this message might be taken by AWM. We have developed good working relationships with AWM staff and (partly as a result) have benefited from considerable investment. We estimate that AWM has funded, or is committed to, over £46.5m of investment in major schemes in the County (detailed in Appendix 1) as well as providing pump priming support for the Worcestershire Rural Hub and funding through a number of small grants programmes. This includes over £2.5m funding toward the Market Town programmes (and associated works) in Evesham, Pershore, Bewdley and Stourport; and £3m towards the Droitwich Canals project. If this relationship is damaged, the report may be counter productive. A more constructive approach would be through inputting to the current review of the Regional Economic Strategy - ensuring that Worcestershire's needs and opportunities are recognised thereby legitimising AWM investment.

The report also suggests that insurance companies (including NFU insurance) should explore whether special rates of insurance could be given to rural young people who take advanced driving tests. Although I am happy to support this, I am not optimistic that the County Council will be able to exert influence over the insurance industry.

The report concludes that local authorities have a role to play in ensuring that a broader and holistic view is taken of the needs of rural areas, and that we could work effectively with neighbouring authorities to promote this view at the regional level. We are currently active (through Worcestershire Partnership) on the West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum which is the regional forum for rural issues, and contribute to the work of the regional Rural Renaissance and European Rural Groups. I am happy that we continue this work and build partnerships with our Shire neighbours.

4. Concluding comments

I thank the Rural Regeneration Scrutiny Task Group on the work that it has undertaken, and the contribution that it has made to developing the County Council's effectiveness in addressing rural regeneration issues in the County.

Advantage West Midlands Investment in Worcestershire

Project	Funding (£'s)
Evesham Market Town	500,000
Evesham High Street	500,000
Pershore Market Town	500,000
Stourport Market Town/Canal Basin	560,000
Bewdley Market Town	300,000
Bewdley townscape	550,000
Sandy Lane Industrial Estate	370,000
Worcester Library and History Centre	19,500,000
Harley Davidson Training Centre (Bromsgrove)	1,735,000
Malvern Hills Science Park	6,200,000
Malvern Hills Science and Technology Park	5,112,000
Bromsgrove Technology Park	7,760,000
Droitwich Canals	3,000,000
Total	£46,587,000