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Contextual Monitoring for Urban and Rural Renaissance

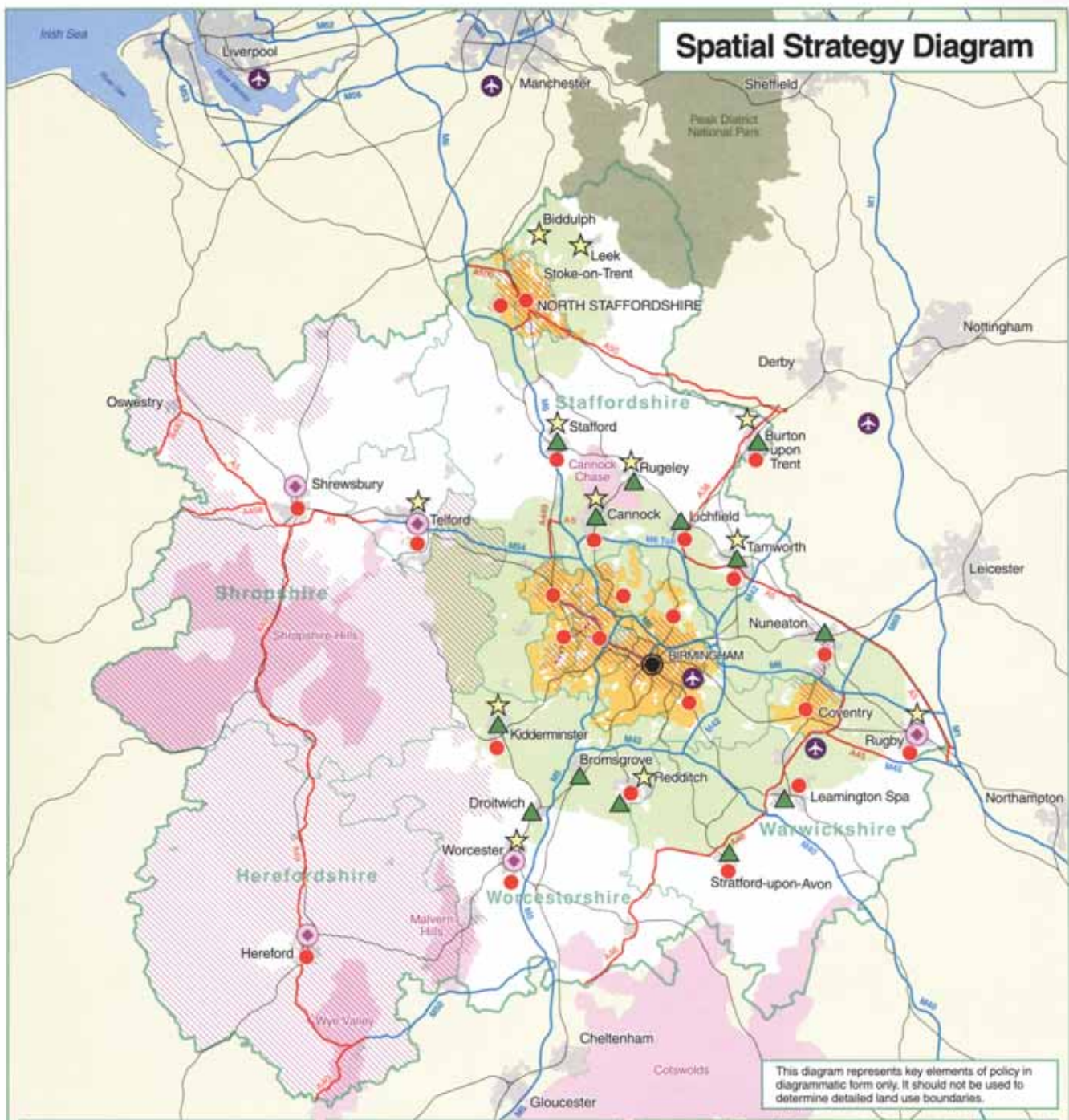


Are we achieving urban and rural renaissance?

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West Midlands
Regional Assembly
Speaking out for the region

Spatial Strategy Diagram



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1.1 Introduction

Both **Urban and Rural Renaissance** are at the heart of the West Midlands Spatial Strategy. The definitions it provides are being increasingly adopted across the Region and its various strategies.

Urban Renaissance is described as development of 'the major urban areas (MUAs) in such a way that they can increasingly meet their own economic and social needs in order to counter the unsustainable outward movement of people and jobs facilitated by previous strategies'.

Rural Renaissance is similarly described as 'addressing more effectively the major changes which are challenging the traditional roles of rural areas and the countryside'.

The Spatial Strategy also recognises that Urban and Rural Renaissance are interdependent and highlights that urban problems of depopulation, social polarisation and environmental degradation are mirrored by pressures on rural areas to accommodate development to meet the needs of out-migrants from urban areas, harming rural distinctiveness and character.

The Regional Assembly, along with partners, wanted to know where the Region currently stands in terms of Urban and Rural Renaissance and to develop a framework for measuring future progress against this. So in 2005 the Assembly asked the West Midlands Regional Observatory (WMRO) to assess the baseline position and propose a framework for monitoring the progress of the Region in this particular area.

This publication provides a summary of the report by WMRO (which can be freely downloaded from the Assembly or WMRO websites). It shows the data and provides some interpretations as well as highlighting the regional position and progress across a broad basket of indicators. In doing so conclusions are drawn about the overall progress of Urban and Rural Renaissance in the West Midlands Region.



1.2 The Regional Position on Urban Renaissance

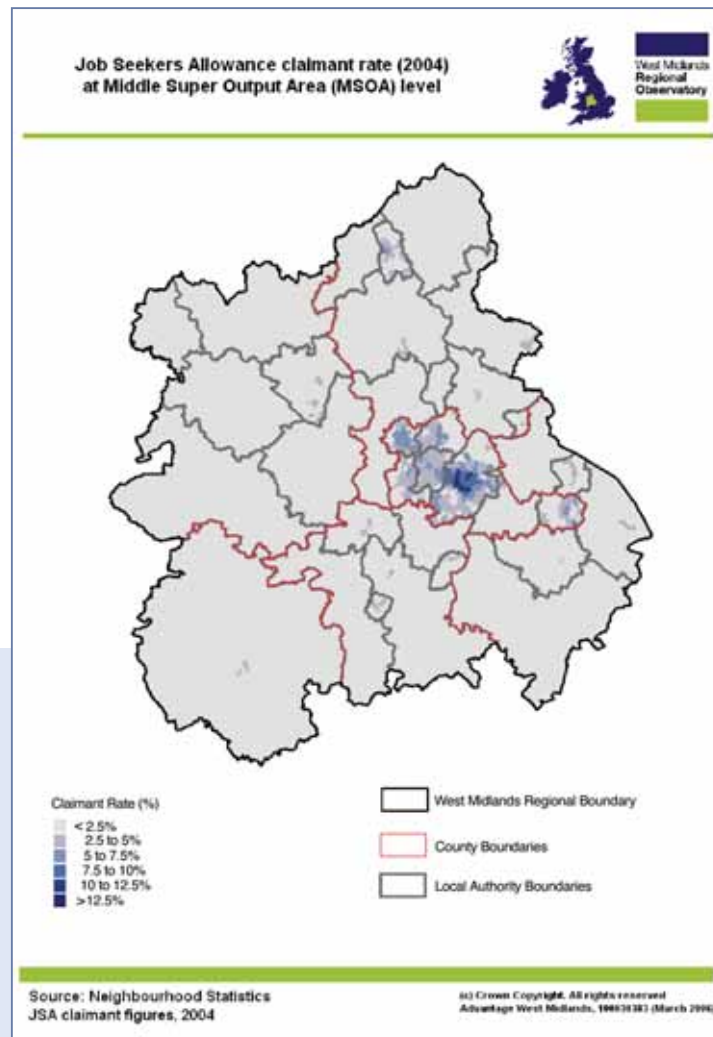
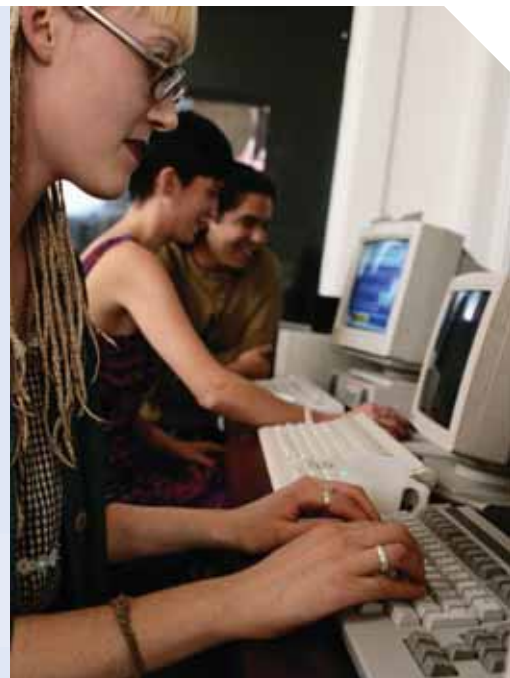
1.2.1 - Education, skills and employment

Historically there is a position both of lower educational out-turns for school leavers in our major urban areas and of lower levels of qualifications in the workforce than are found elsewhere in the Region, and nationally. These positions, like the historically higher levels of unemployment in the MUAs, reflect positions which highlight the challenge of Urban Renaissance. At the same time, there are positive trends - though from a lower base, GCSE attainment appears to be rising more quickly in the MUAs.

Unemployment has fallen much more slowly in the Birmingham and Black Country conurbation than anywhere else, whilst neither levels of participation in structured learning amongst young people, nor the number of young people classified as NEETs (not in education, employment or training), show any recent evidence of improvement over time. Nevertheless, the gross change in the numbers of people unemployed in the conurbations shows significant falls, suggesting some progress.

Local variations further complicate our assessment. In terms of educational attainment, Tamworth (outside the MUA) and Sandwell (part of the MUA) show far lower levels of good GCSE passes than neighbouring areas, and both Sandwell and Stoke show particularly high levels of people in the workforce without qualification - but other parts of the MUA, Solihull and Dudley are comparatively low. Undoubtedly relative deprivation plays some part in these variations.

Relative deprivation cannot explain all local variations. Other issues also play a part, including current and historic attitudes to education and skills, and the effectiveness of policy interventions and institutions. Localised cultural attitudes are also likely to play a part in the wide variations in rates of self employment and entrepreneurship, and these will have derived from historic patterns of employment which have shaped a broad range of attitudes relating to work and skills which will take time and concerted effort to change.

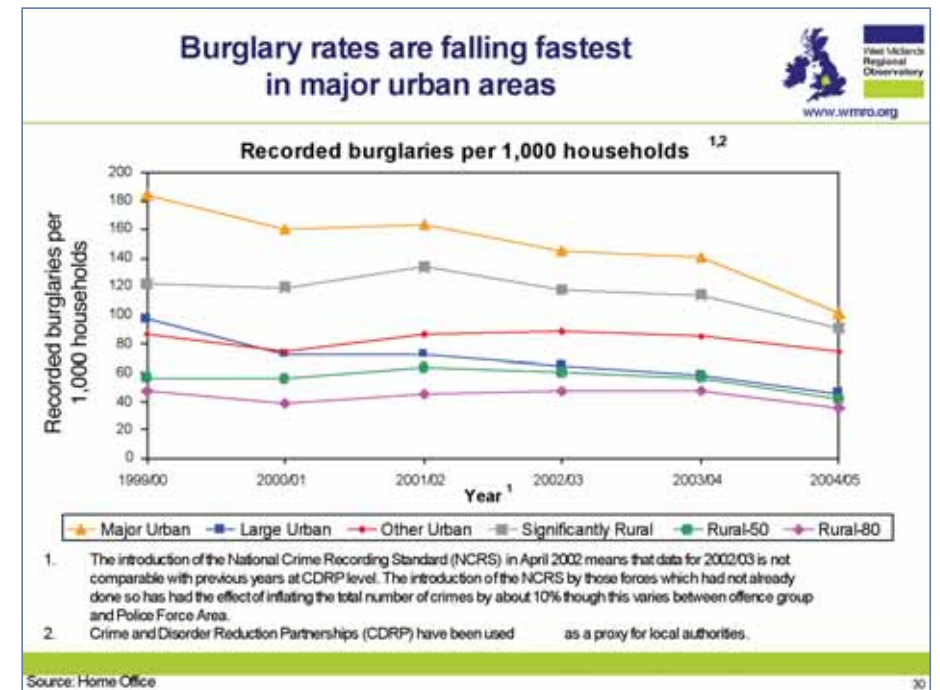
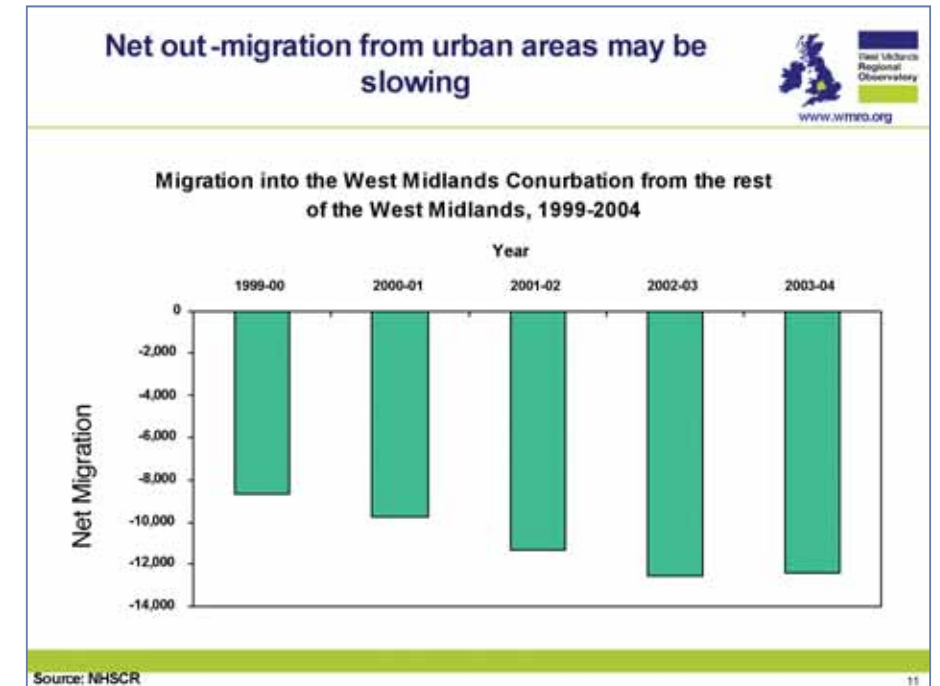


1.2.2 Migration and Quality of Life

There is continued suburbanisation of business activity. Although business stocks are increasing overall, they are falling in the Birmingham / Black Country conurbation. This clearly goes against the pattern we would wish to see for Urban Renaissance. There is also an established and continuing pattern of out-migration from the MUAs, and a clear aspiration amongst many urban residents to live in rural areas (Regional Lifestyle Survey).

We know that when it comes to choosing where to live, the issue which impacts most strongly is community safety. In terms of crime and disorder issues, burglary is viewed as the most significant one which is recorded as a crime (Regional Lifestyle Survey). The relative speed of decline in burglary rates in MUAs is precisely the sort of positive indicator that we would expect to see in support of the wider goals of Urban Renaissance. Urban residents are more sceptical about whether they feel their neighbourhood has improved, and there are lower levels of voluntary activity in urban areas.

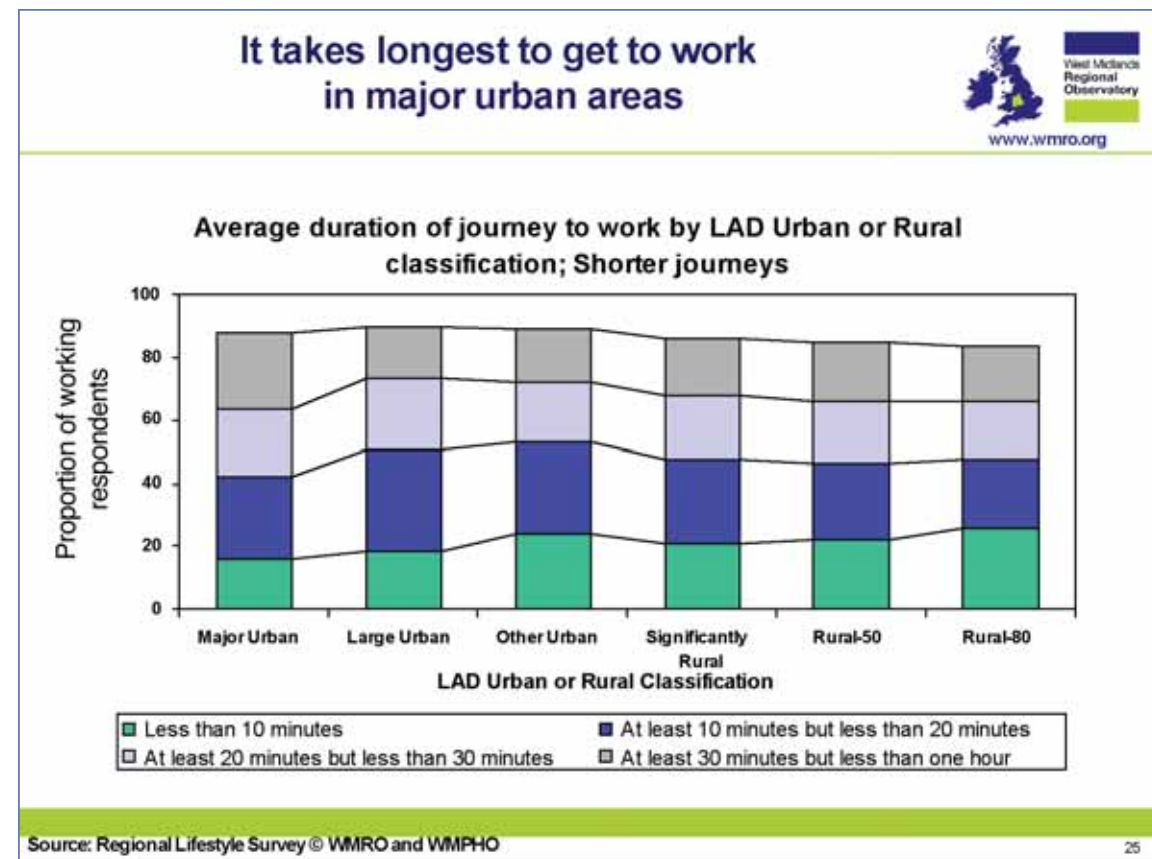
Male life expectancy is rising steadily in most parts of the MUAs (with the possible exception of Stoke) although life expectancy is still significantly lower in urban areas. Female life expectancy in urban areas does not appear to be rising as fast as in rural areas. However the mortality from key diseases such as circulatory disease does show steady improvement in urban areas.



1.2.3. Transport and Environment

Reduced speeds on urban trunk roads provide an ambiguous message which may or may not support Urban Renaissance. For example congestion might increase before the transport network, and the choices of individuals/organisations regarding transport and location adapt. Vehicle mileages have been increasing over many years, and whilst vehicles are becoming more fuel efficient, increased mileage and congestion may be offsetting this technological improvement. Increased vehicle movement on urban roads also has the secondary impact of reducing tranquillity. Longer journey times for residents in the Birmingham / Black Country conurbation may also contribute to decisions to move out of the conurbation, rather than persuading people to reconsider their mode of travel.

For environmental measures, there is little conclusive evidence of trends for Urban Renaissance. It is clear however that our urban areas are some way behind the more rural areas of the Region. Anecdotally, much progress is being made in redeveloping the provision of and the demand for urban living, particularly close to and in our city and town centres - with these developments often anchored with significant arts or cultural developments. However there is currently no means of measuring the quality of the built environment.



1.2.4 The position on Urban Renaissance

Overall, the conclusion must be that at present, many of the long run problems such as out-migration, low educational attainment, higher levels of deprivation and lower quality of life, persist in our urban areas. These are precisely the issues on which we would hope to see positive developments if we were to conclude that Urban Renaissance was taking hold. There are some signs of positive change - a possible tipping point on

net out-migration, clear signs of improvements on educational attainment, and positive news on one of the most significant categories of crime, burglary. Urban renaissance has not yet hit its stride, and many more indicators need to point clearly towards it before we can be sure that we are moving in the right direction - but there are some clear green shoots of recovery.



1.3 Rural Renaissance

1.3.1 Education, skills and employment

Overall, attainment at GCSE level is higher in rural areas, but dependent on the precise definitions of urban and rural which are used, different patterns emerge. Country and market towns are doing relatively well, with the problem of poor attainment concentrated in remoter rural areas away from towns. In terms of overall workforce qualification levels, rural areas appear well placed, though this data is not available at as fine a scale as GCSE attainment and this may mask local issues.

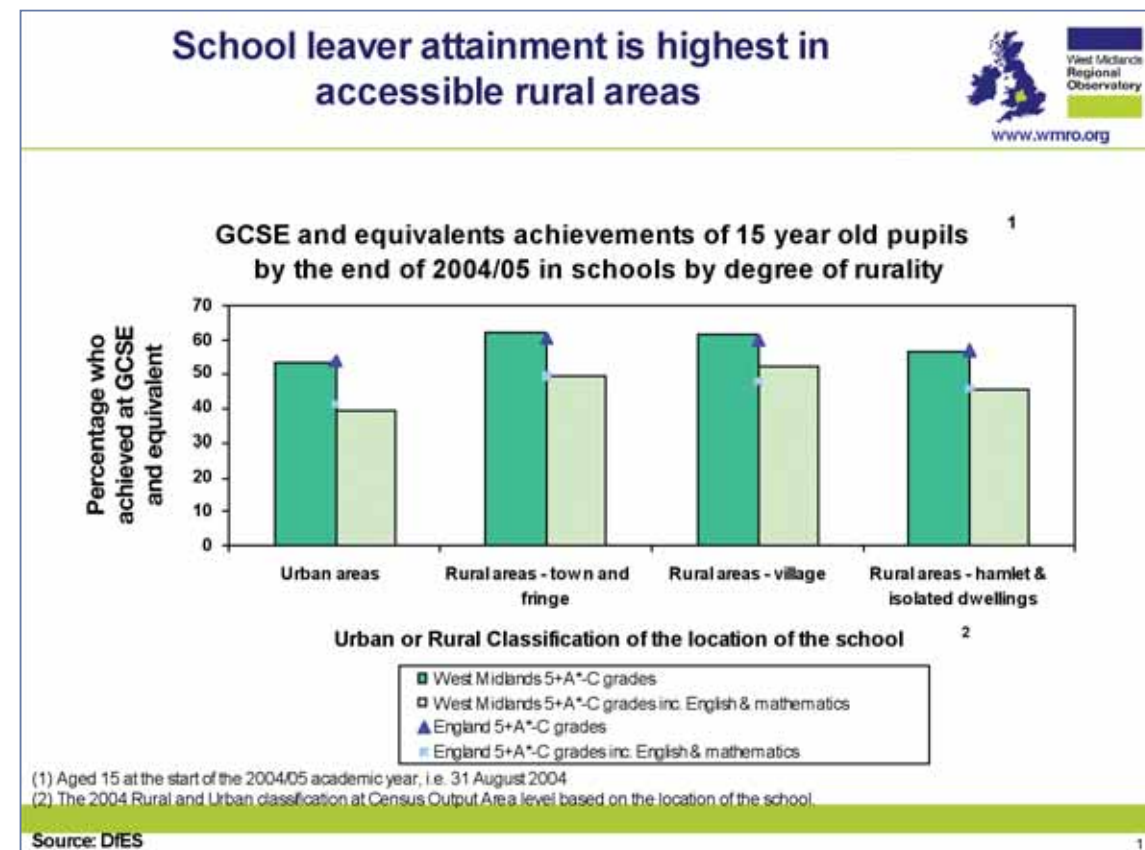
Trends in levels of participation in structured learning, which are rising ahead of the national average in the rural parts of the Region, and falling levels of NEETs both support the aims of Rural Renaissance, which would see increasing qualification levels in rural areas.

Levels of self-employment in rural areas are higher than in urban areas, and are highest in the most remote rural areas. Levels of self-employment are often used as a proxy for levels of entrepreneurship. However in rural areas the higher levels of self-employment could be driven by reduced choices and opportunities in the labour markets of remoter rural areas, or by a culture of self-employment related to practices in agriculture and related industries, and their wider impact on the working culture of rural areas.

Business densities (the number of businesses per 10,000 of the working age population) are higher in rural areas, but it is notable that whilst densities are rising in urban and most rural areas, they are not rising in the most remote rural areas. The issue would appear

to be higher rates of business 'churn' and failure in the most remote rural areas, since rates of new registrations are at their highest in the most rural areas, and like the rest of the Region, have been rising. The presence of high concentrations of R&D activity in rural areas is intriguing. Since these are high, value-added companies and jobs this seems to point positively to rural renaissance in economic terms, though there is a risk that if these are high, value-added jobs migrating from urban locations, they will exacerbate the tendency for out-migration.

Unemployment is relatively low and falling fastest in rural areas in the Region, though there are hotspots in some country and market towns which we would expect to diminish if rural renaissance took a firmer hold. Despite this, in the most rural areas, there are increasing numbers of claimants for incapacity benefit and severe disablement allowance, and the former has been associated with withdrawal from the labour market of those who have been discouraged from job-seeking.



1.3.2 Migration, housing affordability and transport

Out-migration from urban to rural areas continues, with particular pressure on parts of South Warwickshire and parts of south-east and mid-Staffordshire. South Warwickshire is also subject to net in-migration from areas outside the Region (primarily from London and the South-East), which further exacerbates pressures on house prices and affordability in such parts of the Region.

The aspiration of many urban dwellers to live in rural areas, particularly accessible rural areas remains a

concern in the context of achieving rural renaissance. Meanwhile migration continues to contribute to the older age profile of rural areas.

There are real problems of housing affordability in some rural parts of the Region, notably South Shropshire, Herefordshire and Stratford districts. These problems are not present in all rural districts, and affordability problems are shared by some urban areas. Since reducing the problems caused by housing affordability in rural areas is clearly an aim of regional policy in

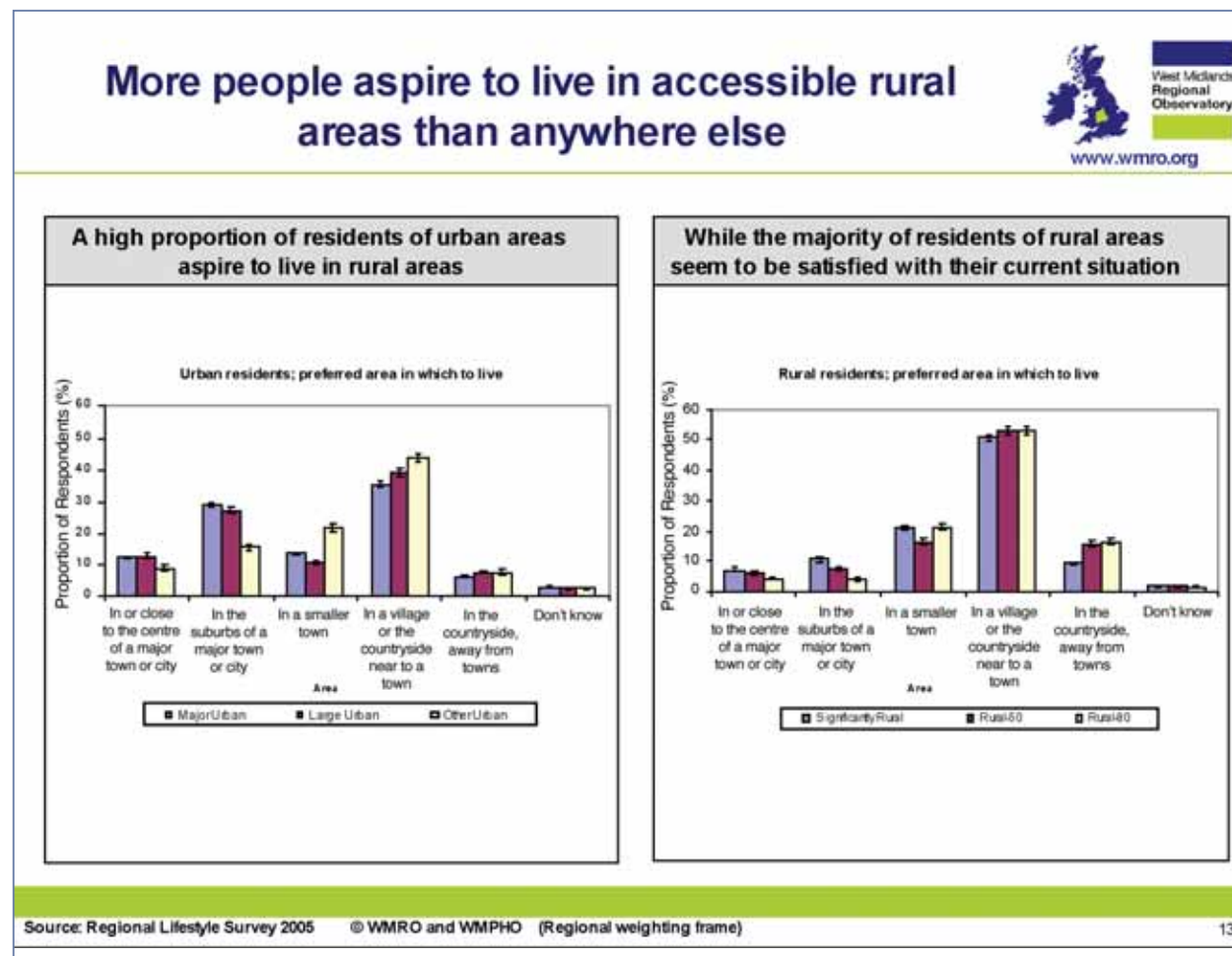


relation to rural renaissance, the persistence of affordability problems does not support progress against the aims of the policy.

Whilst journeys to work in rural areas are longer in terms of distance than in urban areas, this only translates into much longer journey times for a minority, with arguably slightly shorter average journey times for rural residents than for some of the most urban areas. Rural areas remain much more dependent on cars for journeys to work, resulting not just from distance, but also affluence and lifestyle choices. There is little evidence yet of the increased availability of alternative transport choices in rural areas which would signal rural renaissance, nor reductions in rural vehicle mileages.

Policy decisions relating to road charging, and the differentials in rates between urban and rural areas, may also have some effect upon the movement and links between urban and rural areas in the Region.

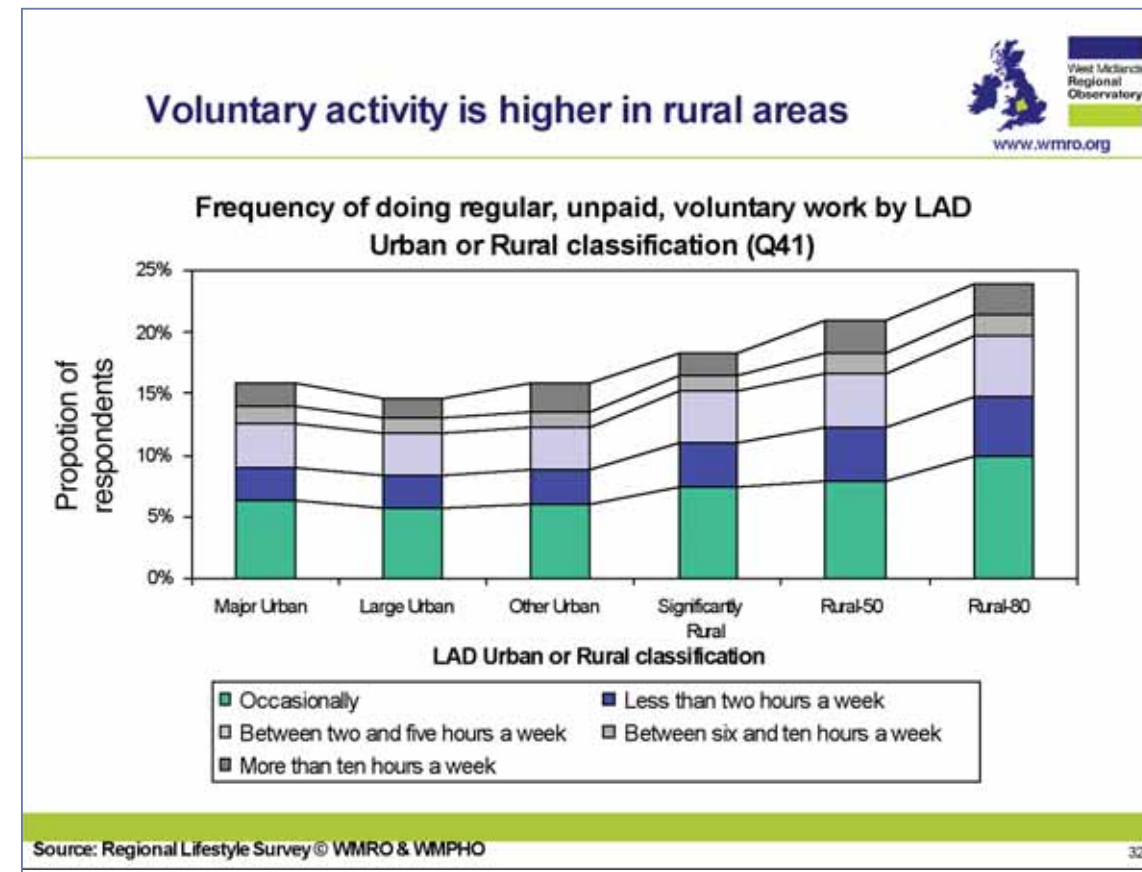
The aspiration of urban residents to live in a rural area far exceeds the capacity of rural areas to absorb, and runs counter to regional policy. Since it is not reasonable to stem this flow of out migrants by making rural areas less attractive or accessible as places to live, it is clear that the success of rural renaissance is dependent upon the effectiveness of urban renaissance policy in making urban areas more attractive as places to live and work, and reducing the proportion of urban residents who want to move to rural areas.



1.3.3 Quality of life

The quality of life offered by rural areas is fundamental to both its attractiveness and to rural renaissance. Rural areas have, for example, greater proportions of green space and other indicators of higher environmental quality, such as better quality river water. It is this quality of life, and the perception of it, which continues to attract those who can afford to, to live in

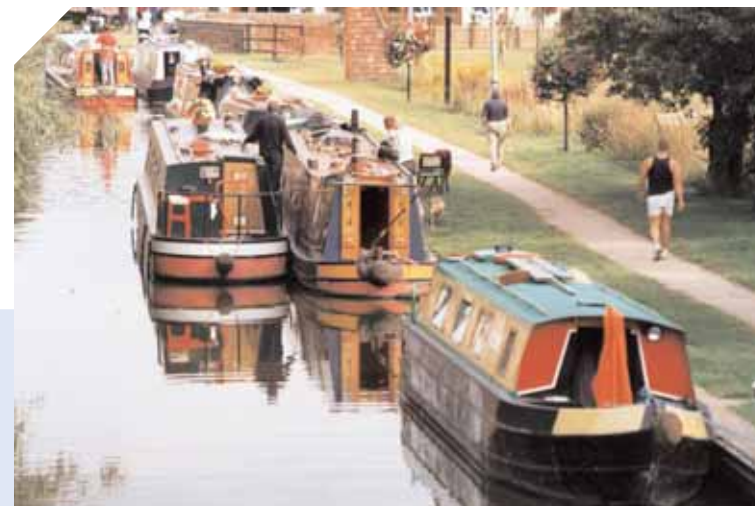
the Region's rural areas. In the remoter rural parts of the Region, levels of crime are the lowest of any part of the West Midlands. However in the part of the Region designated 'Significantly Rural' - comprising a group of nine districts in more accessible rural areas - levels of burglary are currently only a little below those in major urban areas, and higher than in other urban areas.



Residents of rural areas are clearly less likely to think that their neighbourhood is getting worse than their urban counterparts, though they are less likely to identify positive change as well. Remote rural areas are most likely to exhibit a strong sense of being able to impact on the state of their locality, and it is also rural areas, and particularly the more remote parts of the Region, that show the greatest levels of voluntary activity. All these indicators are supportive of rural renaissance.

remote rural areas. In both cases this appears to run counter to the aims of rural renaissance, which envisages thriving rural economies with improving service accessibility.

Mortality rates in rural area are generally lower than in urban areas and are continuing to fall. There is evidence of reducing service accessibility in rural areas - for post offices in the more accessible rural areas (a pattern which shows some evidence of being duplicated for GP surgeries also), and for supermarkets in the more



1.3.4 The Position on Rural Renaissance

The picture varies between accessible and remoter rural areas, where the stories are often very different, and is further complicated because there are many themes - for example quality of life - where progress in rural areas is unequivocally desirable, but where improvement may further fuel the pressures brought through migration.

Trends counter to rural renaissance include continued outward migration, car dependence, difficulties with housing affordability, and aspirations for urban living amongst the Region's urban residents. On skills the messages are more supportive, although this appears

to be a continued problem in remoter rural areas, and other labour market indicators are ambiguous, perhaps even contradictory. The most positive markers for rural areas concern quality of life and environment. Overall, therefore, there is only modest evidence of rural renaissance apparent, and the majority of the data indicates the persistence of the problems which the policy was established to address.

A copy of the full report can be downloaded from the Assembly website at www.wmra.gov.uk and the Observatory website at www.wmro.org.uk



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