

**The Sustainable Community Strategy
for Worcestershire 2008-2013:
Findings of the Rural Proofing Exercise
May 2008**

1 Introduction

Rural Proofing is a process of building rural dimensions into policy. The Rural White Paper (2002) stated that rural proofing should be a systemic part of the policy making process for all policies that cover rural areas. It is particularly relevant to Community Strategies as they must engage rural communities and deliver services in rural communities.

On April 21st 2008 representatives of Worcestershire County Council, Wychavon District Council and Community First went through a process of rural proofing the draft Sustainable Community Strategy for Worcestershire 2008-2013. In doing this, the following questions were considered:

- What are the specific issues to consider for delivery of the priority outcomes in rural areas?
- Will delivery of the priority outcomes have a differential impact on rural areas?
- Is any differential impact addressed in the strategy?
- What is recommended for each theme of the strategy to ensure the strategy is appropriate to rural areas?

The group also considered the overarching issues of the LSP/Community strategy approach to engaging rural communities and considered a number of questions suggested as part of a checklist published as guidance by the Countryside Agency in 2002¹. The outcomes of this exercise are contained in this report.

2 Evaluation of Priority Outcomes on Rural Areas

The group considered the priority outcomes of the Sustainable Community Strategy in turn, by theme, in terms of their appropriateness to rural areas and whether rural issues are given consideration and evidence provided on rural issues. This provided an assessment on whether the priority outcomes of the strategy will have a differential impact on rural areas. When this is the case, recommendations are made for additions or amendments top the strategy to reflect this.

¹ Local Strategic Partnership and Community Strategy rural checklist (The Countryside, Agency, May 2002)

2.1 Communities that are Safe and Feel Safe

i) To reduce crime

Rates of crime in Worcestershire are comparatively low and are also low in rural areas. It was agreed that the nature of crime differs in rural areas particularly with lesser incidents of violent crime. The role of local policing and neighbourhood schemes is essential in building confidence in rural areas.

ii) To re-assure the public by reducing the perception of crime

It was agreed that fear of crime is significant in rural areas. Evidence within the Community Strategy indicates that people in rural areas feel safer after dark. Despite this, there are specific issues to consider in rural areas. Firstly, the older demographic profile in rural areas may result in older residents who can be considered a key vulnerable group for which fear of crime can cause more harm in terms of quality of life. Secondly, the impact of migrant workers is likely to be more acutely felt in rural areas. This is a community cohesion issue that may have a specific impact on rural areas.

iii) To reduce the harm caused by illegal drugs and alcohol

The harm caused by illegal drugs & alcohol is a common issue across Worcestershire. In rural areas though, it is likely to be less visible than in urban areas. This raises a question whether a comparable level of support is available to those abusing drug & alcohol in rural areas.

iv) To build respect for communities and to reduce anti social behaviour

The desire to reduce anti-social behaviour is a common issue across Worcestershire. It is believed anti-social behaviour may be most prevalent in urban areas. However, the impact of anti-social behaviour may be more acutely felt in rural areas due to a high proportion of older and vulnerable residents.

2.1.1 Will These Outcomes have a Differential Impact on Rural Areas?

It was agreed that the strategy takes into account the importance of local policing and neighbourhood schemes with particular actions for neighbourhood policing and partners and communities together (PACT) meetings. The strategy could take into account the vulnerability of older residents in rural areas and the impact of migrant workers in rural areas. This would be appropriate under the outcome of reducing the fear of crime. The strategy could also take into account whether appropriate support is available in rural areas to achieve reductions in the harm of illegal drugs and alcohol.

2.1.2 Recommendation

On the whole, the strategy can be effectively applied to rural areas and so no specific recommendations are suggested. Further evidence could be presented on the vulnerability of older residents and the potential impact of migrant workers on rural communities.

2.2 A Better Environment – for Today and Tomorrow

i) To protect and improve Worcestershire's natural and historic environment

Much of Worcestershire's natural and historic environment is contained in our rural areas and this is implied although not explicitly acknowledged within the strategy. It was agreed that our rural areas stand to benefit from the inclusion of this outcome.

ii) To promote the prevention, re-use, recycling and recovery of waste

This is considered a priority issue across Worcestershire. A concern would be that there are initiatives that are not applied throughout rural areas. This is a problem within a two-tier authority as separate districts may apply different values to this outcome and so it is not effectively applied throughout our rural areas.

iii) To address issues of water quality, supply, consumption and drainage in Worcestershire

This is an outcome that could have a specific effect on our rural areas. Land drainage and water supply are issues that can have a significant impact on our rural areas. There may be areas that make use of septic tanks and there is an implication of the strategy on the quality of watercourses. It was agreed that this is a technical area and a tighter definition is needed for the outcome to assess the impact on rural areas. Further information is also required on what actions will be implemented to assess the impact on rural areas.

iv) To increase energy efficiency and increase the amount of energy generated from renewable sources

Energy efficiency is an issue common across Worcestershire. Production of renewable energy can be considered a rural issue though. This is because for renewable energy to minimise its carbon footprint energy should be produced as close to the source of the fuel as possible. For example, in the production of biomass (i.e. organic matter) most fuel is likely to be either wood or non-food crops. This implies that renewable energy will have a significant impact on rural areas as most farms and forests are located in rural areas.

2.2.2 Will These Outcomes have a Differential Impact on Rural Areas?

There are issues under this theme that will have a differential impact on rural areas. Many of them, such as water quality and renewable energy are likely to be the responsibility of individual agencies or landowners and it is questionable whether the community strategy can influence all stakeholders. The emphasis on protecting the natural environment has an impact on planning development including housing. There is also a concern that rural areas may be marginalised from the outcomes regarding recycling and re-use, are recycling facilities located in rural areas or initiatives applied across rural areas to achieve this?

2.2.3 Recommendation

Further information and a clearer definition is requested on the water quality is requested on water quality, supply and drainage to establish how this may impact on rural areas. It is also requested that it is questioned if there is a consistent approach to recycling across rural communities. The high cost of fuel

and isolation of the rural population may prevent this from being effectively applied across rural communities for example if recycling facilities are primarily in urban areas. Conversely rural communities may have a greater capacity for composting. It is also requested that production of renewable energy is addressed or acknowledged as a rural issue and to consider whether any actions can ensure rural communities adopt this principle.

2.3 Economic Success that is Shared by All

i) To promote technology led growth benefiting all sectors and parts of the County

The emphasis on technology led growth is appreciated as a priority for the county. However, it is questionable whether rural areas can benefit from this outcome as much as urban areas. It is apparent that there is no mention of traditional and land-based industries and this section appears unbalanced in its approach to the economy. Rural issues could be considered such as home-working, diversification of the economy from traditional industries and support of land-based industries.

ii) To support the sustainable development of the County through infrastructure development (in particular, transport infrastructure), and establishing Worcester as a sub regional focus

This outcome, with particular reference to Worcester, appears to imply that investment will be drawn primarily to the main urban areas. This may have a negative impact on rural areas if investment is drawn away. However, it is recognised that investment will inevitably focus on the county town.

iii) To remove barriers to employment and improve skills

Worklessness and seasonal workers are established as issues for the county and these do apply to rural areas. There should be mention of specific rural issues such as the persistent barriers limiting or preventing skills training in rural areas particularly in relation to disconnection from Further Education, the high cost of fuel, limited public transport, and for young people in particular the lack of affordable housing.

iv) To ensure that Worcestershire's economic interests are effectively represented at all levels

It is questionable whether rural economic interests are effectively represented and the consensus is that local rural interests are not as well represented as they once were. However, representation at the regional level is strong including the rural renaissance framework, the rural regeneration zone and the rural affairs forum. This is not reflected in the strategy and there should be a stronger emphasis on our rural areas in this section.

2.3.1 Will These Outcomes have a Differential Impact on Rural Areas?

The majority consensus of the group is that this theme and outcomes would appear to have a negative impact on our rural areas. It appears that investment will be targeted at urban areas and the emphasis on technology led growth and infrastructure improvements would primarily benefit urban areas. There is little

emphasis on rural economic interests other than a brief mention of seasonal workers and an action for market towns to support their rural hinterlands.

2.3.2 Recommendation

The majority consensus of the group is that this section should be revised to include an emphasis on rural areas too, acknowledging the existence of an agricultural based economy in large parts of the county to prevent the strategy having a negative impact on rural areas when it is applied. Specific mention could be made of local initiatives such as the Worcestershire Rural Hub, regional initiatives such as the Rural Regeneration Zone and national/EU initiatives such as the Rural Development Programme for England. The section should strive to be balanced in its actions to reflect barriers to employment and training faced by the rural population.

2.4 Improving Health and Well Being

i) To support adults to lead healthy lifestyles

This is a common issue across Worcestershire. The main issue across rural areas of Worcestershire is an older demographic and increasing age profile; this is addressed in this theme although not as a specific rural issue. The question for rural communities would be whether there is access to healthcare services and support across rural areas and communities. This is not evidenced and so it is difficult to make a judgment on whether this is a real rural issue or a perception of the group.

ii) To reduce health inequalities

Evidence on health inequality hotspots is referenced in this theme although no specific areas are mentioned. We would expect that there are hotspots in rural areas and so this is implicitly addressed under this theme. If no rural areas were considered hotspots of health inequality this would be a concern.

iii) To improve the quality of life and independence of older people and those with a long term illnesses

Independence of older people is a common issue across Worcestershire although there may be a differential impact on rural areas due to a higher proportion of older people in rural areas. Again, this issue is addressed in the strategy although there is no specific reference to rural areas.

iv) To improve mental health and well-being

The importance of mental health and well-being is a common issue across Worcestershire. There is a question on whether mental health facilities and services are available in rural areas either in rural locations or as outreach services. There may be an argument that levels of physical isolation in rural areas could be a mental health and well-being issue although without evidence this is only a perception of the group.

2.4.1 Will These Outcomes have a Differential Impact on Rural Areas?

The outcomes and actions under this theme may have a differential impact on rural areas. Further evidence is requested on the location of "hotspots" of healthcare inequality and whether this includes rural areas. We would also

question whether healthcare services are available across rural areas through community hospitals or outreach services. This information would enable an assessment of whether the strategy can be effectively applied across rural areas. Specific rural issues such as an older demographic and levels of physical isolation could be given more emphasis as evidence however this is somewhat addressed for this theme.

2.4.2 Recommendation

No additions or amendments are requested under this theme. We would request further information on the evidence base under this theme though in terms of access to health services and in “hotspots” of health inequality to ensure that rural areas are properly considered. The main concern of the group would be that there is a perverse measure of health inequality that would concentrate resources on urban areas despite evidence of a higher age demographic in rural areas.

2.5 Meeting the Needs of Children and Young People

i) To support children and young people to lead healthy lifestyles

This is considered a common issue across Worcestershire with no rural emphasis. That is unless there is evidence suggesting that young people in rural areas are less healthy or more obese. It is difficult to suggest how this outcome could not be effectively applied to rural areas.

ii) To prevent bullying and support those affected by it

Again, this is a countywide issue unless there is evidence that bullying is more prevalent or more harmful in rural areas, which is considered unlikely.

iii) To raise educational achievement

This is also considered a countywide issue unless there is evidence that truancy is more prevalent in rural areas or levels of achievement substantially lower due to rural isolation, which again the group does not believe to be true.

iv) To ensure children and young people have things to do and enjoy their communities

For this theme, this outcome is most relevant to rural areas. There are issues regarding access to leisure activities for young people in rural areas, as they are more isolated due to their location. This can be considered an access and hence a transport issue, access to facilities and mapping could be referenced to ensure that this outcome can be effectively applied to rural areas. It could also be evidenced that youth clubs are accessible in rural areas to improve the evidence base. There is also an opportunity to address rural leisure and community led leisure activities, which may address gaps in service in rural areas where it is not economic to provide the same level of leisure opportunities for young people. It should also be recognised that the provision of activities in rural areas tends to rely on local, informal volunteering. This has implications for the increased levels of capacity building to be delivered to local communities.

2.5.1 Will These Outcomes have a Differential Impact on Rural Areas?

The outcomes under this theme are linked to the activities of schools and extra-curricular activities. It is difficult to establish that the outcomes and actions when applied will have a differential impact on rural areas. One issue could be that if schools are closed in rural areas over the length of the strategy this could have a negative impact on the rural population particularly in ensuring there are local activities for young people in their communities. This may be addressed by play strategies at district level. It may also be addressed by the voluntary and community sector in rural areas that ensure there is appropriate provision of activities and that young people are properly safeguarded.

2.5.2 Recommendation

No actions are recommended for this theme and the outcomes and actions. Further evidence could be provided on rural youth activities but the strategy can be effectively applied to rural areas under this theme.

2.6 Stronger Communities

i) To provide decent, affordable housing which meets the diverse needs of Worcestershire

This is considered a specific issue in rural areas and has been identified by a number of agencies as a priority issue for the rural population. Affordable housing has a particular impact on rural areas, as house prices are generally higher. This prevents stability of communities particularly for retention of younger people, as they are unable to continue living where they have grown up. Also, there is a separate impact as most development is concentrated on urban areas and so opportunities for affordable housing in rural areas are often limited to conversions. These issues have influenced the work of the rural housing enabler in establishing these issues and changing perceptions in rural areas.

ii) To improve quality of life in Worcestershire by providing vibrant, sustainable cultural opportunities for all

The desire for provision of leisure and cultural activities are common issues across Worcestershire. In terms of local provision, the quality and quantity are different in rural areas and the actions in the strategy do allude to this with particular reference to natural greenspace in rural areas.

iii) To support effective volunteering which is accessible to all

This outcome clearly applies to the county as a whole. Volunteering opportunities in rural areas are plentiful although often not formally recognised. This includes taking part in community events and initiatives as well as local commitments such as being a school governor. The language and actions under this theme appear to take a very formal view of volunteering rather than an informal way of building communities. Taking part in and attending local events and initiatives, which would be more appropriate as an action for rural areas and would also be more appropriate given the overall theme. The importance of community working and local knowledge in rural areas could be better reflected in this section.

iv) To reduce income deprivation, including child and pensioner poverty

The specific geographical areas mentioned under this outcome are all urban. There is a common problem that traditional measures of deprivation do not fully take into account the existence of rural poverty as areas are sparse in terms of people and poverty is often mixed in with affluence. In effect, there will be few pockets of income deprivation in rural areas despite a significant proportion of rural poverty. This phenomenon could be better reflected in the strategy under this theme. It should be noted that efforts are being made to establish alternative methods of measuring and identifying rural poverty and this will provide a useful evidence base for this theme.

2.6.1 Will These Outcomes have a Differential Impact on Rural Areas?

The strategy could have a differential impact on rural areas in several ways as it is applied. There is a concern that affordable housing, formal volunteering and income deprivation are all identified as primarily urban issues and will be monitored and implemented as such. This theme should take more account of rural issues for all three of these factors so that there is a balanced approach as the strategy is implemented and rural areas are properly considered in future action plans.

2.6.2 Recommendation

Additions or amendments should be made to this section to better reflect the issues and concerns of rural communities for the issues that the group have identified. Actions should be considered which recognise the difficulties of applying this theme to rural areas and of the importance of rural communities developing intra-community and innovative solutions to these issues. The importance of parish councils in this process and as a consultee for the planning process could also be acknowledged in this section.

3 Cross Cutting Themes and Other Issues

The cross cutting themes were briefly considered by the group and whether all of the priority outcomes in the strategy reflected the ground-level views of rural communities.

3.1 Tackling Environmental Challenges like Climate Change and Flooding

This is an issue that is considered important for all of Worcestershire but especially rural areas. This issue is also frequently identified as a priority by the rural population. There should also be mention of how floodwater can be better managed and utilised as an economic benefit.

3.2 Community Engagement

This is essential for sustainable communities and for quality of life in rural areas. It would be of great benefit to further acknowledge the role of local governance and parish plans as means of empowering local people in rural communities.

3.3 Community Cohesion

This is also essential for sustainable rural communities particularly as the diversity of the rural population increases as, for example, migrant workers may

continue to settle in rural areas. The strategy should reflect how rural communities would be supported to achieve social cohesion. Consideration should be given to how community cohesion can better link with the individual theme blocks as a cross cutting theme.

3.4 Transport

There is a glaring omission of transport and of public transport within the strategy. This is an extremely important issue for the rural population to support the wider issue of access to services, employment, training, leisure activities and information. There should be outcomes or actions reflecting this particularly the inaccessibility of services. For rural areas, there could be mention of rural access to service initiatives or the importance of community transport schemes as a means of bridging the accessibility gap.

3.5 Rural Disadvantage

Deprivation is not only an urban issue. As discussed, traditional measures of deprivation do not accurately reflect poverty or quality of life problems in rural areas. Therefore, it is recommended that rural disadvantage is given prominence in the strategy to reflect this and the strategy should discuss specific actions and support which are ongoing and can combat rural disadvantage. In the geographical focus section, the strategy only specifically identifies urban areas. This is unwise, as the rural population will feel ignored by the strategy. It the strategy should include an all encompassing objective to address rural disadvantage – as well as opportunities – in the geographical focus section.

4 Sustainable Community Strategy Checklist

The group considered relevant questions from the guidance published by the Countryside Agency in 2002 to assess whether the objectives within the Sustainable Community Strategy for Worcestershire and the wider activities of the Local Strategic Partnership take into account rural needs and circumstances. The questions and the group's views are shown below although the group cannot claim to have knowledge of all LSP and partner activities and so a number of answers are considered speculative.

i) Two tier working

Will the LSP deliver objectives across two tier authority areas?

The SCS will deliver across two tier authority areas. The SCS would benefit from greater clarity on how actions are implemented and the role of District LSPs in implementation.

ii) Links with other strategies

Are links being made with other strategies which are particularly relevant to meeting rural needs?

A large appendix of key plans and strategies are provided in an appendix to evidence that links are being made with other strategies. The SCS would benefit from greater integration with rural strategies particularly the emerging strategies provided by the regional Rural Evidence Base provided by Advantage West

Midlands. Links could also be made with the emerging Rural Development Programme for England. Further links could be made with local transport plans given the lack of emphasis on transport in the strategy. All of this would enable a greater rural focus.

iii) Dispersed communities

Does the SCS have a strategy for consulting rural communities and minority groups within these communities?

No strategy for consulting rural communities is included as evidence although arguably this is implicit as part of the District LSP and Parish Planning processes. The outcomes in the strategy have been influenced by a wide range of information, including residents' views from Citizens' Panel and other surveys, it does therefore take into account views and needs of rural communities and minority groups.

iv) Community capacity

Have you considered what skills and resources communities may need to engage in the consultation process?

As there has been no promotion of the public consultation for the strategy, due to the fact that it is a refresh, rather than a fundamental review, it would appear there have been few resources available for engaging rural communities in the SCS process.

v) Information points

Has the LSP considered how it is going to inform rural communities about the SCS? Does the policy rely on communicating information to clients?

There is no specific way that is apparent for the SCS to communicate with rural communities. This communication could be achieved through partners, which would be appropriate, but again this is an issue the LSP could consider and whether direct communication with rural communities is appropriate.

vi) Services

Will people in rural areas have equitable access to services? Will the policy affect the availability of public and private services? Does the policy rely on infrastructure (e.g. broadband ICT, main roads, utilities) for delivery?

The strategy should clearly address all of these issues and it is apparent that equitable access to services (where this is possible) has only been intermittently picked up through the SCS. The SCS does rely on infrastructure and this is why transport should have greater prominence as an issue in the SCS particularly for the benefit of rural communities where access to services is a priority issue.

vii) Social exclusion

Does the LSP have a strategy for reaching socially excluded groups and individuals in rural areas? Is the policy to be targeted at the disadvantaged?

The LSP does not articulate how it reaches socially excluded groups in rural areas in the SCS. The activities and objectives of the Rural Regeneration Zone, Rural Housing Enabler, Rural Action Plan and Rural Development Programme for England could be referenced if the LSP believes it is appropriate to include this information in the SCS. There is certainly enough activity that addresses rural social exclusion and this will not be communicated unless articulated in the SCS.

viii) Travel

Does the SCS consider the travel requirements for access to and from rural areas? Will the policy affect travel needs or the ease and cost of travel?

The SCS does not do this and this is a clear gap in the strategy that should be addressed. This has been identified a number of times throughout this report.

ix) Small firm economy

Will the vision address the needs of rural businesses? Will the policy impact on rural businesses, including the self-employed? Will the policy have a particular impact on land-based industries and, therefore, on rural economies and environments? Will the policy affect those on low wages or in part-time or seasonal employment?

The SCS, its actions and its overall vision are not balanced to reflect rural businesses and the rural economy. Again, this is a clear issue that has been identified by this group and should be better addressed within the SCS.

x) Location of development

Is there a vision for sustainable development in the countryside? Does the policy depend on new buildings or development sites?

This is considered to be outside the scope of the SCS although it is appropriate to consider as a partnership as other agencies may do this. The Partnership's position on the sustainable development of the county is adequately addressed in the section that discusses the Regional Spatial Strategy and its impact on Worcestershire.

x) Countryside quality and amenity

Does the SCS take account of local character and distinctiveness?

The SCS does take this into account of this through the story of place and the outcomes and actions appear to appropriately support this objective.

xi) Countryside on the doorstep

Does the SCS provide a framework for the planning, design and management of open green space and the countryside around towns?

The SCS does reference the countryside and discuss the planning process at some length. This is probably appropriate for the purposes of the SCS and detail should be provided in other plans that are referenced.

xii) Impact of strategy

Is the SCS monitoring methodology detailed enough to determine the effects of implementation in different geographical areas?

The LAA is identified as the main delivery mechanism of the SCS. However, there are no specific rural outcomes within the LAA so this will not be a useful tool for measuring the implementation of the SCS on our rural areas. It should be clear to all from the SCS how non-LAA outcomes identified in the SCS are monitored and reviewed over time so that the strategy is properly implemented as it is agreed. This group would like to establish how rural outcomes and perspectives within the SCS will firstly be implemented and secondly be monitored. This is catered to an extent by partner activities and so these should be drawn together to ensure the SCS achieves the actions that have been identified.

5 Recommendations

This rural proofing exercise has identified a number of outcomes, actions and issues in the Sustainable Community Strategy, which will have a differential impact on our rural areas. This should be acknowledged in the strategy so that these rural perspectives are taken into account especially as the strategy is fed into theme action plans and the plans of all partners. This exercise has highlighted a number of issues, which we recommend are incorporated into the strategy as it is re-drafted through either minor amendments or the inclusion of additional evidence or new actions. The group would request that these recommendations are considered and the outcomes of this exercise are fed back to the group. We recommend that the findings of this exercise are distributed to the Worcestershire Partnership Management Group and theme leads for their consideration.

The group would also recommend that the LSP consider whether it is appropriate for a mechanism to measure implementation of the SCS and wider LSP activities on our rural areas. How this is monitored, reviewed or reported on should be considered by the LSP and the decision fed back to this group. There is a consensus within the group that a mechanism should be implemented to ensure that the implications of all strategies and activities on our rural areas are given due consideration.

Appendix One: Rural Proofing Exercise 2008 Participants

Richard Quallington – Community First
Aamir Kayani – Worcestershire County Council
Joe Pooler – Worcestershire County Council
Jennifer Springer – Worcestershire Partnership
Cherrie Mansfield – Wychavon District Council

Appendix Two: Sources of Guidance

Local Strategic Partnership and Community Strategy rural checklist - The Countryside, Agency, May 2002

Rural Proofing - policy makers' checklist - The Countryside Agency, 2002

'How to' rural proof policies and strategies - Kendall Economic Development Associates, 2005