

Wyre Forest District Council

Rural Economic Strategy: 2008 – 2014

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This Strategy provides a framework to address the economic development needs of Wyre Forest District's rural areas and population.
- 1.2 It takes account of comments received on an initial "Scoping Paper" and a "working draft Strategy" circulated during spring and summer 2008 respectively.
- 1.3 The Strategy reflects the aspirations of, and is co terminus with the Wyre Forest District Sustainable Community Strategy 2008 to 2014.
- 1.4 The Strategy document sets out the Background and Context to the Strategy, sets out its Aims and Objectives and includes a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats analysis (Appendix A).

2. Background

- 2.1 In land use terms, Wyre Forest District is approximately 15% urban and 85% rural, though in population terms, the reverse is true.
- 2.2 Strategies exist or are being developed to address the economic development and regeneration of the District's urban areas (Kidderminster, Stourport-on-Severn and Bewdley) - this Strategy focuses on the District's rural areas.
- 2.3 The Strategy is underpinned by the three key principals of Sustainable Development: namely: Environmental well being, Economic well being and Social well being.
- 2.4 The economic development of the District's rural areas does not need to be at the expense of environmental protection and enhancement. Development and regeneration can deliver environmental, social and economic benefits if done in the right way.
- 2.5 For example, the economic and social benefits provided by the natural environment, such as the contribution of natural green spaces to climate change, the "feel good factor" that results from providing access to natural green spaces and the role of an attractive environment for businesses are recognised as environmentally sound development that makes good business sense.

- 2.6 The Strategy reflects both the West Midlands and the Worcestershire Economic Strategies, in that it is centred on the “components” of “Business, Place, People and Powerful Voice”. These components are defined further below:-
- 2.6.1 **Business** refers to the contribution that ‘businesses’ (used in its widest sense and including social enterprises and not-for-profit organisations) make to the productivity and growth of the local economy and to the demand for employment.
 - 2.6.2 **Place** focuses on the role of place in both attracting and enabling economic growth (i.e. high-quality locations and environments which encourage businesses and a highly skilled workforce); but also in dissuading or constraining economic activity (poor-quality environments can limit investment, reduce aspirations and lead to negative stereotyping).
 - 2.6.3 **People** refers to the contribution of the area’s population and their skills to the sustainable growth and increased productivity of the local economy; and to ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to develop to their full potential.
 - 2.6.4 **Powerful Voice** - Projecting a “powerful voice” and a positive image of the area is vital to the long term economic prosperity of the district. A strong evidence base needs to be gathered so that the rural areas can understand and articulate its strengths and weaknesses.
- 2.7 The Strategy recognises and relates to, where appropriate, relevant local, sub regional, regional, national and European plans and strategies. In particular it recognises the multi agency backed “Rural Development Programme for the West Midlands” being delivered through Advantage West Midlands. By necessity however, it focuses on the issues and actions that affect the District.
- 2.8 The Strategy will sit alongside an Action Plan, to be developed during November/December 2008, that will identify timetabled key milestones, outputs, outcomes.
- 2.9 The District’s rural areas are identified in the map and table below:-

MAP OF RURAL AREAS TO BE INSERTED HERE

PARISH	SETTLEMENTS
Broome	Broome
Chaddesley Corbett	Chaddesley Corbett, Harvington, Drayton
Churchill and Blakedown	Blakedown, Churchill, Stakenbridge
Kidderminster Foreign	Trimpley
Ribbesford	Ribbesford
Rock	Rock, Clows Top, Bliss Gate, Far Forest, Heightington, Callow Hill
Rushock	Rushock
Stone	Stone, Shenstone
Upper Arley	Upper Arley, Shatterford
Wolverley and Cookley	Wolverley, Cookley, Caunsall, Kingsford, Blakeshall

3. Context

- 3.1 Whilst rural areas have a predominance of employment in low value added, low-wage sectors, they do make an important contribution to quality of life and rural community sustainability. However, employment can be sporadic, particularly where people are depending on seasonal, part-time or temporary contracts. Whilst these working patterns can be positive for some, for others it is a cause of low and uncertain income and self-esteem.
- 3.2 Employment opportunities in rural area are not just within the traditional land based and agricultural sectors. Other businesses need to supply these sectors with materials and services and the high quality rural environment, which also supports the tourism sector, needs to be maintained.
- 3.3 New employment sectors are developing and there are the opportunities to encourage them, e.g. creative industries, energy, environmental technologies, medical technologies.
- 3.4 In addition, there are opportunities for “traditional” rural businesses to diversify, though many small and micro-businesses lack the capacity, finance or experience to do this.
- 3.5 Related to this, is that access to a wide range of training and learning opportunities is restricted, for many, by distance, the lack of available public transport and the increased costs for training providers to deliver outreach and other services.
- 3.6 In terms of the environment, encouraging sustainable living is important. For example, by encouraging working practices that cut down on commuting/improve the work/life balance and undertaking life-style changes that support the local economy, rural community sustainability can be improved. (Sustainable in this context is defined as “being able to be continued in the long term” as well as “having regard to the environment”.)
- 3.7 Many rural services are dependent on the commercial viability of businesses, as well as the needs and circumstances of the communities.

Often there needs to be a sufficient “critical mass” of need and of demand in order to bring about improvements. Public transport, for example is a “key” local service that needs to be maintained. However, whilst the need exists, sometimes, the critical mass to make it commercially viable, does not.

4. Vision

By 2014:-

- 4.1 Wyre Forest District’s rural areas have enhanced, sustainable, safeguarded, promoted and diverse, historic, built and natural environments with centres that have accessible and affordable housing, services and transport provision.
- 4.2 The rural areas have a stable economic base with sustainable new and traditional employment opportunities in an environment that supports new business formation and diversification.
- 4.3 The rural population has access to and choice of quality learning and skills provision.
- 4.4 Rural communities are resourced, engaged and participative and make positive contributions to local community capacity and democracy. Information is fully communicated and accessible.

5. **Aims**

5.1 The **Strategic Aims** are to:-

PLACE

- Assess the role and impact of climate change on the rural economy and support a secure, low carbon energy infrastructure.
- Promote positive and healthy uses of the high quality outdoor areas making people feel welcome and secure.
- Support, subject to relevant permissions, the innovative use and management of land in response to challenges, needs and aspirations.
- Maintain, conserve and enhance the natural and historic environmental qualities which contribute to the overall character and quality of rural landscapes including their landscape character, biodiversity and locally distinctiveness.
- Ensure fair and equitable access to rural services with implementation of new technology and innovations as appropriate.

BUSINESS

- Understand the traditional “land based” employment sectors and how they contribute to the environment and economy.
- Develop a sustainable and competitive economic base with sustainable and traditional employment opportunities that responds to, supports and maintains the needs and growth of rural businesses and provides well paid and highly skilled jobs.
- Encourage and support new business formation, innovation, diversification and entrepreneurship.

PEOPLE

- Provide rural communities and people of all ages with a choice of quality learning, training, skills and activity provision that are fully accessible.

POWERFUL VOICE

- Promote the natural and built environment.
- Engage with communities to make positive contributions to local rural community capacity and democracy.
- Access appropriate external resources.
- Understand rural population profile and trends.

6. Objectives

6.1 The **Strategic Objectives** are to:-

PLACE

- Limit development within the Districts Landscape Protection Area, particularly to the West of the District.
- Safeguard and enhance the historic environment, rural and natural heritage (including water courses) and the distinctive character of villages.
- Identify issues and potential solutions regarding sustainable rural transport focusing on public transport, walking and cycling.
- Identify issues and potential solutions regarding to affordable housing including allocation an appropriate supply of land.
- Maintain and improve the provision of ICT services.
- Maintain key local services in existing centres or ensure they are maintained in nearby larger centres, accessible via public transport.
- Provide recreational, cultural, healthy and leisure activities for residents and visitors and those working in the area.
- Support voluntary organisations and social enterprises as a means of service provision.

BUSINESS

- Encouraging and supporting the development and maintenance of a sustainable and competitive economic base through new and traditional rural employment opportunities.

- Support and maintain the needs and growth of rural businesses and the provision of well paid and highly skilled jobs.
- Enhance access to rural employment sites.
- Encourage innovation, diversification, business networking and entrepreneurship.
- Support, where relevant, the provision of rural based workspace and clarify a role for live/work units.
- Improve the environmental performance of businesses.
- Promote local supply chains through the purchasing of local goods and services.
- Provide baseline evidence from which monitoring/trends can be identified.
- Investigate whether a role exists biofuel/biomass production supporting its development where relevant.

PEOPLE

- Work with the relevant agencies and organisation to continually develop and retain the skills of all people of all ages.
- Work to develop skills in environmental management.
- Work with local communities to develop their “community capacity” skills.
- Encourage all to engage and network with the Rural Hub and other institutions providing training and skills development.
- Provide the infrastructure to enable young people to stay in their community rather than move to the towns.
- Identify the health benefits to be gained from undertaking increased physical activity within the rural areas.
- Improve the quality of the training infrastructure matching demand with availability.
- Remove barriers to employment for disadvantaged and minority groups.
- Encourage innovation, diversification and entrepreneurship in people of all ages.

POWERFUL VOICE

- “Rural proof” relevant Wyre Forest District Council strategies.
- Continue to promote the District’s natural and sustainable land and water based resources and visitor attractions through Destination Worcestershire.
- Develop clear consistent guidance for preparation and delivery of parish plans.
- Exploit the existing Market Town Structures and Initiatives to take their skills and experience to the rural areas.
- Identify rural partnerships/organisations.
- Identify the “hierarchy” of rural parishes – ie main villages and the settlements “served” by the main villages.
- Seek out examples of successful rural initiatives nationally that can be replicated in Wyre Forest.
- Seek relevant, appropriate and sustainable resources and external funding through outside bodies and partners.

APPENDIX A

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) Analysis

Strengths

- 100% “first generation” Broadband coverage
- Access to canal and rivers
- External funding opportunities through the Rural Regeneration Zone (RRZ) and Leader programmes (via Advantage West Midlands)
- Close to established “urban” areas
- Diverse and accessible natural environment with high bio diversity value
- Diverse and accessible built and historic environment
- Established cycling network
- Existing skills and experience within and out of the public sector
- Good local produce and producers
- High levels of self-employment
- High levels of environmental responsibility
- Areas of high quality agricultural land
- Local initiatives (outside of the public sector)
- Market Towns Initiative investment in Stourport on Severn and Bewdley in support of surrounding rural communities
- Parish Plans adopted in Upper Arley, Chaddesley Corbett and Rock
- Rural areas in Wyre Forest are not as “isolated” as other rural areas in the county
- Several villages have retained local shopping and economic activity
- Significant number of established rural visitor and leisure attractions

Weaknesses

- Use of urban areas for shopping and service provision
- Lack of regular public transport
- Retaining young people to live and work in rural areas
- Shortage of high skilled jobs
- Not all Parishes have produced a Parish Plan
- Lack of exemplars for rural diversification

- Low incomes and insufficient capital investment particularly in agriculture
- Minimal affordable rural housing
- Minimum information on impact / needs of agriculture sectors
- District not perceived as being a “rural area” with “rural needs”
- Poor appreciation of the District’s rural heritage
- Poorly developed supply chains in terms of locally grown and processed products
- Prevalence of low “value added” industries
- Vulnerability of agriculture

Opportunities

- Employment sites at Lea Castle and Rushock
- Biomass and wood fuel supply chains
- Build stronger links to the nearby urban areas
- West Midlands Central Technology Belt
- Community and social enterprises
- Work with Destination Worcestershire to develop tourism economy
- Develop knowledge of rural and agricultural sectors
- Farm diversification
- Heart of England Fine Foods development of fresh and sustainable local produce
- Further development of Parish Plans
- “Geo park” in the West of the District
- Forestry Commission’s “Grow with Wyre” project at the Wyre Forest
- Improve accessibility
- Redundant Building Grant to bring buildings into economic use
- Rural Development Plan for England capital grant scheme – including Rural Enterprise Grant to assist farm households/businesses and rural micro businesses
- Improved links with rural stakeholders
- Increase of home working due to IT developments
- Advantage West Midlands “Leader” Funding for rural communities

- Live/Work units
- Local products need to offer significant cultural benefits in order to compete with (frequently significantly cheaper) mass commercially produced products available in adjacent urban areas
- Locally produced products and all other elements of the supply chain (eg retailing and marketing) could be carried out locally
- Migrant labour willing to work in a wide variety of industries
- Older people's contribution to local skills and employment
- Open up culverts as part of the development of green infrastructure/corridors along the District's waterway networks
- Potential to explore the opportunities that may exist for production of Biomass fuel
- Renewable energy sources
- "Wheels to Work" programme
- Worcestershire County Council's work on "LEADER", "Women", "Young People" and "Small Businesses"
- Worcestershire Rural Hub

Threats

- Delays in installing second and third generation broadband
- Competition from cheap foreign food imports
- Demographic change
- Economic downturn
- Reduction of maintenance of rural watercourse defences and watercourse management along main river areas
- Higher rural housing costs
- In/out migration in medium to long term and impact on services
- Increased transport costs
- Poor maintenance of traditional farm buildings and inappropriate conversions
- Potential use of 'greenfield' field sites to meet local affordable housing needs
- Rural crime
- Climate change
- Uncertain future for rural post offices, shops and services