

## Chapter 5

# Rural Renaissance

### Introduction

- 5.1 The renaissance of the Region's rural areas is one of the key objectives of the Spatial Strategy. While the West Midlands is often thought of as an industrial and urban Region, some 80% of its area in which 20% of its population lives is rural. These rural areas vary greatly in character and in the degree and nature of action they require in order to create stable, sustainable and attractive communities. Actions taken to achieve this must recognise the different circumstances that exist in different places in the rural areas.
- 5.2 Many of the actions necessary to achieve the rural renaissance will be small scale and specific to the locality. It is important that decisions about change and their implementation should include community involvement at all stages. The main strategic mechanisms for enabling this to happen are set out in this Chapter and in the policies covering the rural economy and diversification in the Prosperity for All Chapter (PA14-15). General guidance for planning in the countryside is set out in PPG7.
- 5.3 It is important that activities to improve the quality of life in the rural areas protect and enhance their unique qualities including their environmental assets. The policies in the Quality of the Environment Chapter will be particularly important in this respect.

### Rural Renaissance

- 5.4 All parts of the rural area are equally important but there are many differing characteristics. Policies and actions should be tailored accordingly. Areas such as southern Staffordshire, northern Worcestershire and much of Warwickshire, are heavily influenced by proximity to and functional linkages with MUAs and share some of their characteristics. Actions in both urban and rural areas need to be made in the context of this strong inter-relationship wherever it exists. Local authorities, in preparing their development plans, and service providers need to consider the inter-relationship of the rural areas with the larger cities and towns that serve many of their higher-order service needs and provide important sources of employment.
- 5.5 In others areas, such as the "rural west" and parts of north Staffordshire, which are among the most remote and sparsely populated areas in England, establishing a network of rural service centres will be important. In these areas there will be a greater need for local planning authorities, service providers and other partners to take a co-ordinated approach to centres, so that together they provide the widest possible range of quality services and opportunities.
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## POLICY RR1: Rural Renaissance

- A. Rural areas of the West Midlands will be regenerated through the improvement of choice in housing; the diversification of the rural economy; better transport links both within rural areas and between urban and rural areas; improving health, education, skills training, social, shopping, community facilities and other services, the sustainable use of environmental assets, and the prudent use of natural resources.
- B. Policy priorities will vary according to a number of factors, including the quality of the environment, local character and distinctiveness, need for new employment, need for additional housing, including affordable housing, to meet local needs and stem population decline, and access to services and facilities.
- C. In preparing their development plans, local authorities will need to have regard to the inter-relationship between urban and rural areas and to draw a general distinction between:
  - i) rural areas which are subject to strong influences from the MUAs and which are relatively prosperous and have generally good access to services. For these, the main priority will be to manage the rate and nature of further development to that required to meet local needs, whilst ensuring that local character is protected and enhanced; and
  - ii) rural areas which may be remote from the MUAs, with generally sparse and in some cases declining population, poor access to jobs and services. Here the main priorities should be economic diversification (PA14-15), affordable housing, better services and improved public transport.
- D. Significant incidences of low income and social exclusion occur throughout the rural areas and should be addressed wherever they occur, although the most severe problems tend to be in the most remote areas.

- 5.6 In implementing this policy it is important that local people and organisations have the opportunity to contribute directly to decisions about the future of their area, and where appropriate to help put those decisions into practice. In a rural area, issues and choices are often local and distinctive in nature, requiring 'grass-roots' knowledge and understanding which may not be available to organisations operating more widely.
- 5.7 Community involvement should be planned as a positive and integral part of any programme so that it does not lead to indecision and delay. Community based organisations and individuals with local knowledge and understanding should be given the opportunity and support to become actively involved in land-use and transport planning and in related social policy areas such as health, education, skills training and crime prevention and the provision of other key services and facilities.
- 5.8 Parish councils, rural community councils, local amenity groups and other community based organizations should make a particularly important contribution. Mechanisms for involvement include parish and town plans, village appraisals, village design statements, and Local Agenda 21 and local biodiversity action plans. It is important that the role of each and the links between them, and with development plans, are clearly defined. Where appropriate the action plans and appraisals produced should be linked to development plans through adoption as supplementary planning guidance.

## The Rural Regeneration Zone

- 5.9 The main geographical focus for rural renaissance will be 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 (shown on the Spatial Strategy Diagram) and has a population of some 280,000,

much of which is widely dispersed. 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 population is ageing as young people move away in search of higher education and greater job opportunities while older people move into the area on retirement.

- 5.10** A wide range of action is required to tackle problems of unemployment, under-employment, low incomes, deprivation and social exclusion while preserving and enhancing the high-quality environment and strong character of this very attractive and distinctive part of the Region.

### **POLICY RR2: The Rural Regeneration Zone**

- A. In order to encourage the renaissance of those parts of the Region where rural communities are under greatest threat from economic change and other associated pressures, local authorities, AWM and other partnerships should focus investment within the Rural Regeneration Zone as identified on the Spatial Strategy Diagram. The RRZ will be the primary focus for rural regeneration in the West Midlands.
- B. Priority should be given to improvements in traffic management and public transport within the A49 transport corridor and any other parts of the Zone where they are necessary to support economic and social regeneration and to improve accessibility.
- C. Local authorities should work with the RRZ Partnership Board to identify initiatives which have spatial implications and to develop policies in their development plans to facilitate those initiatives. In particular, emphasis will be given to the following measures:
- i) supporting existing businesses and attracting appropriate new economic activity. Incubator and starter units and serviced employment land will be provided where necessary to attract appropriate economic activity to existing settlements;
  - ii) strengthening the range and quality of services available to residents through the establishment of a network of rural service centres. Where possible services should be based on market towns and large villages, but in the more sparsely populated areas they may need to be more widely dispersed or mobile, reflecting the settlement pattern;
  - iii) improving accessibility to jobs and services, including for education, training and learning, through improved transport (particularly public transport), better facilities such as multi-purpose centres and outreach facilities, and radical improvement of ICT infrastructure including access to the broadband network;
  - iv) providing affordable housing to meet local needs, in existing settlements wherever possible, and making full use of the existing housing stock (in line with policy CF5);
  - v) promoting rural diversification, particularly in association with environmental improvement, the enhancement of biodiversity and the development and marketing of local food and other products; and
  - vi) maintaining and enhancing the landscape (especially the three AONBs), natural, built and historic environment and distinctive character of the Zone and particular areas within it, and minimising the negative effects of any new development.

- 5.11** Responsibility for implementing this policy rests primarily with Advantage West Midlands, working with the Herefordshire, Shropshire and Worcestershire Partnerships. It will require close co-ordination with development and local transport plans.

- 5.12 Other relevant policies are found in the Prosperity for All and Quality of the Environment Chapters, in particular those covering economic development (PA14), tourism (PA10) and agriculture and forestry (PA15, QE8).

## Market Towns

- 5.13 Market towns have long been a focus for commercial and social activity in the rural West Midlands, but in recent years their functions have been affected by social, economic and agricultural change. The Region has many different types of market town, ranging from county towns, such as Shrewsbury, Hereford and Stafford, which have a degree of urban autonomy to small towns such as Kington and Craven Arms, which are firmly grounded in their rural hinterlands. Towns have reacted in different ways to changes in rural areas, and some have struggled to maintain and develop their roles.
- 5.14 Market towns should be the focus of rural renaissance in most parts of the Region, including the RRZ (RR2). In a county or market town, people should be able to buy most things they need, obtain a range of essential services, find a variety of housing, have a choice of jobs, obtain training and education and enjoy entertainment. So that these benefits are widely available to people in the rural hinterland of the town, transport (particularly public transport) improvements will often be needed. The distinctive character and environmental quality of a town is important in its own right but may also help it to develop as a centre of tourism (PA10) or as a focus for rural renaissance.

### POLICY RR3: Market Towns

- A. Market towns have a key role in helping to regenerate rural areas (RR1), as a focus for sustainable economic and housing development and by providing services and other facilities to their rural hinterlands. In fulfilling these roles, it is important that the distinctiveness and character of each individual town is maintained and where possible enhanced. Market towns which are to have a role in rural regeneration should be identified in development plans; having regard to the following characteristics:
- i) a close and interdependent relationship with the population and economy of a rural hinterland, whether or not the settlement has ever had a traditional agricultural market;
  - ii) an existing focus for and reasonable balance between employment opportunities, housing provision, community facilities and services, or potential to provide this;
  - iii) existing or potential for a planned and co-ordinated local transport network;
  - iv) generally, although not exclusively, a population of less than 20,000 and above 2,000; and
  - v) the capacity to accommodate new growth in terms of its character and setting, and the potential to develop as a sustainable community.
- B. The mixture of action required will vary from town to town. Development plans and other plans and programmes should normally prioritise, for each town, policies to:
- i) provide sites and premises to support the expansion of existing businesses and, where necessary, the generation of new ones;
  - ii) improve the natural, built and historic environment (QE3-6);
  - iii) provide additional housing to maintain viable communities and meet local needs, including the provision of affordable housing (CF2, CF5);

### **POLICY RR3: Market Towns – continued**

- iv) develop shopping and other key services and facilities within the town centre in accordance with PA11 where suitable sites exist; where no such sites are available, shopping development should be subject to the key tests and in particular the sequential test in PPG6;
- v) develop the accessibility of the town from its rural hinterland, for example by improving public transport facilities and services (also see policy T1);
- vi) develop ICT infrastructure to assist the local economy, including increased potential for home working and better access to local services;
- vii) facilitate the developing role of higher and further education, for example through the development of local centres and the use of shared facilities;
- viii) improve access to health facilities and enable their integration with social and other service provision; and
- ix) encourage the multi-purpose use of land and buildings for community facilities, leisure and service provision.

- 5.15** Market towns should be defined in development plans taking into account an assessment of the town's ability to accommodate development and the relationship with the other settlements in the area. When preparing proposals local authorities should discuss and agree priorities with the Market Towns Task Group and local partnerships, taking into account the likely effect of their proposals on neighbouring towns.
- 5.16** Particular attention should be given to the needs of the local community and those of surrounding rural areas. It will be important to involve a range of community groups and specialist organisations in developing and implementing proposals. Each market town should develop a vision, taking account of its relationship with other service centers, and may be given a health check and action plan, using the Market Towns Toolkit developed by the Countryside Agency. It will be important to prioritise the action required in each town.

### **Villages**

- 5.17** Depending on definition, the Region has approximately 2,300 villages. They perform an essential role in maintaining and enhancing the rural way of life by providing homes, jobs, services and other facilities for local people, many of whom cannot easily reach the nearest town. Consideration should be given to the extent to which sustainable development, which is appropriate in scale and nature, would enable villages to remain viable. It is not envisaged that any new villages will need to be developed.

### **The Open Countryside**

- 5.18** The open countryside consists of the whole of the rural area outside towns, villages and other small settlements.
- 5.19** The Rural Economy policies (PA14-15) in the Prosperity for All Chapter and many of the Quality of the Environment policies will be particularly relevant to local planning authorities in development plan preparation and determining planning applications. Detailed planning guidance on the countryside is contained in PPG7.

## Rural Services

- 5.20** Access to the services people need is one of the most important determinants of quality of life in rural areas. A village shop, school, doctor's surgery and bank are likely to be important to most households, but many other services will be 'essential' to particular people, depending on their circumstances and stage in the life cycle. Where services are not provided locally, public transport to a service centre may be a vital lifeline.
- 5.21** The Countryside Agency's Rural Services Survey 2000 showed that the West Midlands had a higher proportion of rural parishes without essential services than England as a whole. In many parts of rural Shropshire, Herefordshire and Staffordshire, fewer than 75% of households are within 2km of a post office, fewer than 40% are within 4km of a bank or building society and fewer than 70% are within 2km of a primary school.

### POLICY RR4: Rural Services

- A. Improving the range and quality of services available to rural communities is a key component of rural renaissance. Some services will be improved by bringing them closer to where people live, some may need to be concentrated in towns and other centres accessible from the surrounding area, and some can be provided jointly. Where possible, centres should develop complementary roles in service delivery.
- B. Development plan policies for housing and other forms of development should take into account the likely implications for the provision of services and facilities for the particular communities concerned, including the extent to which new development may help support the provision of local services.
- C. Development plans should set out how services will be provided for in rural areas, taking full account of the need to retain essential community services and to facilitate and provide for appropriate new and innovative forms of service delivery.
- D. Local Transport Plans should identify where improved public transport services are required to support rural services.

- 5.22** The threat to rural services is recognised in the Countryside Agency's "State of the Countryside 2003 (West Midlands)" and in limited circumstances it may be appropriate to protect services and facilities from other development proposals. To retain and improve the availability of services in the rural areas will require a co-ordinated approach between public and private sectors and Local Strategic Partnerships will have an important role to play. To assist, local authorities should consider developing service strategies for rural areas. These should take account of the broad range of services and delivery options (see para 5.23) in the context of local service standards developed in line with the Rural White Paper. Where there are land-use implications these should be taken into account in the preparation of development plans.
- 5.23** Innovative and imaginative solutions should be developed, particularly in the joint delivery of health, education, social, leisure and cultural and other services. This may also include the use of mobile services, ICT (PA14) and transport solutions (RR4). The implications of such solutions, which may include increased potential for homeworking and for a number of service providers to share facilities, should be taken into account in the preparation of development plans. Service provision should be adequately co-ordinated with public transport services from the rural hinterland. In some cases, groups of market towns may be identified to work together to deliver locally effective solutions.
- 5.24** For the review of this RPG the RPB should work with partners including the Countryside Agency and AWM to identify and prioritise the critical services that need to be protected, enhanced or secured in the different parts of the Region and establish mechanisms for delivering them.
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