

Wyre Forest District Council
Planning Health and Environment
Regeneration and Economic Prosperity Section
Draft Rural Economic Strategy
Scoping Paper

1. Introduction

1.1 In land use terms, Wyre Forest District is approximately 15% urban and 85% rural.

1.2 Whilst there are currently a number of strategies aimed at developing the urban areas of Kidderminster, Stourport-on-Severn and Bewdley, no strategy exists to address economic issues within district's significant rural areas.

1.3 The District Council is leading on a proposal to develop a focussed strategy which aims to ensure that the economic needs of the rural areas/rural population can be addressed and met.

1.4 This Scoping Paper seeks to identify the key issues to enable such a strategy to be developed that will provide a "joined-up" approach to rural regeneration in the District.

1.5 This Paper therefore:-

- gives a contextual framework of other relevant strategies
- proposes a number of Aims and Objectives
- sets out an initial SWOT analysis
- identifies proposed consultees
- sets out a proposed timetable

and invites responses to specific questions relating to the above.

2. Background and Contextual Policies

2.1 The strategy will need to integrate with relevant European, national, regional and local strategies, including those as set out below:-

2.1.1 European Union policy

The European Union's rural policy seeks to promote:-

- a competitive agricultural sector through lower institutional prices
- use of safe production methods generating good quality output
- a fair standard of living for the farming community
- a diverse range of European food products
- maintenance of vibrant rural communities which generate employment
- a sustainable agricultural sector which preserves natural resources and natural heritage

2.1.2 National Policies

a) The Rural White Paper - reviewed in 2004.

Delivering sustainable rural development is the key objective of the Rural White Paper.

The vision is to achieve sustainable development for rural areas through:

- a living countryside, with thriving rural communities and access to high quality public services
- a working countryside, with a diverse economy giving high and stable levels of employment
- a protected countryside in which the environment is sustained and enhanced, and which all can enjoy
- a vibrant countryside that can shape its own future, with its voice heard by government at all levels

b) Planning Policy Statement 7: "Sustainable Development in Rural Areas"

2.1.3 Regional Policies

a) West Midlands Rural Delivery Framework 2006

The main geographical focus for rural renaissance is in the Marches, where a Rural Regeneration Zone (RRZ) has been

designated by Advantage West Midlands (AWM). The Zone covers parts of the rural areas of Herefordshire, Shropshire and Worcestershire including the Bewdley ward.

The area is characterised by agriculture, market towns and villages and is rich in landscape, historic buildings and traditional crafts. However, the economy is changing as employment in agriculture declines and new, mainly small businesses are created or move into the area. The growth of leisure and tourism has been significant in recent years.

The Delivery Framework has six priorities:

- Enhancing the value of the Countryside
- Developing a diverse and dynamic business base
- Improving learning and skills
- Creating the conditions for growth
- Fair access to services for all
- Securing vibrant, active and sustainable communities

b) Advantage West Midlands Tourism and Leisure Cluster Business Plan 2005- 2008

The vision for this cluster is for the West Midlands to be recognised for its continuing growth, and for the excellence of a number of sophisticated, world-class urban and authentic rural destinations, for business and leisure visitors, which showcase the region's creativity and its heritage, celebrate its diversity and set new standards for quality and sustainability.

It also identifies the Rural Innovation Fund (supporting a number of small tourism projects and Countywide tourism activities).

Buildings and townscape initiatives that assist destination development have also been supported across rural areas (via the Redundant Building Scheme) in Bewdley.

The plan also sites a weakness in the region that there is limited public transport to Rural destinations.

c) The West Midlands Regional Economic Strategy, "Connecting to Success" – Rural Dimension Paper

Delivering Advantage provides a framework for the economic development and regeneration of the West Midlands and will guide the actions of organisations that can contribute to the regions future prosperity.

The West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum and the West Midlands Regional Assembly have produced an associated paper to the Strategy, called "Rural Dimensions". This paper:

- i) highlights the opportunities for rural areas and rural communities as well as possible barriers to success and
- ii) identifies the implications for delivery as the strategy moves from high level objectives and priorities to actions on the ground.

d) The West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy, June 2004

Places a strong emphasis on 'Rural Renaissance' with four key policies highlighting the importance of the rural communities to the wider region.

The policies help to support the regional economic strategy with a focus on the Rural Regeneration Zone, 'Market Towns' and Rural Services. All of which are directly relevant to Wyre Forest District.

The 'Prosperity for All' chapter also contains relevant policies on 'Economic Development and the Rural Economy' (PA14) and 'Agriculture and Farm Diversification' (PA15).

Finally in Quality of the Environment the Regional Spatial Strategy considers the needs for conservation in addition to forestry and woodlands.

e) Regional Delivery of The Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE)

This programme, which will run until 2013, is jointly financed by the European Union and the UK Government and will fund a regional programme around the following 4 "Axis":-

Axis1 - Improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector.

- Delivered regionally through Advantage West Midlands "Business Clusters" – eg Food and Drink, Tourism and Leisure.

Axis 2 - Improving the environment and countryside.

- Delivered nationally through Natural England and the Forestry Commission

Axis 3 - Improving quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy

- Delivered regionally through Advantage West Midlands “Business Clusters” – eg Food and Drink, Tourism and Leisure

Axis 4 - Addressing social and community issues through the “Leader” programme.

- This rural community programme is being developed regionally, through Advantage West Midlands. Within Worcestershire, an initial proposal is currently being developed around the rural areas of Wyre Forest, Malvern Hills and Wychavon Districts, based around the following themes:-
 - ♦ Provision of Enterprise Support
 - ♦ Access to Services
 - ♦ Engagement of young people
 - ♦ Use of community buildings
 - ♦ Supporting key sectors

2.1.4 Sub Regional

a) Worcestershire Partnership Rural Action Plan June 2004

The framework provides an overarching view of the key issues and challenges facing the rural economy, opportunities for action and ways forward for partners to respond to the challenges.

2.1.5 Local

a) Wyre Forest District Adopted Local Plan 2004 - 2011

The District Council’s adopted Local Plan has a number of specific Policies relating to its rural areas, including:

- Affordable Housing Exception Schemes in rural areas (H.11)
- Employment development in the rural areas outside the Green Belt (E8)
- Employment development in the Green Belt (E9)
- Natural Resources (NR1 to 15)

- Countryside – including Landscape (LA 1 to 6), Green Belt (GB 1 to 6), Agriculture (AG 1 to 5 and 7 to 8), Re-Use and Adaptation of Rural Buildings (RB 1 to 6), Chalets (CH1 - 4)
- Transport
- Leisure, Recreation and Tourism
- Horticultural Retailing (RT 12)

Other Policies in the above Plan, not referred to above, are likely to be relevant to the wider “rural economy”.

b) Local Development Framework

Following the introduction of the Government’s ‘new’ Planning System in September 2004, Wyre Forest District Council must replace the Adopted Local Plan with a Local Development Framework (LDF).

The LDF is made up of a portfolio of documents which will provide a development blueprint for the District. The District Council’s Local Development Scheme (LDS) sets out the authority’s programme for delivering the LDF and identifies the production of the Core Strategy as the first in a suite of Development Plan Documents.

The LDS highlights the aim of the Core Strategy which is to:

“Set out the District Council’s vision, key objectives and spatial strategy for the District up to 2026.”

The Core Strategy is the key strategic level document within the LDF. It will set out the broad strategy and vision for the development blueprint that will guide planning and related initiatives up to 2026. Moreover, it sets the context for the detailed parts of the LDF.

The Strategy will not address specific sites; however it will set the overall development strategy for the District and the broad areas where new housing and employment development will be located up until 2026.

c) Sustainable Community Strategy

The production and implementation of a Sustainable Community Strategy, is a statutory requirement placed on all Councils under the Local Government Act 2000.

The Strategy is the district's "route map", to ensure that all relevant agencies and organisations are working towards the same vision, tackling the big issues and making the most of the district's resources. It is the reference point for everything we do in the Wyre Forest district.

The Local Strategic Partnership, Wyre Forest Matters, aims to bring together all the efforts of partners within the area, and maintain a strategic overview of the way in which the district is progressing to improve the social, economic, health and environmental wellbeing of the area and its inhabitants.

d) Parish Plans

A number of Parish Plans have been adopted locally. The Strategy will need to recognise the contents of these Plans and the relevant and respective needs of the Parishes.

Q.1 Are there other policies and plans of particular relevance to rural areas?

3. Aims

3.1 The Aims of the Strategy are proposed as follows. To:-

- define the District's rural areas
- identify relevant rural partnerships/organisations
- integrate and sustain rural services, including transport
- benchmark the role and status of the District's rural economy
- build greater community capacity and enhance community cohesion
- protect the diverse natural environment for residents, businesses and visitors
- ensure rural centres have accessible service provision for their local population
- ensure that the district benefits from external resources aimed at developing rural areas

Q.2 Are there any additional aims that the Rural Economic Strategy should seek to address?

4. Objectives

4.1 The initial Objectives are proposed as follows. To:-

- create employment opportunities
- encourage innovation and entrepreneurship
- encourage local purchasing of goods and services
- improve communication of and access to relevant information
- improve access, choice and quality of learning and skills provision
- identify issues and potential solutions regarding to affordable housing
- develop sustainable tourism and leisure sectors relevant to the area
- enable the Strategy to be incorporated within relevant agencies own activities
- allow the benefits of the countryside for recreational and leisure purposes to be enjoyed by local residents and visitors alike
- identify the health benefits to be gained from undertaking increased physical activity within the rural areas
- identify issues and potential solutions regarding sustainable rural transport focusing on public transport, walking and cycling
- understand the agricultural/farming and food production sectors and how they can contribute more fully to the rural environment and economy
- continue to promote the District's rivers and canals as visitor attractions and green corridors as well as safeguarding and enhancing the environment surrounding them.
- seek to maintain key local services in existing centres (and if not to ensure these services are maintained in nearby larger centres and are accessible via public transport)

Q.3 Do you agree with the above Objectives? Are there any other possible Objectives to be achieved?

5. SWOT Analysis

5.1 Strengths

- Access to canal and rivers
- Close to established "urban" areas

- Several villages have retained local shop and economic activity
- Market Towns Initiative investment in Stourport on Severn and Bewdley
- Parish Plans adopted in Upper Arley, Chaddesley Corbett and Rock
- Significant number of established rural visitor and leisure attractions
- Bewdley Ward is within Advantage West Midlands Rural Regeneration Zone (RRZ)
- The District's accessible natural environment including attractive open countryside, woods and forests

5.2 Weaknesses

- Strategic road infrastructure
- Few rural "business centres"
 - low skills/educational attainment levels
 - low wage levels
- Minimal affordable rural housing
- Availability of regular public transport
- Not all Parishes have an adopted Parish Plan
- Minimal information regarding rural sector generally
- Minimum information on impact / needs of agriculture sectors
- Perception – District not regarded as a "rural area" per se, with rural needs

5.3 Threats

- Higher rural housing costs
- Increased fuel and travel costs
- Decline of public transport services
- Competition from cheap foreign food imports
- Uncertain future for rural post offices/banks/advice centres
- Influx of migrant workers and resulting impact on local working population
- Affects of supermarkets and other urban retail developments on rural shops
- Potential use of 'greenfield' field sites for Government Housing requirements

5.4 Opportunities

- Biomass fuel
- Grow the Wyre project
- Redundant Building Grant
- Destination Worcestershire
- Further development of Parish Plans
- Improved links with rural stakeholders
- Development of migrant worker sector
- Worcestershire County Council Rural Hub
- Provide additional affordable rural housing
- County Council Wheels to Work programme
- Build stronger links to the nearby urban areas
- Increase of home working due to IT developments
- Develop knowledge of rural and agricultural sectors
- County Council strategy for development of Social Enterprises
- Tourism/business diversification – sustainable/outdoor pursuits
- Farm diversification – reuse of rural buildings for suitable business enterprises
- Developing green infrastructure/corridors along the District's waterway networks
- Potential from being able to benefit from the concept of 'outside but serving' the RRZ for areas outside the RRZ boundary

Q.4 Do you think the main SWOTs have been covered? Please suggest alternative / additional SWOTs.

6. Proposed Consultees & Timetable

Wyre Forest District Council

Corporate Management Team

Elected Members

Housing Services Manager

Forward Planning Manager

Principal Forward Planning Officer

Senior Health and Sustainability Officer
Community Safety and Partnerships Officer
Tourism Officer
Conservation and Countryside Officer
Parks and Green Spaces Manager
Community Development Manager

External Agencies

Advantage West Midlands
Bewdley Development Trust
Business Link
Community First
Country Landowners Association
Destination Worcestershire
DEFRA
Natural England
English Heritage
Environment Agency
Forestry Commission
GOWM
Heart of England Fine Foods
Learning Skills Council
National Farmers Union
Parish Councils
Primary Care Trust
Registered Social Landlords
Regional Assembly
Stourport Forward
Voluntary Organisations (via Parish Councils)
Worcestershire County Council
Worcestershire Rural Hub
West Mercia Constabulary
Wyre Forest Matters

Timetable

February:	Rural Strategy Scoping Paper considered by the Community and Regeneration Committee and Cabinet.
March to April:	Public Consultation on Scoping Paper
May:	Report results of Public Consultation to Community and Regeneration Committee and Cabinet
June	Prepare Consultation Draft Strategy
July to September	Public Consultation on Draft Strategy
October	Report results of Public Consultation and submit proposed final Strategy to Community and Regeneration Committee and Cabinet

Q.5 Are there any comments on the above proposed list of consultees and proposed timetable?

*Regeneration and Economic Prosperity Section
Wyre Forest District Council
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