



West Midlands Rural Community Council Network: Social Justice for All – a West Midlands Rural Perspective

The West Midlands Rural Community Council Network draws together the four rural community councils (RCCs) that operate within the region. Each RCC is an independent charity with a broad range of member organisations, including parish councils, voluntary and community organisations and village halls. RCCs have a understanding of rural issues, born out of a long involvement with rural communities, and the Network has published 10 policy and information papers covering those issues which are of the greatest concern and interest to rural communities. This paper provides a brief summary of all of the papers, updates them and highlights ongoing major issues. Some good practice examples are included, along with information on the developing role of the network in regional structures. The topics which have been covered are:

- Transport*
- Housing*
- Voluntary sector infrastructure*
- Social enterprise*
- Village Halls
- West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum
- The changing face of support for rural communities
- Modernising rural delivery
- Including disadvantaged people
- Community planning

* An executive summary paper covering these four topics was also produced

Context

Over the last six years major changes have come about, and are continuing, in the ways in which government support is provided to rural areas in England. After decades of support delivered through the Rural Development Commission (RDC) we have seen a period of rapid change. The RDC disappeared and its role was split between the new Countryside Agency (which absorbed the Countryside Commission) and the new Regional Development Agencies (Advantage West Midlands in this region).

“Government and regional strategies and policies which say the right things are welcomed but what rural communities want is more action not more talk.”

Rural Strategic Engagement Fund 2

The Network has secured £171,002 through the Regional Strategic Engagement Fund (RSEF) to assist the partnership of rural community councils develop their engagement in regional policy and strategy development over the next 3 years.

The fund, made possible by grants of £2.072 million from AWM and other partners, is managed by RAWM with an aim to ‘provide capacity building support to regionally significant communities/ communities of interest to enable them to engage in regional policy and strategy development’.

Under the rural theme, the Network will now be in a better position to reflect the needs and views of local rural communities to those who are making decisions about strategic planning. The objectives of the Network are to increase the opportunity for consulting and listening to rural needs, develop tools for gathering issues raised locally and representing a regional picture whilst assisting local communities understand the regional agenda and feel able to influence it.

This paper is one of a series of policy papers produced by the West Midlands RCC Network covering a range of topics. For a list see reverse, for hard copies contact the Network Co-ordinator, 01684 580862 or visit www.wmrccn.org.uk to download.

An important stage in the evolution of the Government's policy framework for rural England was the publication of the Rural White Paper in November 2000, and the introduction of the package of support delivered by the Countryside Agency under the "Vital Villages" banner. This was followed by the setting up of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra); the review by Lord Haskins of the arrangements for delivering the Government's rural policies and the publication of Defra's Rural Strategy 2004. During the same period the Active Communities Unit (ACU) at the Home Office was looking at voluntary sector infrastructure arrangements and, as an adjunct to this, Defra published its own policy document on "Community Capacity Building and Voluntary Sector Infrastructure in Rural England". An infrastructure organisation is one "that plays a role in supporting, co-ordinating, representing, policymaking and/or development of local voluntary and community organisations".

Lord Haskin's report had 33 recommendations grouped under five main themes:

- To improve accountability by splitting responsibility for policy and delivery functions
- To bring delivery closer to the customer by devolving greater responsibility to regional and local organisations
- To develop a more integrated approach by rationalising agencies with overlapping

agendas into a new agency for sustainable land management (this will be Natural England)

- To improve the co-ordination of delivery by enhancing the role of Government Offices for the Regions as co-ordinators and monitors
- To make things better for the customer and get greater value for money for the taxpayer through a more integrated approach to regulation and through simpler services.

Rural Strategy 2004 set out three priorities for rural policy:

- Economic and Social Regeneration – supporting enterprise across rural England but targeting greater resources at areas of greatest need
- Social Justice for All – tackling rural social exclusion wherever it occurs and providing access to services and opportunities for all rural people
- Enhancing the Value of our Countryside – protecting the natural environment for this and future generations.

Included in "Community Capacity Building and Voluntary Sector Infrastructure in Rural England" vision were:

- Effective networking and co-ordination of "frontline" community development, volunteer support and expert advisor staff
- Consistency of community support throughout each county

- Protocols and service level agreements between Voluntary and Community Sector VCS and local authorities that would clarify roles, delivery responsibilities and possible funding support
- Common training and learning provision
- Co-ordinated small grant provision with consideration of a common gateway.

What has happened?

The Countryside Agency is being abolished, with many of its functions being transferred to the new Natural England (along with English Nature, and Defra's Rural Development Service). At a national level the Countryside Agency has been refocused as the Commission for Rural Communities which provides expert advice to Government and advocacy on behalf of rural people. Work relating to socio-economic needs, including transport and access to services, has been transferred to Advantage West Midlands (AWM) from the Countryside Agency. Funding for the rural voluntary and community sector is being channelled via Government Regional Offices which are also brokering a framework for co-ordinated delivery – The Rural Delivery Framework. The England Rural Affairs Forum has been abolished but the Regional Rural Affairs Forum is taking on a bigger role and has more direct contact with Ministers.

The ACU and Defra made money available to County consortia of voluntary and community organisations for Infrastructure Investment Plans over a two year period to March 2006. This has resulted in Rural Community Councils, Councils of Voluntary Service and other organisations working more closely together and developing joint initiatives.

Transport has been a high profile issue for government in recent years. Issues of social inclusion, particular



Rural Affairs Forum

RURAL BUS GRANT

| Local Authority | 2005/06 allocation £ | 2006/07 allocation £ |
|--------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Herefordshire | 832,552 | 855,022 |
| Shropshire | 1,006,092 | 1,031,590 |
| Staffordshire | 1,292,490 | 1,324,192 |
| Stoke-on-Trent | 8,663 | 8,875 |
| Telford and Wrekin | 121,475 | 124,455 |
| Warwickshire | 969,986 | 993,778 |
| West Midlands | 148,550 | 152,193 |
| Worcestershire | 1,079,014 | 1,105,481 |
| Total | 5,461,622 | 5,595,586 |

problems for rural communities, pollution, climate change and safety have all been clearly recognised and acted upon. Research by the Countryside Agency found that transport is the single most important concern of people living in rural areas.

Central Government has increased its support for rural bus operations over the last eight years and Rural Bus Grant allocations for the last two years for authorities in the West Midlands are shown above.

Rural bus services also benefited from the Rural Bus Challenge scheme (West Midlands authorities received over £1.8 million in 2000 alone) and the Countryside Agency administered Rural Transport Partnership (RTP) and Parish Transport Grant funds. However these schemes are no longer in operation. Whilst Rural Bus Grant allocations have continued to increase they have been at a slower rate (just over 10% in the last four years compared to nearly 17% in the previous three years). Against a background of rising costs and the loss of other funding this has led to local authorities withdrawing support from some services.

AWM appointed consultants in 2005 to consider what action they should take in relation to the transport and access to services responsibilities inherited from the Countryside Agency. As a result AWM decided to provide support to a region wide Wheels to Work project and to six Rural Access Partnerships. This will provide a complete coverage of the region but there will not be direct support to individual transport

delivery projects. The new Partnerships are expected to be involved in bringing services to people and delivering through ITC as well as transport solutions.

RCCs in the West Midlands have been involved in transport innovation work for many years including establishing the first dial-a-ride minibus services in Shropshire and in inaugurating the Wheels to Work concept including implementing the pioneering scheme in Herefordshire and Shropshire. RCCs have supported, and in some cases managed the successful Rural Transport Partnerships. Many innovative schemes have been implemented by RTPs such as;

- *Gnosall Ruralink Staffordshire A community based transport initiative funded through Rural Bus Challenge (RBC) and contributions from Arriva Midlands North. Two six seater passenger vehicles operate a fixed route (Mon – Sat) between the villages in the Gnosall area, with connections with the Ruraline 481 that operates between Stafford and Newport/Telford. When the local service does not operate the vehicles are available for community groups. The scheme has resulted in improved access for the community to employment, education, health services, shopping, leisure and social activities.*

Significant progress has been made in finding transport solutions in rural areas and this impetus needs to be maintained through continuing innovation, spread of good practice, mainstreaming of successful schemes and continuing support through facilitation, advice and funding. Flexible and demand responsive services need to be expanded; much still needs to be done on integrating services both within and across modes and the needs of pedestrians and cyclists require continued attention. An opportunity has been missed in not making the new free concessionary fares scheme at least county wide. The advent of the Community Railways Strategy is welcome but the easier system for closing railway lines included in the Railways Act 2005 has set alarm bells ringing.

Housing, and in particular the provision of affordable housing, ranks as one of the most important issues in rural areas. Dramatic rises in house prices have taken place over the last thirty years in many parts of rural England. Government policy has continued to promote home ownership and the “right to buy” scheme for council house tenants. Many council houses have been transferred to housing associations but there has not been a programme of investment proportionate to the loss of rented property and the need for affordable housing. Although there are indications of a reduction in the number of people sleeping rough, homelessness still remains an issue in many rural areas and is often hidden from view.

The Regional Housing Strategy envisages a reversal of the pattern of decentralisation from the major urban areas of the region which has gone on for many decades. The Strategy points out that rural areas in the West Midlands do “not exhibit a homogenous set of issues”. Low demand exists in North Staffordshire in contrast to the high demand and high affordability problems elsewhere.

The Strategy does not quantify the level of need for affordable housing in rural areas, but for the region as a whole says that between 2002 and 2021 78,000 dwellings (of which 47,000 should be for rent) are required. This equates to 6000 – 6500 dwellings per year and the rate of provision has fallen far short of this. Not only is there a major mismatch between the need for affordable housing and the supply but in many areas housing has become less affordable to local people as price rises have outpaced wage rises. For example in 2004 in Malvern Hills District the gross annual income needed to raise a 95% mortgage for the average priced house was £60,991 compared to average annual earnings of £26,221.

Various means have been used to make affordable housing available in rural areas. The Social Housing Grant from the Housing Corporation supports the provision of houses to rent. The use of Section 106 agreements under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 enables planning authorities to require that a proportion of the housing on each site should be affordable. The Exceptions Sites planning policy, which allows affordable housing to be built on sites outside of normal planning policies, also helps. Changes to the latter are currently being

proposed by Government that would allow financial contributions in lieu of on site provision. Whilst this could be beneficial, there is a risk that rural sites might lose out. The Government is also consulting on the introduction of a “Planning Gain Supplement” which would be a levy on the increased value of land arising from planning consent. This could be used to fund more affordable housing. “Sustainable Communities – Homes for All” published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister included the concept of the £60,000 house. At the time of writing the Government’s Affordable Rural Housing Commission was sitting and figures on the scale of need were awaited from the investigations carried out by the Commission for Rural Communities.

Two Rural Housing Enablers are line managed within RCCS and funding has been provided by the Countryside Agency, the Housing Corporation and local partners.

The Worcestershire Rural Housing Enabler (RHE) plays a vital role in the delivery of affordable housing and has developed an essential network between the different stakeholders including Parish Councils, local authorities, landowners, developers, Housing Associations and many others.

Over the last five year period the RHE has carried out over fifty Parish Housing Needs Surveys with the support of Parish Councils and community groups. In many of the parishes project groups were set up so that local communities could be closely involved in the identification of suitable sites and in the development of the housing scheme. Nine rural schemes have been completed with a further twelve rural schemes being developed in the current year. All of these schemes will contribute towards the long term sustainability of these rural communities.

The knowledge and understanding of grass roots issues allows the RHE to make much wider contributions to the development of policy and strategy at both a local, regional and national level. He plays a key role in many of the regional and sub regional partnerships, representing the views of the voluntary sector and rural communities.

This work has been recognised in the Rural Research carried out on behalf of the Regional Rural Housing Network by Land Use Consultants and Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research. They have recommended that the RHE role be expanded to other rural areas of the region.



Low energy housing by South Shropshire Housing Association, Craven Arms

Although there has been much activity and useful initiatives relating to affordable housing there remains the fundamental issue of inadequate resources compared to the need, which in many areas continues to be exacerbated by the continuing rise in house prices. The price of land remains a problem and increasing housing supply overall will not necessarily make it easier for less affluent households to secure decent housing. There is an urgent need for the provision of rented housing as well as for more housing affordable by first time buyers.

Including disadvantaged people

The term **disadvantage** is capable of wide interpretation. People experiencing disadvantage may include black people, women, people with disabilities, lesbians and gay men, older and younger people, people with HIV and AIDS, and working class people among others. Not everyone who may be seen as belonging to one of these groups will define themselves as disadvantaged and it is patronising and potentially discriminatory to assume that any individual should be defined by others because they are perceived as having characteristics which are usually shared by members of a particular group.

Social inclusion Disadvantage is at the centre of the concept of **Social inclusion**. The concept was summarised by the Deputy Prime Minister in the "Inclusion" Newsletter, Autumn 2002 as; "about creating thriving, inclusive and sustainable communities which meet everyone's needs, no matter where they live or who they are."

Social exclusion includes poverty and low income, but is broader and addresses some of the wider causes and consequences of poverty. The Government has defined social exclusion as; "a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown."

Equality of opportunity is based on the idea that, in order to enable disadvantaged groups to achieve a more equitable share of power and resources, organisations and society need rules of behaviour to create a more level playing field and thus allow access for marginalised and less powerful people. It assumes that everybody can achieve their full potential as long as they are given the same starting point.

Hard to reach groups. include a substantial number of people who are



Wheels to Work

not involved in the processes of local consultation, politics or community engagement. The term "hard to reach" is frequently used to describe such people. An alternative view strongly endorsed by the Standing Conference on Community Development in September 2002 is that there are no "hard to reach groups"; only inappropriate means of doing so.

Rural social exclusion is different from that in conurbations since disadvantaged people are likely to live in greater isolation, both geographically and socially, than their urban counterparts. In analysing rural social exclusion official statistics suffer from several defects.

- Many are based on ward-level analysis, which precludes consideration of the smaller-scale incidence of discrimination or social exclusion which characterises much rural experience
- There is a strong likelihood that many people living in rural communities do not report harassment or discrimination and do not take up entitlements to benefits or support. There is therefore probably under-

representation of claimants in the statistics

- Some of the indicators used in the statistics are inappropriate to rural contexts. For example, the level of car ownership used as one measure of deprivation or exclusion fails to recognise that rural people will prioritise car ownership more highly than in an urban environment, regardless of income.

One of the projects facilitated by the Community Development Worker in Staffordshire was a piece of work involving the production, distribution and promotion of an audiocassette tape for older people in isolated rural areas to raise awareness about bogus callers and how to avoid becoming the victim of a distraction burglary. This was intended to improve people's quality of life by instilling safety messages to those most at risk. Children and young people were involved in the process to make the message more personal and fun by having the message interspersed with Christmas carols. The tapes reached in excess of 3000 people and more people were reached by word of mouth through the children.

There are important aspects of working with all people and groups, which should be considered well before any work is started. Where a group is not engaged with the mainstream, these aspects assume an even greater significance. These include questions about both context and process of the work. Consideration of these, examples of how the voluntary and community sector can operate more inclusively and tools and practical solutions are set out in the main paper.

Village halls have been the centre point of rural community activity for over 100 years and with the decline in village schools, shops, post offices etc are now, in some villages, the last place where communities meet and interact. Many village halls are owned and run by 'the local community' and their management committees and facilities have often been the breeding ground for many village activities and projects. The uniqueness of village halls is recognised by many statutory agencies and voluntary groups and there are examples across the region of the buildings being used as locations for statutory and other service delivery programmes. The term "**Community Building**" is synonymous with village halls but

also incorporates other meeting places in local communities such as Church Halls, parish rooms, and community association buildings.

AWM funded the Network to undertake an audit of Community Buildings and Village Halls in the rural areas of the region. At the end of June 2003 all the information collected was fed into a local database, which was then connected across the region and is hosted on the West Midlands Rural Community Council (WMRCC) Network website. The rural areas of the region have 789 village halls and community buildings. Of these 665 responded to the questionnaires and their details are included in the database. It is the Network's intention is to add to and continually update the database over time.

Village Halls are the primary community meeting places that are open to everyone in the community without distinction of age, sex, religion, politics or ethnicity. Community buildings can also fulfil this function, however, some community buildings may only be available to a particular 'section' of the community, such as churchgoers.

The management of the village hall or community building is vested in a management committee. They have

to deal with all the issues that come with running an open access 'public' building. These are varied and can be complex, leading to a need for voluntary committees to be well trained, informed and skilled.

The recent moves to ensure that village halls become community resource centres for business activities as well as the recreational and leisure facilities that they were originally set up to provide are welcomed as they ensure that a hall is viable and well utilised by the community. However it should not be forgotten that these vitally important buildings are run by volunteers. With increased usage comes increased responsibility, and many voluntary management committees find their task of running the hall increasingly difficult.

Within RCCS in the West Midlands there are trained Village Halls Advisers who aim to lead their village halls through the quagmire of legislation and regulation, advising them on running halls efficiently as an asset for their local community.

Funding to maintain or develop the fabric of buildings is a key issue. There is a wide range of activities that take place in village halls, however the ability of halls to offer multiple activities running concurrently is severely limited by the fact that over 75% of halls only have one room in which to hold the activities. A small but growing number of buildings are being used for the provision of statutory services, but the general lack of good facilities (with accessible facilities, heating, etc.) may prevent this development becoming universal.

The Network recommends that action be taken by funders, statutory authorities and RCCs to ensure that village halls and community buildings can take their rightful place at the heart of the community and continue to do so in the future. Funders are encouraged to establish rural community buildings funds, dedicated to the support and improvement of village halls across



the region. Funders and statutory authorities should work with management committees to develop the provision of services in village halls, whilst recognising the need to secure resources for improvements to the fabric of buildings. RCCs should secure resources for a programme of training for Village Hall Management Committees to increase skills to enable them to adapt to change.

There is no **single definition** for the term 'social enterprise'. For the purposes of this paper we will be using the Department for Trade & Industry (DTI) definition: "A social enterprise is a business with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners." "There is no single legal model for social enterprise. They include companies limited by guarantee, industrial and provident societies, and companies limited by shares; some organisations are unincorporated and others are registered charities." The Charities Bill currently before Parliament includes provision for a new type of "Community Interest Company".

In March 2004 AWM published a paper "A Point to Prove: A Social Enterprise Framework for the West Midlands". This says "social enterprise in a rural setting meets many different needs and has tended to develop along different lines from urban-based organisations – and consequently has some distinctively different support requirements. Currently there are relatively few social enterprises in rural areas, but evidence suggests there is a significant latent demand, not least contained in endeavours to achieve a rural renaissance. The vibrancy of the voluntary sector is a main driving force behind the potential for social enterprise in the region's rural areas. The West Midlands Social Economic Partnership (WMSEP) research indicates that, in the rural context,



North Shropshire Community Transport

social enterprises can provide essential 'local' jobs that serve to retain young people as well as addressing some of the existing transport problems".

Defra has recognised the potential of social enterprise in rural areas and Alun Michael, the former Rural Affairs Minister, said "there is increasing evidence that the social enterprise sector is particularly suited to addressing the needs of rural areas. In particular, when distance, isolation and poor access to jobs and services compound the problems of disadvantaged people scattered widely across rural areas, social enterprises can make very positive changes".

In March 2005 the Countryside Agency published an evaluation report on the four Pheonix Development funded projects. One of the projects supported was Voluntary Action Cumbria's (the Rural Community Council) "Enterprising Communities" project and the lessons learned through the evaluation were that "one-to-one support is essential for fledgling social enterprises, as there is a 'double bottom line' of financial viability and satisfying the social goals of the founders. Rural business is expensive to support, because of the distances travelled and the additional support needs of

isolated people who can lack other support networks that are available to people living in urban areas".

Community First commissioned a report published in February 2004 on "Unlocking Enterprise – Infrastructure support for Social Enterprise in Herefordshire and Worcestershire". This envisaged the development of a strategy for social enterprise development and support across the two counties.

Partners for Social Enterprise is delivering a £66,000 social enterprise development programme on behalf of Herefordshire's and Worcestershire's Voluntary Sector Infrastructure Consortia. Through the ChangeUP investment the Partnership is delivering:

- *grassroots awareness raising events*
- *training and skills development for community development workers*
- *a website, with a directory of social enterprises and a route map of support*
- *a two-county social enterprise conference*
- *research into how the public sector does business with social enterprises.*

During the six years to March 2005 the RCCs in Worcestershire and Warwickshire supported "Vital Villages"; a Single Regeneration Budget funded programme to revitalise small village economic and social life. There was a particular focus on village shops which were supported as either fully commercial or as community based social enterprises.

Social enterprise can bring real benefits to rural communities but currently there is a lack of comprehensive knowledge about them in the region and a shortage of appropriate support. The support needs of community enterprises include the fact that they:

- *are likely to require a high level of on-going support and handholding*
- *are not likely to have a conventional business approach*
- *will have multiple aims, both commercial and social*
- *will vary significantly in the type of enterprise and in their different circumstances*
- *may still need some subsidy, for example in the form of a soft loan or start up grant.*

The WMRCC network is well placed to take a lead in rural areas on developing business support for social enterprise, with its strong tradition of working in the sector and providing organisational development and business support. 'Success is often underpinned by being able to learn from each other and to access specialist expertise and support in their locality.'

Community-based planning is a means for local people living within a defined geographical area to identify the needs and issues facing that community and to draw up an action plan for the future.

Community-based planning is not a new concept, as evidenced by the number of **parish surveys** and **village appraisals** that have been undertaken over the years. However

the nature and impact of community-based planning has become much more significant in recent years as a direct result of the launch of the Countryside Agency's **Parish Planning Initiative** and the introduction of Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and their responsibility to produce Community Strategies.

There was a CA funding stream specifically targeted at resourcing the process of undertaking a Parish Plan. Like village appraisals, Parish Plans are consultation exercises undertaken by local community members which aim to identify the needs and issues facing a parish. The Countryside Agency identified some key criteria/components that a Parish Plan would need to meet in order to secure funding and specified that plans must be:

- **Inclusive** – Parish Plans should reflect the views of all sections of the community and must show how they have engaged groups and individuals who do not normally take part in consultation
- **Holistic** – Parish Plans must not be focused on single issues but should cover a range of issues which are important in the parish

- **Action driven** – all Parish Plans must contain an action plan that identifies; short, medium and long term priorities for action
- **Community-led** – Parish Plans should be led by members of the local community working as a Steering Group.

The role of RCCS in the West Midlands in the development of Parish Plans has been vital in terms of both on-the-ground support for Parish Plan Steering Groups and facilitating the 'bridging' process. Their work has encompassed close support work with individual parishes; running training sessions on such topics as writing questionnaires; consultation skills; action planning; facilitating Parish Plan networking events; brokerage between local steering group members and local authority officers; assistance with questionnaire analysis, etc. The support provided is fundamental to the successful production of a Parish Plan; not least because, in order for the plan to be able to influence and shape decision making at a strategic level, the process needs to be comprehensive, robust and developed in conjunction with a host of external partners all wrestling with their own strategic plans and policies.



In late 2003 The Community Council of Shropshire (CCS) established the Shropshire Neighbourhood & Parish Plan (SNAPP) Group. Membership of the group consists of the 6 local authority (county & district / borough) nominated Parish Plan single points of contact, Shropshire Association of Local Councils, a representative from the Shropshire Partnership team, Primary Care Trust, Learning Skills Council, Jobcentre Plus, Defra and CCS. The purpose of this group is to oversee the delivery of the agreement entitled 'Putting the Community into Community Strategies.'

Parish planning is widely regarded as a successful and productive initiative. However it is important that:

- *At a parish level there is an on going commitment to working to implement and review the plan*
- *The parish council is included in this commitment*
- *Principal councils and other bodies are willing to take parish plans on board and play their part in implementing them*
- *Financial support continues to be provided to allow for the ongoing support and facilitation of plans through community development officers*
- *There are vigorous attempts to maximise engagement across communities. Social inclusion implies the involvement of all sections of diverse communities in the processes of local consultation, politics and community engagement*
- *The important contribution that parish planning can make to the identification of local housing need is recognised and supported in the new planning process.*

The **West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum (WMRAF)** grew out of the Rural Network as a result of the Rural White Paper of 2000's commitment to establish regional "sounding boards". It has added to its membership and revised its method of working as a



Bishops Frome village hall

result of Rural Strategy 2004. The purpose of WMRAF is to "act as a sounding board for rural practitioners and delivery agencies; reflect the needs and aspirations of rural people; provide direction, leadership and co-ordination in respect of the rural agenda; be a conduit for rural views and present the West Midlands perspective on the national, regional and sub-regional rural agenda". The role and responsibilities of the Forum include;

- working with the Regional Assembly, the Regional Development Agency, Central Government, Government Office for the West Midlands, Local Government, the Commission for Rural Communities, rural customers, delivery agencies, businesses and other regional and sub-regional bodies on the integration of the rural dimension in strategies and action plans
- supporting, reviewing and monitoring progress in implementing the Rural Strategy 2004 and other key regional strategies to ensure that they address the needs of the end-customer.

The Forum has 40 members who represent sectors which cover;

- Countryside, Environment and Recreation
- Rural Economy and Employment

- Rural Communities and Services including the Voluntary Sector
- Central Government Bodies
- Regional Bodies (not represented in other sectors)
- Local Government
- Sub-regional partnerships.

Task Groups are appointed to deal with particular issues and at the time of writing there were group dealing with Transport, Cross-Border Issues (with Wales) and the Rural Sustainable Development Framework.

The Forum itself holds four meetings a year which are rotated around the region as well as at the Government Office in Birmingham. Meetings are open to observers as well as members and there is a system of alternate members.

Regional Rural Delivery Framework

This framework has been under development over the past year working through the Rural Accord grouping of regional bodies. A consultation was launched at the Rural Affairs Forum conference held in November 2005 and the information in this section is based on that consultation document. The Framework is set out under three strands and six priorities:

Environment Strand

Priority 1 Enhancing the value of our countryside

Economic Strand

Priority 2 Developing a diverse and dynamic business base

Priority 3 Learning and skills improved

Priority 4 Creating the conditions for growth

Social Strand

Priority 5 Achieving fair access to services for all

Priority 6 Securing vibrant, active, inclusive and sustainable communities.

The Framework has a vision which states "an agreed, integrated frame of reference for rural delivery, which will guide partners and stakeholders in their activities to enhance the quality of life in the West Midlands. This will be achieved through:

- providing a strong customer voice
- co-ordinating and aligning policy
- reflecting regional strategies and feeding into them as they are reviewed
- targeting identified needs and opportunities
- continuously improving delivery which is simplified and streamlined."

The above demonstrates that there has been a great level of activity and many changes over the last six years. Such has been the state of flux that some of the changes in the organisational structure proved to be short lived. It remains to be seen whether all this will result in a better quality of life for rural people and more sustainable rural communities. A very clear issue which has arisen over the last year is whether there is an adequate champion for the social elements of rural areas to stand alongside AWM (for the economic) and Natural England (for the environmental). Also will these three strands be adequately integrated in accordance with the principles of Sustainable Development?

Network Linkages

The WMRCC Network links, through its member RCCs, to a wide range of local organisations and communities and has access through mailings to over 4000 groups and individuals. During the last five years the Network has developed closer links with regional organisations. The Network now has members on;

- The West Midlands Regional Assembly
- The West Midlands Regional Rural Affairs Forum
- The Rural Accord Rural Delivery Framework Group
- Regional Spatial Strategy Rural Renaissance Working Group
- Regional Action West Midlands.

The Network has recently participated in the steering group of AWM's Transport consultancy project and has been represented on the Regional Assembly Scrutiny Review Panel of AWM and Rural Renaissance. The Network's Policy and Research Officer chairs the Rural Affairs Forum's Transport Task Group. Links are maintained with;

- The Community Renewables Initiative operated under the auspices of the Marches Energy Agency
- The Campaign for Rural England's Regional Environment and Rural Services Group
- The Association of Community Rail Partnership's Central Stations project.

In 2004 the Network undertook a research project for the Rural Affairs Forum on their engagement with the voluntary and community sector. Amongst the recommendations arising from this were;

- *In responding to the modernising rural delivery agenda the opportunity should be taken to strengthen links between WMRAF and VCS as part of the process of ensuring that "rural customers have a clear voice into the regional prioritisation process".*
- *Action should be taken to develop electronic communication*

- *The WMRCC Network offers the potential to be a more significant conduit for increasing engagement between WMRAF and VCS but there are opportunities through other regional networks and particularly through Regional Action West Midlands.*
- *VCS members of the Forum and those with whom they are communicating within VCS need to have the capacity for meaningful engagement. This does require the provision of additional resources so that time is available.*

Progress has been made with some of these recommendations but further work remains to be done and additional resources need to be available.

Conclusions

Rural Strategy 2004 stated that "The overarching Government aim is that our rural policy should have as its outcome genuinely sustainable development. This means integrating and balancing environmental, social and economic considerations at every stage. It means providing a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come...including thriving economies and communities in rural areas and a countryside for all to enjoy. It includes tackling social exclusion – ensuring that all sections of society and all localities participate in and benefit from sustainable development. So public policies, programmes and instruments – across national, regional and local government – must apply effectively and equitably in rural areas, with a focus on raising levels of social inclusion. In addition we must ensure that our economic and social strategies are consistent with our aim of protecting and enhancing our natural heritage for this and future generations".

We would not contest this vision but the work which we carry out and the

consultations which we have had with local communities lead us to stress that

The definition of the meaning of **Social Justice** and Fairness in a rural context is a key issue.

Fair access to services implies that there should be a minimum standard of service provision.

Balanced communities is a concept that requires clear support and **affordable housing** is absolutely crucial to this.

Transport and/or local provision of services is crucial in combating social exclusion.

Parish Councils should be more proactive rather than reactive.

Parish Plans are most important as vehicles for communicating local needs, feeding into strategies and as springboards for action.

Capacity Building both within local communities and the voluntary and community sector is crucial to develop a 'culture of involvement' through which people can actively contribute to improving their local community and standard of life.

Village Halls are vital centres for the functioning of rural communities and as a potential base for the delivery of services.

Funding is of crucial importance and funding schemes need to extend over longer periods. Successful, innovative and experimental projects need to be integrated in mainstream funding.

Administrative processes need to be simpler and appreciate the micro rather than the macro scale. Rural proofing needs to be built in from the start not regarded as a "bolt on" extra.

Sustainable Development needs to give equal attention to social, environmental and economic aspects in practice as well as in theory. Climate change which involves specific challenges and opportunities for rural communities needs to be addressed and proactively managed.

The importance of integrating policies and programmes across the board is well illustrated by two statements from Land Use Consultants work in relation to the Regional Housing Strategy.

"Rural residents who have access to a car are very mobile, but those without their own means of transport are

much less able to access employment opportunities and other retail, health and education services."

"Housing provision is perhaps best seen as a means to an end as well as an end in itself. It can meet household's housing needs, but at the same time if it is also joined-up with transport, employment and social policy and programmes, it offers a wider contribution to more sustainable rural communities."

The WMRCN papers including the report on engagement between the Rural Affairs Forum and the voluntary and community sector and village halls information can be accessed at www.wmrcn.org.uk

The Rural White Paper 2000 can be found at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/ruralwp/whitepaper/default.htm>

Lord Haskins report can be found at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/ruraldelivery/report/default.htm>

"Rural Strategy 2004" can be found at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/rural/strategy/default.htm>

The Defra paper on Community Capacity Building and Voluntary Sector Infrastructure in Rural England can be found by searching at <http://www.defra.gov.uk/>

Information on the Active Communities Directorate at the Home Office can be found at <http://communities.homeoffice.gov.uk/activecomms/sup-vcs/>

Information on the Commission for Rural Communities can be found at <http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/>

Information on Advantage West Midlands can be found at <http://www.advantagewm.co.uk/>

Information on the West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum can be found at http://www.ruralnetworkwm.org.uk/wmraf/wmraf_home.htm

Information on the West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy June 2005 can be found at <http://www.wmra.gov.uk/page.asp?id=63>

Information on "Sustainable Communities – Homes for all" can be found at <http://www.odpm.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1122851>

Information on the Charities Bill can be found at <http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/spr/charbill.asp>

"A Point to Prove – a Social Enterprise Framework for the West Midlands" can be found at <http://www.advantagewm.co.uk/downloads/west-midlands-social-enterprise-framework.html>

Information on the rural Phoenix Development funded projects can be found at http://www.countryside.gov.uk/NewEnterprise/Economies/evaluation_of_phoenix_funded_schemes.asp

Information on the Warwickshire and Worcestershire Vital Villages scheme can be found at

<http://www.vitalvillages.org.uk/default.htm>

Countryside agency publications "Planning for vital communities – Good Practice in linking parish plans, market town plans and community plans"; "Parish Plans – Guidance for parish and town councils" and "Assessment of the Market Towns Initiative – a summary" can be found at

<http://www.countryside.gov.uk/publications/>

Information on the West Midlands Rural Delivery Framework can be found at

<http://ruralnet.typepad.com/wmrdf/>

Information on the Community Renewables Initiative in the West Midlands can be found at <http://www.mea.org.uk/core/index.html>

Information on the Campaign for Rural England in the West Midlands can be found at <http://www.cprewm.org.uk/>

Information on the Central Stations Project of the Association of Community Rail Partnerships can be found at <http://www.acorp.uk.com/>

Acknowledgements

Colleagues in RCCs and in particular Jonathan Hyams, Sarah Jessop, Alan Saunders, Mavis Wilkins and the authors of the original Network papers.

The West Midlands Rural Community Council Network draws together the four rural community councils (RCCs) which operate within the region. Each member RCC is an independent charitable organisation with a broad range of member organisations including parish councils, voluntary and community organisations and village halls, and has access through newsletters and mailings to over four thousand groups and individuals throughout the region. The RCCs have the common aims of promoting voluntary action and improving rural life. Across the West Midlands the RCCs have a combined turnover of over £3.75 million and employ over one hundred full time equivalent staff providing technical and professional support on issues and projects to people in local communities.

RCCs

have a considerable understanding of rural issues born out of a long involvement with rural communities. They provide a forum for voluntary and community organisations and a wide range of information and advisory services. They enjoy membership of many partnerships that encourage community development and capacity building in rural areas and that manage projects delivering benefits to rural communities. Part of the RCCs' effectiveness stems from the close relationships they have with networks including village hall committees, playing fields trusts and parish councils. Recently they have also developed relationships with regional structures, most notably through the West Midlands Regional Rural Affairs Forum, the West Midlands Rural Network, RAWM (Regional Action West Midlands - the voluntary and community sector network) and the West Midlands European Network.



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Papers available:

Regional Rural Affairs Forum
Rural Housing
Rural Transport
Voluntary Sector Infrastructure
West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum
Village Halls in the West Midlands
The changing face of support
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