

RURAL RENAISSANCE

ADVANTAGE WEST MIDLANDS'

RURAL FRAMEWORK

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PURPOSE

Rural Renaissance sets out Advantage West Midlands' integrated approach to rural development. It demonstrates our role and strategy for implementing the West Midlands Economic Strategy (WMES) in the rural West Midlands.

The document has two purposes:

- First, it explains the context and rationale for our main rural development commitments and future actions. This will help our key partners, rural decision-makers & influencers to understand our engagement with the rural agenda;
- Second, to help guide the actions of our partners in aligning their activity with the WMES and/or seeking support for rural development from the Agency.

Rural Renaissance is not a separate strategy, but explains the Agency's role in rural areas in implementing the WMES. The document highlights our principal activity which either takes place in, or impinges directly on, the economy of rural areas¹.

The document sets out the rationale for The Agency's activity for the next Corporate Planning cycle (the three years from April 2005). Whilst some elements of our activity have a much longer life span (such as the Rural Regeneration Zone, extending to over 10 years), *Rural Renaissance* will be reviewed on a 3 year basis, alongside Advantage West Midlands' Corporate Plan.

This will be an extremely important period, with the review of CAP, European Structural Funds and full implementation of the Haskins report through Defra's Modernising Rural Delivery Programme (MRD) and Defra's refreshed Rural Strategy, implementation of the region's new Regional Spatial Strategy (formerly Regional Planning Guidance), amongst other key rural initiatives. The document has been developed in consultation with the West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum (WMRAF), which the West Midlands Regional Assembly looks to as its rural policy forum. WMRAF has endorsed this Rural Renaissance Framework.

VISION

Rural Renaissance is rooted in the WMES vision:

"Within ten years, the West Midlands will be recognised as a world class region in which to invest, work, learn, visit and live and the most successful in creating wealth to the benefit of everyone who lives in the region."

Our contribution to implementing this vision in the rural West Midlands is encapsulated by the principal that all rural activity should seek to:

- ***"Achieve sustainable development in the rural West Midlands, by improving access to opportunity and the number and quality of jobs available within sustainable rural communities."***

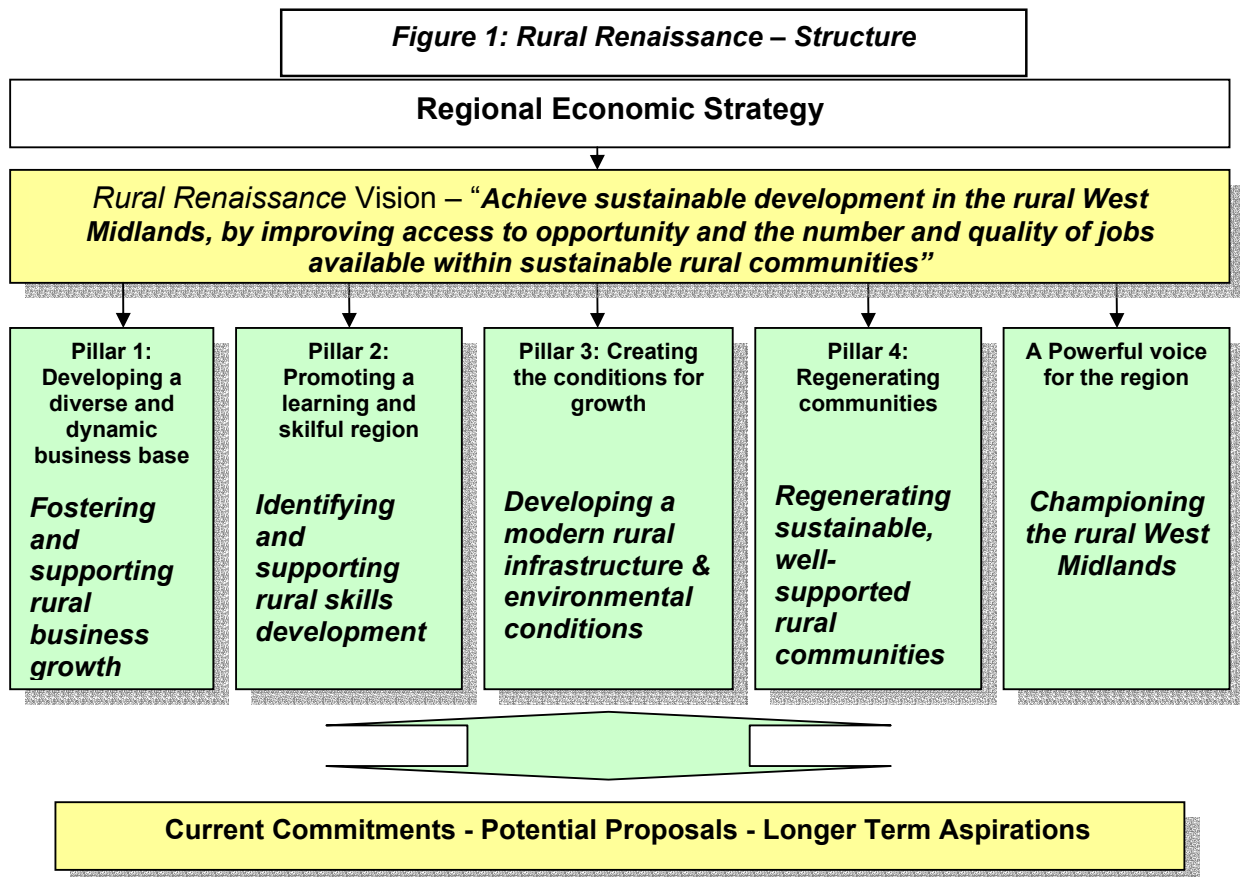
¹ For statistical purposes, we are adopting the definition of rural areas which is in most common current usage; the Tarling definition. This definition identifies the following Districts: the County of Herefordshire, North Shropshire, Oswestry, South Shropshire, Bridgnorth, Shrewsbury and Atcham, East Staffordshire, Lichfield, South Staffordshire, Staffordshire Moorlands, North Warwickshire, Stratford-on-Avon, Rugby, Warwick, Malvern Hills, Wychavon and Wyre Forest. This is likely to be replaced in the near future by Defra's new definitions, which will be adopted, once they are fully tested and widely available.

To achieve this, we will follow two principles in accordance with the approach of the WMES:

- focus regeneration on need and economic development on opportunity. Wherever possible these are brought together to the benefit of those rural parts of the region whose economic performance most lags behind the rest of the region;
- foster the development of key rural employment sectors/clusters whilst encouraging rural enterprises to modernise, diversify and collaborate to meet the challenges of the 21st century global economy”.

STRUCTURE

Within the document we have set out our activity under the same structure as the WMES, i.e. 4 Pillars and “a powerful voice”. Each of the 5 sections is introduced by a specific objective, describing our approach to rural development work. Each section then describes the challenges, responses, current commitments and actions (summarised in Figure 1). The structure is followed throughout so the logic of the document remains clear and can be traced back to the WMES in which it is rooted.



Relationship to Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) & Regional Assembly

Government has recently approved the West Midlands’ first RSS, as a successor to Regional Planning Guidance. Its rural renaissance chapter lays out the spatial and planning development

framework for our rural areas and has been developed in the light of the WMES. The RSS' overall approach is to foster sustainable local growth patterns whilst acting to counter the urban-to-rural migration patterns that appear to be undermining viability of our urban centres. This is supported by the Rural Renaissance Framework. Both the RSS and the WMES are approved by and subject to the scrutiny of the West Midlands Regional Assembly.

Delivery through Partnership & Modernising Rural Delivery (MRD)

The Agency works through others and will deliver *Rural Renaissance* through effective partnership working at regional, sub-regional and local levels. At the sub-regional level, the Agency works with existing partnerships, such as the Local Strategic Partnerships. Increasingly the Agency will be working with locally owned Economic Development Strategies to help guide its investment. In drawing regional and sub-regional strategy and delivery in this way, we are working to support our partners in their delivery of the Regional Economic Strategy. At the regional level, our principal partnership links include the West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum and the Rural Accord Group, and set out in more detail, in Section 5 "a powerful voice".

The MRD agenda is being implemented through Defra's Rural Strategy. This foresees that increasingly, the delivery of rural programmes and services will be through such partnership structures. If that is to be achieved, capacity will need to be built to ensure that delivery mechanisms are fit for purpose. We are committed to the principle and the process of MRD. Hence, we have worked in collaboration to establish this strategic approach and we will continue to work with key partners to support delivery through:

- maintaining and developing our understanding of rural economic circumstances;
- determining appropriate interventions;
- facilitating and supporting the development of responses and partnerships.

The Agency will, as a result of Defra's Rural Strategy, take responsibility for a larger part of the rural socio-economic agenda. We will work to develop approaches which implement our new responsibilities and target need most effectively, whilst delegating delivery to the most appropriate level. In doing this we will work with other regional partners who have responsibility for developing the Regional Rural Delivery Framework.

KEY DRIVERS OF RURAL RENAISSANCE

Our approach to rural renaissance is driven by an analysis of the challenges and opportunities faced by our rural areas. These challenges influence the design and prioritisation of the Agency's own projects and programmes, and also help inform all those in the region who are responsible for the delivery of current and future socio-economic & environmental programmes in the rural West Midlands. To demonstrate the linkage between our national and regional policy context and the work we do, we have derived the following key drivers through our own research and the outputs of the *Rural Renaissance* consultation process.

In supporting rural economic development and regeneration, we recognise:

- In general, relative to the regional average, the rural West Midlands has:
 - Lower unemployment
 - Higher business start up rates and levels of self employment
 - Similar, if not broader, diversity of economic activity and employment;

- However, these statistics mask the relatively low growth potential within the rural economy and the significant pockets of deprivation that exist throughout the region, particularly in the “lagging areas” (see below)
- The rural West Midlands has the following characteristics that need to be taken into account in programme design and implementation:
 - Current and future economic growth is at least as likely to come from outside the “traditional” rural sectors as from within them;
 - Sustainable rural development depends on fostering indigenous economic growth;
 - There are strong interdependencies between many sectors of the rural economy;
 - The distinctions between the region’s rural and urban economy are increasingly blurred and the region’s rural economy is at least as diverse as the urban;
 - The interconnections with neighbouring regions that drive sub-regional rural economic patterns are often stronger than connections with the conurbations;
 - The economic value of a high quality environment, both directly as a source of good quality primary produce and resources, but also indirectly as an essential ingredient of the rural tourism & inward investment offer;
 - The strategic importance of the land-based sectors in managing 80% of the region’s land, its supply chain linkages to other key rural and regional sectors and its importance in creating favourable economic and environmental outcomes for inward investment.

There are parts of the region where economic performance lags significantly². Where there is evidence of a two tier economy developing, it is characterised by:

- Higher than average dependence on relatively low Gross Value Added (GVA) of “traditional” rural sectors;
- Higher than average proportion of employment in poor value added and low wage sectors and low employment in high technology industries;
- A fragile rural economy, particularly but not exclusively in the West, due to high dependency on a few large employers, particular feature in market towns;
- A high representation of small and micro businesses in the rural economy as a whole;
- The need to foster growth through modernisation, diversification and collaboration (particularly in the primary produce sector)

IMPLEMENTING THE FRAMEWORK

The key drivers set out above will be used to test the rationale for our principal interventions. The Agency will ensure that relevant Agency Advisory Boards (e.g. the Regional Skills Partnership and the Enterprise Board), partnerships and their frameworks are informed by this document and use it to test their rural interventions. We expect the WMES key delivery mechanisms (Regeneration Zones, Clusters, Corridors) and other key initiatives, such as the Market Towns Programme, the Access to Finance Initiative to address most emerging priorities. However, there will be some issues that require distinctive rural approaches, and these are likely to include business support, access to learning and community facilities and maintaining environmental qualities and characteristics.

² Economically, the worst performing Districts are Herefordshire, S Shropshire, Oswestry, North Shropshire. Three other districts also show significantly less than average economic strength, these are: Wychavon, Staffordshire Moorlands & North Warwickshire

Rural Renaissance shows how we will meet rural needs by embedding rural dimensions in the regional development programmes and interventions established through the WMES. It is organised to show the strategic fit and connections between the WMES and our rural interventions, and is set out as follows:

- Objective – each section is headed by a specific objective;
- Themes – each objective is broken down into component themes;
- Strategy – from WMES and/or elsewhere;
- Co-ordination – the bodies and groups we see co-ordinating rural activity;
- Delivery mechanisms – where specific mechanisms exist;
- Evidence base;
- Projects.

Each of the following 5 sections is led by an objective which itself is broken down into themes. The themes demonstrate the internal logic and strategic fit of each pillar, showing the relationship between strategy, policy, co-ordination, delivery and the evidence base. Each Pillar states the Agency's role and our project level activity.

Our priority activity does not, however, meet all rural economic and socio-economic challenges equally. As the Agency embeds this Framework as a way of working, we will look to address the challenges through the existing mechanisms. However, where gaps can be identified in provision, and a role for the Agency is justified and resources allow, new approaches may need to be found.

PILLAR 1: DEVELOPING A DIVERSE AND DYNAMIC BUSINESS BASE

Objective – *To foster the sustainable development and diversification of the rural economy of the West Midlands. Working with partners to develop the business clusters with greatest potential and reach, with a particular focus in the least well performing areas of the region.*

Themes	1A - Understanding and promotion of distinctive rural business agenda	1B - Cluster development	1C - Business support
Strategy and Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Rural business growth agenda” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cluster strategies • Regional response to Strategy for Sustainable Food and Farming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enterprise Framework • Learning, Skills & knowledge Review • SBS/Business Links review
Co-ordination Bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WM Business Council • Enterprise Board 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All COGs • Other Cluster co-ordination Bodies such as Tourism West Midlands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural Business Connect Steering Group
Delivery Bodies & mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business Links • Rural Business Connect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cluster mechanisms, e.g. Food & Farming Delivery Plan & team • Business Links 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural Business Connect • Regional Centre for Tourism Business Support • Business Links • Women in Rural Enterprise (WiRE)
Evidence base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural Economy & Stepping Stones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cluster analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural business support research

Context

The overall state of the rural economy portrayed by some indicators is one of reasonable health. The largest sectors remain manufacturing, retail and business services. A less favourable climate exists, particularly in the rural west of the region, where traditional sectors are more significant. These economies are typically low waged and low value with declining, seasonal or part-time employment and an over-dependency for employment on traditional sectors and single large employers.

The needs that confront business growth throughout the region also face the rural economy, i.e.:

- To modernise and diversify key employment sectors, such as manufacturing,
- To identify and exploit new and developing high growth potential clusters; and
- To foster enterprise in local national and international markets.

However, in addressing the rural business agenda, there is a range of challenges stemming from size, sparsity & distribution and business motivation which face rural businesses and those who aim to support them. These are summarised in the next section.

The wider business growth agenda is also influenced by central government. For instance, the “Curry Report” and the subsequent Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food (SSFF) has set a series of challenges for this sector. The Agency is responding to the former through the Food and Drink Delivery Plan & Food and Farming Team (see below). Defra’s wider Rural Strategy will also help to set the Business Growth agenda.

Finally, change and the direction of change, are influenced strongly by Europe, in particular the ongoing review of the CAP and consequent changes for the modernisation and diversification of rural businesses. The new Single Farm Payment will give farmers more freedom in making diversification choices. The review of the CAP regime from 2006 onwards will accelerate change.

Summary of challenges facing rural business growth: the rural business growth agenda

Enterprises are of a smaller size than the regional average, with particularly high numbers of small to micro enterprises. Such enterprises often have low growth potential and aspirations.

Enterprises need to overcome isolation and sparsity to survive and grow

Rural business/employment sectors in the West Midlands are over-represented in the “traditional” sectors which are undergoing structural changes i.e.:

- Manufacturing, agriculture and other land based sectors
- Also, other sectors over-represented in the rural economy low GVA (Gross Value Added)
- Tourism and leisure and food and drink

These sectors are also hard to reach and vulnerable.

As a consequence of the previous points, small rural businesses face:

- relative difficulties in accessing business support or finance from public or private sectors;
- relatively high costs of business to business networking;
- difficulties in investing in training;
- relatively poor position relative to suppliers.

There are some additional issues that face the rural economy:

- Over-reliance on a few large employers;
- Over-dependence on low growth sectors and under-representation of high-tech industries (although this is changing in areas such as Malvern, where the combination of the High Technology corridor and the Malvern Hills Science Park will impact);
- Under-representation of the social economy sector;
- Farming and the associated land based activities remain at the heart of rural society, and an important focus for rural policy, whilst being less central as economic drivers.
- Traditional rural sectors of land based industries and food and drink remain important. However, employment is more likely to be sought in manufacturing, tourism, public sector, business services or retailing.
- Employers report a relative difficulty in accessing appropriately skilled labour. However, the quality of the rural employment offer is relatively poor, e.g. relatively low wage rates and high levels of seasonal/casual work.

Advantage West Midlands' Role

The Agency's approach to business growth is to encourage modernisation & diversification of the region's rural economy through cluster development. We will encourage key partnership bodies & mechanisms such as Cluster Opportunity Groups (COGs), the Enterprise Board and Enterprise Strategy to consider how they meet rural needs. All Clusters are expected to consider their

relationship with the rural agenda, although those Clusters with the greatest relevance are likely to be Food and Drink, Environmental Technology and Tourism and Leisure.

The Agency will focus its investment towards higher growth activity and maximising the benefits to rural areas of developments such as High Technology Corridors (HTC) and Malvern Hills Science Park. The Cluster role is to guide and consequently focus growth and development in the most appropriate ways and locations in the region. Clusters will also be encouraged to recognise and capitalise on changes in the region's demography, in particular, the changing needs and opportunities of the region's BME communities.

The Agency will also invest in the acquisition of sites and premises in rural areas to create opportunities for diversification, as set out in Pillar 3, particularly where this helps to improve the prospects of the worst performing areas. We will also work with partners to maximise the benefits of HTCs to their hinterlands. The Agency will also promote the opportunities offered by the provision of broadband infrastructure to rural areas (See Pillar 3).

MRD and the Agency's new responsibility for Business Links offer the opportunity to modernise rural business support, which we will take forward through the Rural Business Connect initiative. This activity aims to support entrepreneurial behaviour, already evidenced by the higher than average numbers of business start ups and self employment in rural areas.

The Agency's rural economic baseline will be maintained and augmented. We will work with partners to ensure this remains as up to date as possible.

Committed Activity

1A – Understanding and Promotion

- Completion and maintenance of rural economic reporting, including the incorporation of Countryside Agency's "Stepping Stones" work
- Engagement with WM Business Council Rural Economy Sub-Group

1B - Cluster Development

- Cluster (and related) strategies are relevant to rural areas, either through locations or supply chains, particularly Food & Drink, Environmental Technologies and Tourism & Leisure.
- Examples include:
 - o Visitor Economy Strategy – key for rural areas and particular focus through *Festivals & Events* and *Local Distinctiveness* sub-groups. This work is supported by Heart of England Tourism, the Regional Centre for Tourism Business Support and the Regional Cultural Forum
 - o The continued facilitation, co-ordination and delivery of the Food and Farming Delivery Plan (appendix 1)
 - o Building Technologies Cluster use of aggregates and design
- Support for export activity through the International Agriculture and Technology Centre (appendix 1).
- Work with DEFRA and its agencies in co-ordinating advice and prioritisation of the England Rural Development Programme

1C - Business Support

- Pan-regional business support brokerage services supplied through Business Links, including mechanisms such as the DTI's Grants for Research and Development
- Sources of specialist advice, such as the Manufacturing Advisory Service, the Food and Drink Information Centre & Farm Business Advisory Service

- Rural Regeneration Zone work to promote business opportunities in the lagging Districts, as well as driving key projects, such as Going for Growth and Enterprise Experience.

Proposals & Areas for Future Consideration

1A - Understanding and Promotion

- Development of the distinctive rural business agenda in partnership with Rural Business Connect, Business Link and WM Business Council

1B - Cluster Development

- Support for the development of business-led rural hubs
- Working with partners to develop approaches to rural innovation, particularly in the areas of:
 - Non-food crops, energy and capitalising on environmental assets
 - “Green” tourism development, e.g. capitalising on the informal recreation network;
 - Smart use and development of community facilities.
- Social Enterprise Strategy implementation
- European Network of Regions, led by IATC to support agricultural technology transfer
- Rural Regeneration Zone (RRZ) Cluster development projects, e.g. enterprise and innovation centres.

1C Business Support

- The Agency will continue to develop the Rural Business Connect model, to ensure delivery of relevant and effective business support as close to rural businesses as possible
- RRZ projects including virtual business support & networks.

PILLAR 2: PROMOTING A LEARNING AND SKILFUL REGION

Objective - Raising skills levels and improving access to skills development opportunities in rural areas, in support of the ten business clusters, through the development of a particular rural skills agenda by the appropriate lead regional skills group.

Themes	2A - Leadership	2B - Provision and access	2C - Attain appropriate skills levels
• Strategy	• FRESA • Regional Skills Partnership • <i>Regional Rural Skills agenda</i>	• LSC & learning partnership reviews	• Cluster, Zone & Corridor needs assessments • STAR reviews • Sector Skills Councils
• Co-ordination	• Rural Skills Leadership Group (RSLG)	• RSLG	• RSLG
• Delivery mechanisms and bodies	• LSK Delivery Plan • <i>Rural skills action plan</i>	• Training providers and related bodies	• Sub-regional delivery partnerships
• Evidence base	• <i>Rural skills baseline research</i>	• STAR reviews and LSC sub-regional employers' surveys	• Cluster Needs Assessments • STAR reviews and employers surveys

Context

This pillar seeks to drive the development of an appropriately skilled and adaptable workforce which attracts and supports the growth of high value jobs and wealth-creating businesses. Improved skills levels should lead to an increase in income levels across the workforce. We need to ensure everyone has the opportunity to develop relevant skills to take advantage of better job opportunities. It is important to ensure that both rural and urban communities have equivalent access to opportunity.

Rural skills needs are diverse. The rural economy is no longer dominated by traditional sectors, such as tourism, farming and food. The modern rural worker is far more likely to be entering the construction, public or service sectors. In identifying and meeting rural skills needs, strategy needs to take account of the consequent challenges.

Skills development is delivered by a range of public and private sector providers. Modern work entrants are more likely to access skills support through broad based FE and HE provision. HE access is relatively poor in the rural West of the region and possible solutions are being assessed through the HEFCE "University of the Marches" study. Work place training is more available in these areas, with higher provision and uptake of work place training in Herefordshire, Shropshire & Worcestershire.

Land-based Colleges have changed and diversified, having become both more integrated with the wider FE sector. By offering a broad-based curriculum taught in a rural context, they have established themselves as key hubs in rural diversification.

The policy context for rural skills is subject to a range of reviews and initiatives:

- Implementation of the Defra Learning, Skills and Knowledge (LSK) Review
- Transformation of LANTRA into a Sector Skills Council
- Implementation of the Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food

- Sector Strategic Area Review (StAR) for the land-based sector by the National LSC
- The potential for a Regional Sector Learning Partnership for land-based Industries
- Formation of Regional Skills Partnerships following the White Paper “21st Century Skills”
- STAR reviews for LSC provision across the region.

Summary of challenges facing rural skills development – the “rural skills agenda”

- The need to re-skill the workforce to maximise opportunities, whilst ensuring maintenance of essential skills on which the rural economy depends, e.g. ensuring the land-based work force maintains the sufficient skills levels to meet the demands of current and future developments in production technology and CAP reform;
- The need to maintain the skills and services provided by land managers to the wider economy (e.g. the link between high quality trade skills, high quality landscapes and environments supporting inward investment and tourism);
- The need for training opportunities that can be accessed by all and that meet the current and future skills needs of established, developing and new businesses, including FE & HE;
- The need to “up-skill” those with poor basic skills, low vocational qualifications and low engagement in learning;
- Improving access to learning and training both for individuals and small businesses, e.g. addressing rural transport issues;
- Possible mismatch between skills development needed by small businesses and national skills development policy, i.e. the need for accreditation;
- Skills development in rural areas is challenged by the relatively higher proportions of SME’s and micro-businesses and the self-employed. Such businesses are less likely to engage in training due to their lack of capacity and relative remoteness;
- People working in rural areas are less likely to be unemployed, but more likely to be under-employed or unpaid. Individuals commonly hold multiple employments and businesses often benefit from family efforts. Skills needs are harder to capture in these contexts.

Advantage West Midlands’ Role

The Agency’s role is to guide the region’s resources to tackle these issues, in partnership with LSCs and other partners, using the outcomes of the STAR Reviews and other evidence, along with the specific priorities identified by the clusters, corridors and the RRZ commissioning framework. The Agency will be focusing on action to establish the rural skills agenda and support improved co-ordination. We will draw down the key lessons and maximise the benefits to the region from the reviews outlined in the context section above. We will do this in close partnership with the LSCs and in line with our Regional Concordat with them.

Rural Skills Co-ordination

The Regional Skills Partnership (RSP) & Rural Skills Leadership Group and the connections between them will ensure that rural skills needs are reflected in the development of regional and sub-regional skills development activity. The objective of the RSP is to encourage a robust and vibrant economy in the West Midlands by changing the dynamic for developing a highly and appropriately skilled workforce. RSP will lead the overall direction of skills work in the West Midlands. It will drive forward work on skills across the region so that it makes a real difference to the economy and to learners in the region.

The RSP will use the Rural Skills Leadership Group (appendix 1) to “rural proof” regional skills provision. It will also need to link with sector specific groups such as tourism and leisure skills

groups. Future iterations of *Rural Renaissance* will need to capture the agenda developed by this group.

These two groups will also support development of the Framework for Regional Skills Action (FRESA). The FRESA aligns strategic direction and actions for the development of the “learning and skilful region” with the RES and RSP. It is region-wide in its application and is a key influence on rural skills development.

Committed Actions

2A – Leadership

- The development and support of a Rural Skills Leadership Group
- Research is being conducted into the overall Skills Needs of the Rural Economy (This work will identify needs and how these issues can be addressed by partners up to 2010)

2B – Provision and access

- Development of University College Worcester and Hereford Learning Village
- “Wheels to Work” and “U-Turn” rural access projects

2C – Attain appropriate skills levels

- Cluster Training Needs Assessments for the Food and Drink and Tourism and Leisure clusters has been completed (action plans will be developed to support implementation)
- Central Technology Belt training needs assessment (to support the development of a comprehensive skills strategy for this High Technology Corridor)
- Skills 4 Adults –to develop a series of integrated projects which will support delivery of adult apprenticeships in engineering & manufacturing (significant in both rural & urban contexts)
- Sustainable Development Advocacy Programme - establish a Masters level course, through Project Carrot
- Women in Rural Enterprise (WiRE) – a business networking approach, building on a pilot project established in Shropshire

Proposals & Projects under Consideration

2A - Leadership

- To maintain the evidence base on which to make informed policy decisions and interventions
- Regional implementation of Defra’s LSK delivery plan
- To establish and support the delivery of a Regional Rural Skills Action Plan to inform the development of the FRESA and the plans and programmes of LSCs and the FE/HE sector.

2B – Provision and access

- Skills Action Plan and Rural Skills Leadership Group to address provision
- Incorporate findings from LSCs and learning partnerships to examine both physical and “softer” barriers to access
- RRZ projects such as industrial estates learning zones and test bed learning communities
- To explore the establishment of a Gateway Centre to act as a high profile flagship centre for basic skills development and provision for workers from rural and urban communities engaged in agricultural employment
- Examine outcomes of recent research on the role of land based colleges to inform future support and the work of the RSLG.

- To work with land-based colleges, LSCs and the RSLG to look broadly at the future role the colleges may play in the context of wider FE and HE provision, the LSK delivery plan and long term trends
- Work with English Heritage to draw lessons from the work of the National Heritage Training Group to inform the work on provision.

2C – Attain appropriate skills levels

- The Agency aims to implement through its skills interventions, such as Skills 4 Adults and cluster related skills action plans
- Engagement in employee training pilots, led by LSCs.

PILLAR 3: CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR GROWTH

Objective – Support restructuring in the West Midlands rural economy through development of an accessible, modern, social & economic infrastructure and the environmental conditions appropriate to the growth needs of rural areas.

Theme	3A – Improving ICT, transport & other social infrastructure	3B – Delivering Good quality physical development	3C – Capitalising on our environmental assets
Strategy and Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional Transport Strategy Regional ICT Strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) Market Towns Initiative Strategy RZ Policy & RRZIP Regional Housing Strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional Cultural Strategy Regional Biodiversity Strategy Environmental Economies of the West Midlands
Co-ordination Bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional Transport Partnership Regional ICT steering group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional Planning Partnership Regional Housing Board & Rural Housing Network Market Towns Task Group RRZ Board 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional Cultural Forum West Midlands Life Environmental Economy Steering Group
Delivery Bodies & mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HIT, SoS, Local Authorities RCCs Rural Transport Partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Market Towns partnerships RRZ ZIP & Secretariat Local Authorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RRZ, AONBs Peak Park
Evidence Base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DTi/International benchmarking Study 2003 SME e-adoption report 2004 Urban-rural interdependence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Market Towns study 2000 & 2004 RRZ Prospectus 2001 Rural Housing study 2004 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Environmental Economies of the West Midlands 2004 AONB Management Plans

Context

If the region is to create conditions for growth and address barriers to economic activity in rural areas, integration of a wide range of activity is required at regional, sub-regional and local levels. For instance, rural communities and businesses depend on the provision of affordable housing, broadband and transport to maintain viability and competitiveness. However, it is the diverse and dispersed nature of rural economic activity that means that specific, often local, approaches are required to finding solutions. What works in one area will not necessarily work elsewhere.

A barrier facing the region as a whole, which specifically impinges on rural areas, is access to affordable ICT broadband infrastructure. This reduces the rural economy's ability to capture the efficiency gains from the effective use of ICT. It has an impact on communities inhibiting access to information, training and communication. Across the region local partnerships have been established to support ICT infrastructure development, such as "Switch on Shropshire" and "Herefordshire in Touch". More widely the Agency has promoted Broadband uptake through a marketing campaign and raising awareness of e-business adoption benefits. Once the broadband infrastructure is in place (likely through further Agency interventions due to be announced in October 2004), the task will be to ensure that the training and support is available to maximise the benefits to both businesses and communities.

The high quality environment of our rural areas has great potential to support local regeneration, particularly in the light of our host of natural and cultural assets, reflected by their national and international status. These include all or part of 1 World Heritage Site, 1 National Park, 5 Areas of Outstanding National Beauty, 1 Ramsar (internationally designated wetland) site, and a host of other natural and cultural designations. Supporting the work of Agencies who protect and maintain these assets is crucial, as is working with them to capture this potential.

Creating the conditions for growth requires similar interventions in rural areas to those employed in urban areas, although the delivery is likely to be different. The two mechanisms which the Agency most often uses to target rural regeneration activity are the Rural Regeneration Zone and the Market Towns Initiative. The Agency also supports a network of business led rural hubs and fora to develop the collaboration and information sharing that is necessary to foster sustainable growth.

Summary of the Challenges facing rural infrastructure development

- Develop and promote ways to capitalise on the region's high quality environmental assets for economic development and regeneration
- Ensuring appropriate development of suitable redundant sites and buildings that become available (particularly including those developed in the last 50 years)
- The lack of investment-ready strategic investment sites and the barriers to their development
- The lack of private sector investment in the market for workspace provision
- The lack of significant inward investment in those areas that are experiencing the greatest economic challenges
- Meeting the need for accessible and appropriate rural transport solutions
- Meeting the need for accessible and appropriate health, social care and related provision
- Increasing the provision and use of affordable broadband to rural communities and businesses
- Ensuring the availability of affordable housing that is appropriate to the needs of all of the local population

Advantage West Midlands' Role

ICT infrastructure is a key issue for the future competitiveness of the region. The Agency will focus on securing widespread access to broadband to open up new opportunities for businesses and people across the region, particularly in rural areas.

Advantage West Midlands will focus its resources on investment in locations, sites and premises to meet the needs of rural enterprise and community regeneration, in line with the Regional Spatial Strategy. We will aim to achieve the appropriate reuse of brownfield land and the creation of employment and related opportunity to achieve renaissance of the rural economy. In particular, we will focus our resources where communities are under greatest threat from economic change and deprivation and disadvantage are most acute, such as the Rural Regeneration Zone and the Market Towns. We will assemble major strategic sites to support inward investment, applying the principles of the "Design Framework for Urban Renaissance" in new-build and re-developments.

We also recognise that there are a number of other key settlements in the region experiencing substantial economic difficulties which justify our input and involvement. Over the 3 year period of the 2005 -08 Corporate Plan, The Agency proposes to begin to address issues in those settlements that serve a substantial rural hinterland. Our initial emphasis will be on Hereford and in particular the development plans for the northern part of that City.

Where possible, we will work with partners to ensure mixed use developments that meet social/community and health needs. Our approach to influencing infrastructure development will

be informed by the outcomes of our urban-rural interdependence work. We will ensure that economic and social development of rural areas is given appropriate prominence through our monitoring of plans and development.

The Agency will support the development of housing policy through the Rural Housing Network and Regional Housing Board, in line with its new role in the planning system.

The Agency will facilitate the Environmental Economy project supported by regional partners (appendix 1). This requires work at all levels from local to national, to promote opportunities and overcome barriers.

The Agency will take responsibility for developments that help build the West Midlands into a world class region. Hence we will maximise opportunities such as that presented at Stoneleigh Park to build the national and international profile of the region's iconic sites to the benefit of the region.

Committed Actions

3A – Improving ICT, transport & other social infrastructure

- Action to improve access to the West Midlands ICT broadband infrastructure has a strong rural focus especially in the Western part of the region. The Agency supports:
 - **Rural Broadband Access Project** - will provide Broadband access to those parts of the region where the market cannot, thereby delivering full coverage through BT exchanges. Support will also be available to businesses who cannot gain access via the telephone network, where wireless and satellite are the only possible solutions.
 - Switch on Shropshire and Herefordshire in Touch
- Support the development of a network of business led hubs and fora as the basis for sub-regional and local information sharing, mechanisms for the transfer of knowledge, ideas and the basis for "spinning out" projects and encouraging collaboration.

3B – Delivering good quality physical development

- The development of sites for sustainable mixed use schemes in support of Pillar 4 interventions, including employment use and affordable housing e.g., Wem and Craven Arms
- Ensuring the availability of good quality employment land in sustainable locations, including investment sites, incubator and grow-on space for Cluster development, e.g. Food and Drink Incubation at Battlefield, Shrewsbury
- Delivering developments within significant settlements serving large rural hinterlands, particularly those in areas with clear regeneration needs; e.g., Edgar Street, North Hereford, where we are working with Herefordshire Council to develop a master planning framework;
- RRZ and Market Towns projects, e.g. Redundant Buildings Grants in RRZ
- Phase 3 of the Malvern Hills Science Park

3C – Capitalising on our environmental assets

- Capturing the economic potential of high quality rural environment assets to support sustainable economic and community regeneration. See Appendix 1.

Proposals & Projects under Consideration

3A – Improving ICT, transport & other social infrastructure

- RRZ exploration of high specification ICT access points and the contribution of rail hubs to community transport
- Analyse and better understand the perceived and actual barriers that lack of access to transport offers to the rural economy and communities and formulate responses, in advance of MRD transfer of activity from the Countryside Agency
- The Agency will, with partners, investigate the establishment of a rural shows network to foster ways of improving their offer to the benefit the rural economy

3B – Delivering good quality physical development

- Support for the development of Stoneleigh Park as a major international venue for showcasing agricultural and rural business development
- The Agency will also invest in the acquisition of sites and premises in rural areas to create opportunities for diversification and development of mixed use schemes, including employment use and, where possible in concert with appropriate partners, help to deliver affordable housing solutions
- Encourage use of innovative design and building technologies to address rural regeneration needs in Market Towns and the wider countryside. Where relevant we will look to transfer urban renaissance design principles. The RRZ is exploring the development of sustainable buildings and the use of the aggregates/landfill levies in support of regeneration.
- Analyse and review the problems associated with meeting local housing needs, to gauge the potential scale and scope of the interventions needed to address them (in partnership with Regional Housing Partnership and Rural Housing Network)
- The Agency will investigate the further potential for Market Towns to act as hubs for access to services and engines for economic growth, e.g., tourism.

3C - Developing the environmental economy

- Implementation of the Environmental economy report.
- RRZ is looking to integrate sustainable economic growth into Heritage Environmental Regeneration schemes (HERS), promoting sustainable land management and environmental excellence across the zone.

PILLAR 4: REGENERATING COMMUNITIES

Objective - To address the region's most significant rural regeneration needs through a locally targeted approach, which improves social infrastructure and capacity; through improving access to opportunity.

Objective	4A - Targeting and meeting local need	4B - 21 st Century social infrastructure & capacity
Strategy and Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Plans • Rural Policy & RRZIP • Market Towns Initiative Strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Point to Prove • Regional Strategic Engagement Fund
Co-ordination Bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RRZ Board • Market Towns Initiative Steering Group • RCC Network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RCC Network • RegenWM
Delivery Bodies & mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RRZ Executive & partners • Market Towns partnerships • LSPs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GOWM • RCCs Network
Evidence Base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CA's Regional State of the Countryside • Market Towns Health Checks • RRZ prospectus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi Use Centre Mapping • Long Term Impact of Foot and Mouth on the Community and Voluntary Sector • The potential and value of local food initiatives

Context

The Regenerating Communities Pillar describes how we will target the most disadvantaged rural communities through bespoke regeneration interventions. A clear distinction exists between most rural districts and those which are lagging economically. The four districts which lag most significantly are North Shropshire, South Shropshire, Oswestry and Herefordshire, i.e. districts closely fitting within the Rural Regeneration Zone. These are also the Districts the Government has chosen to focus on through its Rural Public Service Agreement (PSA) which is in place 2003-2005.

In these areas, the key indicators of productivity, such as income and economic activity, are well below the regional and national averages. Nevertheless, the picture which emerges for all rural Districts taken together is one of relative economic health, with enterprise activity, for instance, being slightly above the regional average. Hence, a picture of a two speed region emerges, a gap we aim to narrow through our regeneration interventions.

These issues are variable in their impact across the region, dependent on the indigenous health of the local economy and the accessibility of well-paid urban based employment. Rural communities in the West Midlands face some very specific issues that result from a complex range of inter-linked factors. Sparse population coverage makes rural service delivery difficult and expensive, impacting across the range of services delivered by regional and local bodies.

Targeting and addressing rural deprivation requires recognition of its highly dispersed nature, sometimes existing in pockets in otherwise prosperous parts of the region. Normally applied statistical approaches cannot identify rural deprivation as clearly as can be done in urban areas. Modern work patterns and increasing commuting distances mask the characteristics of local rural economies in the more accessible parts of the region. This has other important effects, including the reduction of affordable housing stock for rural employees, accelerating the apparent ageing of the population of such areas and increasing the demand for elderly care. As a result, key workers

and those employed in lower income occupations are less able to find accommodation local to their employment.

Summary of Challenges for Rural Regeneration

- Maintaining balanced rural communities in the face of continuing migration in and out and declining affordable housing stock
- Developing sustainable market towns to meet the challenges of creating 21st century sustainable rural economies & communities
- Identifying need and delivering solutions to dispersed rural communities, overcoming the barriers of isolation and sparsity
- Encouraging the development of multi-use centres in sustaining rural communities
- Encouraging the development of provision to promote the health and well-being of rural people and communities
- Ensuring a reasonable level of access to services for all rural people; particularly the need to target help for those suffering deprivation and currently hidden from view
- The opportunities and challenges of the ageing population
- The corresponding problem of retaining young people
- The need to develop sustainable affordable housing solutions

Advantage West Midlands' Role

The Agency will play a key role in tackling social exclusion through targeting initiatives aimed at overcoming exclusion, whether through ethnicity, disability, age or gender, with a particular focus where deprivation is most acute, i.e. in the regeneration zone & market towns, in line with "A Point to Prove".

The Agency will focus its principal regeneration activity through these main vehicles. These are two well established and substantial programmes, which we will implement through partnerships that look to support and complement the activity of others in this area.

The Agency will ensure delivery of Single Regeneration Budget programmes, where there are still considerable outcomes yet to be delivered.

The Agency will continue to look to develop interventions in the least well performing parts of the region, in the light of the MRD and the programmes which will be transferred as a result.

The Agency will ensure that activity is evidence based and that, where gaps are identified in current provision and if it is relevant to our role, that we will work with others to address them. Examples include our interventions to build capacity in the rural Voluntary and Community Sector.

The Agency leads two key rural regeneration initiatives; the Rural Regeneration Zone and the Market Towns Initiative:

Rural Regeneration Zone

The Rural Regeneration Zone is the only rural area in the country that has been designated by its Regional Development Agency as a key area for investment alongside the region's most deprived urban areas. This status reflects the vulnerability of this most remote area of the region and also heralds huge opportunities, challenges and responsibilities.

The designation of the zone signifies the Agency's commitment to addressing the most deep-seated rural economic & social challenges adversely affecting the quality of life of those who live and work in the Zone.

The Zone Implementation Plan (ZIP) sets out the aspirations of partners drawn from across the three county areas covered by the RRZ and is guided by a RRZ Board, supported by an Executive Team. The Local Strategic Partnerships have developed a "partnership of partnerships" that has supported the development of the RRZ and its component plans. The Zone is working to provide a clear and focussed strategic lead, maximising funding opportunities to meet Zone needs in line with Local Strategic Partnerships' priorities.

The RRZ works across all 4 pillars of the WMES. Project examples developed by and through the Zone have been included in all 4 Pillar sections.

Market Towns Initiative

The Market Towns Initiative is a national scheme launched in 2000, but greatly extended since then within the region. In addition to the Central Government allocation the Agency has committed over £7.6 million to the programme and invested over £2 million on complementary land and property development activity. The Countryside Agency has also provided funding for the scheme. The regional project is guided by a Task Group consisting of key partnership organisations and sub-regional representation.

Across the region 30 market towns have been identified for support since the inception of the programme. For each market town a local partnership has responsibility for taking forward the project and delivering activity. In the first phases of the programme market towns have funding to appoint a market towns manager for the three years of the programme.

Activity eligible for funding under the programme is linked to regeneration that would not have taken place without the additional funding. The programme is intended to be responsive to local needs, supporting a broad range of activities driven by a local needs assessment.

Committed Actions

4A - Targeting and meeting local need

- Support the development of the Rural Regeneration Zone to deliver the Zone Implementation Plan:
 - RRZ will focus on the higher growth cluster activity, to support a transition to higher value added economic activities, within the Zone. Three initial cluster priorities will be: food and drink, environmental technologies and creative industries;
 - The provision of serviced and appropriately located workspace for new enterprises, linked to training and business development support, including a programme of environmental enhancements across key industrial estates, and good access to broadband. This is complemented by the Leominster Back From the Brink SRB programme which will include £600,000 SRB spend on an access road to the new 14 hectare Leominster Business Park.
- To lead the Market Towns Initiative, strengthening their roles as service centres, to the benefit of both the towns and their hinterlands. The market towns covered by the initiative are:
 - Craven Arms, Evesham, Kington, Leek and Cheadle, Oswestry, Wem, Alcester, Atherstone and Polesworth, Bridgnorth, Bewdley, Highley and Alveley, Bromyard, Ledbury, Market Drayton, Pershore, Uttoxeter, Whitchurch, Ross-on-Wye, Leominster, Ellesmere, Wellington, Ludlow, Stourport, Cleobury Mortimer, Stone, Biddulph, Newport, Broseley, Bishop's Castle, Church Stretton & Coleshill.

4B - 21st Century social infrastructure & capacity

- RRZ and Market Towns programmes will target social infrastructure and capacity
- Assist the rural voluntary and community sector in building capacity and engage in the delivery of socio-economic programmes. The Agency will support the West Midlands Rural Community Council Networks Co-ordinator, through the Regional Strategic Engagement Fund. Actions undertaken with the RCCs include the establishment of an audit of rural multi-use centres.

Proposals and Projects under Consideration

4A - Targeting and meeting local need

- Development of a coherent programme capitalising on the RRZ's high quality environment
- Ensuring regeneration practitioners are equipped with best available data and tools to undertake their work through the Agency and RegenWM.

4B - 21st Century social infrastructure & capacity

- Investigate best mechanisms for rural community regeneration in the light of the transfer of the Countryside Agency socio-economic functions to the Agency. This will be done in line with the regeneration approach established in the WMES
- RRZ looking at investment into multi-use centres
- Working with DoH and the Rural Affairs Forum Sub-group on Health and Local Food to implement the findings of the "Potential and Value of Local Food Initiatives" report
- Working with DoH on the links between ill health and economic health in rural communities.

5 - A POWERFUL VOICE FOR THE REGION

Objective – To be an effective champion for the rural West Midlands at regional, national and international levels, ensuring that the West Midlands makes the most of all opportunities.

Themes	5A Effective Championing of the rural West Midlands & representation	5B The European dimension	5C Understanding rural development
Strategy and Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional Concordat • Regional Marketing Strategy • Rural Strategy 2004 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European Action Plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural Affairs Forum & Rural Accord
Co-ordination Bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural Affairs Forum • Rural Accord • RAWM/WM RCC Network • Regional Assembly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional European Policy and Funding Group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural Affairs Forum
Delivery Bodies & mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural Affairs Forum & sub-groups • Rural European co-ordination Group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposed Rural European Co-ordination Group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural Affairs Forum & sub-groups • RegenWM • Observatory
Evidence Base	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural Evidence Base • Marketing the Region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European Action Plan • Rural Evidence base 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural evidence base

Context

This Section describes the enabling activity which the Agency will carry out to support the 4 Pillars described in the previous sections. It highlights the region’s “jewels”; its nationally and internationally best known rural assets and institutions. The region’s “rural jewels” include:

- its cultural connections and their countryside settings e.g., Shakespeare Country, the associations between Elgar, Delius and Langland and Worcestershire, the Malvern Hills, and the Peak District National Park;
- major rural institutions with an international profile, such as Royal Agricultural Society of England and its Stoneleigh Park site, Henry Doubleday Research Association, Harper Adams University College and Horticultural Research International.

In promoting the region, best use will need to be made of such connections and assets, so we can make full use of the rich diversity of the region and approach our aspiration to be a World class region. The **Regional Marketing Strategy** outlines the approach being undertaken to Marketing the Region in establishing:

- What is special and unique to the West Midlands;
- The “Governing Idea” with its interconnected themes of “Genius.Centred.Connected”;
- Leadership, networks and concordats necessary for delivery;
- Using our special qualities as a vehicle to approach the key regional audiences.

Rural Renaissance demonstrates how we will go about linking this overall approach to rural strengths, perceptions and audiences. In particular the “rural jewels” outlined above, show how strong the underlying theme of creativity and innovation is within the region; where ideas are “brought to life”. The document also outlines the need for further work in taking this forward.

There are a number of bodies that have important roles in liaison over and co-ordination of rural affairs and are critical in developing a regional consensus on application of the Regional Marketing Strategy to the West Midlands. These include the Rural Affairs Forum, Rural Accord & the Regional Planning Guidance Monitoring Group. These bodies are a focus for regional and national policy development and through their representation reflect local, sub-regional and regional, as well as sectoral interests.

The activity reflected in this section also seeks to bring focus to our evidence gathering, information flow, representation roles and the relationships that need to be in place to ensure that the region is effective in putting its case and developing its profile. In this sense “A Powerful Voice” is enabling activity in support of the 4 pillar sections. It includes our activity and proposals for evidence gathering, analysis and evaluation, together with our commitments to support regional networks and groups.

Policy making must be evidence-based and all regional and rural agencies must pool their research needs and resources to the benefit of the region. The Agency will make its evidence base available to the region, both through the Regional Observatory and via our own website.

Summary of the Challenges in developing a Powerful Voice for the Rural West Midlands

- Interpretation of Regional Marketing Strategy, the benchmarking work and its appropriate implementation.
- Understanding and influencing the implications of ongoing CAP reform and changes to EU funding after 2006/7
- Establishing and conveying a West Midlands rural economic development agenda that is inclusive of all key sectors, but realistic about the long term value of each sector
- Ensuring that all Agency plans, policies and programmes are “rural proofed” so that the needs of all rural businesses are fully understood and met
- Ensuring appropriate representation reflecting the importance of agriculture, forestry and other land related industries, in plans, policies and programmes
- Making the most of European opportunities and developing European relationships to the benefit of rural West Midlands (as recommended at the Highbury Summit)

Advantage West Midlands’ Role

The Agency will work to ensure that The Regional Marketing Strategy and the “Governing Idea” are as relevant to rural circumstances as they are to urban. The starting point for this work are the findings of the benchmarking research which offers a base on which to establish an understanding of the region’s rural areas, their sense of belonging and points of difference.

The Agency will ensure delivery of survey and intelligence support for evidence-based rural programmes. We will use the information we have gathered to assist our foresight over existing programmes and to help set the scene for future programmes.

As Regional Champion, Advantage West Midlands acts as external advocate for the region, working to secure funding and investment and to influence policy. The agency’s focus will be to:

- Work towards effective championing of the West Midlands on national policy (and European/international) issues;
- Understand rural development trends & issues and ensure the availability of good quality data and intelligence to support and inform the region’s policies;
- Influence national and regional policy that is likely to affect rural development.

Achieving these objectives will require strong partnership & communication arrangements.

Effective Championing of the Rural West Midlands

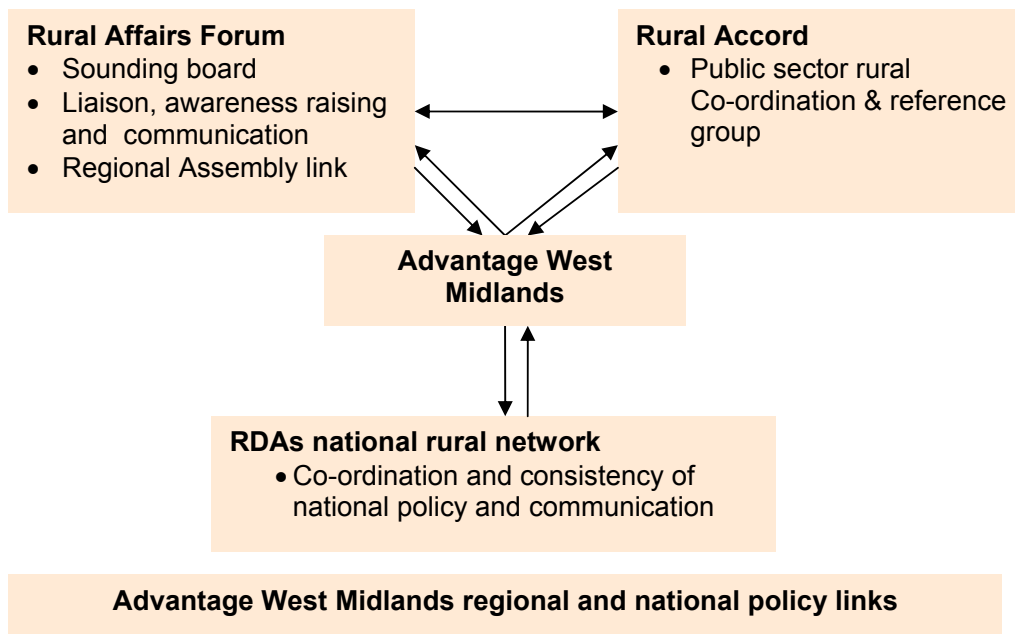
Advantage West Midlands works with partners to develop regional policy and delivery mechanisms (see figure below). We seek to raise well-evidenced rural issues in the appropriate fora, to guide policy development and achieve change where necessary. At all times, when possible and appropriate, the Agency will work with regional partners to achieve an agreed position and to work collectively on its promotion.

The Rural Affairs Forum is the region's leading rural liaison and representation body. It includes representatives from a wide range of public, private and voluntary sector organisations. It is a stakeholder body, where matters of rural interest are brought forward for consideration, debate and where appropriate; endorsement. We will maintain ongoing liaison with partners through the Forum and the other co-ordination groups identified in the Framework. We are committed to senior representation of rural issues at these key regional groupings.

The role of the Agency's rural Board member will be to represent rural interests at Agency Board meetings and to champion Agency rural policy and activity within the region.

Co-ordination of regional public sector agencies is brought together through the Rural Accord. The Accord is a set of operating principles agreed within the Regional Concordat. It is supported by a networking group. By sharing understanding, objectives and activity the Agencies involved seek to make better use of resources. This group includes West Midlands Regional Assembly and West Midlands Local Government Association as well as Government Office for the West Midlands, Advantage West Midlands and Defra Agencies.

It is also the Agency's role to represent the West Midlands interests at the national level, for example, in networks relating to food, farming & rural enterprise. We will use the established regional rural networks to ensure the region remains apprised of developments and opportunities for influence.



The European Dimension

The Agency has a lead role in developing the European dimension of the region's activities. This is reinforced through the European Action Plan and the role we play in the Regional European Policy and Funding Group and its associated groupings.

We will work to establish close co-operation between rural co-ordination bodies and groups responsible for European Policy and funding to ensure we make the best use of European opportunities. This will be particularly important as the region prepares itself for the post-2006 landscape of reduction or removal of Structural Funds support and further CAP reform.

Understanding Rural Development Trends

The Agency is committed to evidence-led programming. This document makes available in one location a broad new package of survey and intelligence about the rural West Midlands. This work has been undertaken over the last 2 years to give a comprehensive and up to date picture of the rural West Midlands. This document is based on the analysis of the Agency's evidence base, demonstrating that a robust link exists between policy and delivery. It both establishes a foundation for new and existing programmes as well as for innovation. It will also assist in monitoring RSS.

The new rural evidence base includes a range of reports, tools and an evidence base on which the Agency's approach has been based. This is summarised in the Contextual report. Summaries and the full reports can be found at www.advantagewm.co.uk/rural_research.htm.

The evidence base will be used to support the Agency's positions on key issues, both regionally and nationally. The Agency is committed to maintaining the evidence base and to filling in gaps, making links with other research of relevance to rural development.

Committed Actions

5A Effective Championing of the rural West Midlands & representation

- The Agency is committed to senior representation at the Rural Affairs Forum and the Rural Accord Group (currently the Corporate Director for Sustainable and Rural Development). We will support its work both through the main forum and its sub-groups, particularly those on the Common Agricultural Policy and Local Food and Health.

5B The European dimension

- A new Regional group is being established to bring focus to regional rural issues within EU context. It will develop the region's rural profile for a European audience and advise on Rural Development. It is hoped that it will become the reference body on the Rural Development Regulation (second pillar of the CAP) and the rural aspects of the Structural Funds & Cohesion debates. It is intended that this group should be established as a sub-group of the Rural Affairs Forum.

5C Understanding rural development

- The region's evidence base as it applies to rural economies will be made more accessible and linked to the Regional Observatory.

Proposals and Projects under Consideration

5A Effective Champion & unified voice

- The Agency is committed to working with rural partners to maintain communication structures that are fit for their intended purpose. In implementing Modernising Rural Delivery, the region's existing structures will be tested and where necessary adjusted in this light.
- Work with regional partners to develop a particular dimension to the Regional Marketing Strategy and to implement the actions arising.

5B Rural representation & the European dimension

- Stimulate and co-ordinate development of a network of European regions with similar profile to West Midlands. Its purpose would be to enable experience sharing, support trans-national bid development opportunities and the development of partnering opportunities. If successful, may be funded through Interreg IIIC.

5C Understanding rural development

- The rural evidence base will be augmented by new tools and surveys and backed with a commitment to be maintained as an up to date and authoritative regional resource. If the evidence base is to be maintained, then a regional approach, through the Rural Affairs Forum, or similar body, will be needed.
- Dissemination will increasingly be the responsibility of RegenWM, as it establishes itself as the region's Centre of Excellence for rural and urban regeneration practice. It is their role to prompt debate on application to new problems and to make the case for follow up activity.

APPENDIX 1

This Appendix will contain a short series of case studies illustrating current projects and activity.

Case Study 1 - Food and Drink Delivery Plan

In response to the government's Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food regional stakeholders worked together to develop a West Midlands' food and farming delivery plan. This identified ten action areas to assist the food and farming sectors within the region. To facilitate delivery the Farming and Food team was established in May 2003 as a joint venture between AWM, Government Office for the West Midlands and the Rural Development Service. A key element of the approach has been to establish a combined delivery plan for the Strategy for Sustainable Farming and Food and the [Food and Drink Cluster](#). The Food and Farming Delivery Plan includes action to:

- [Develop business networks, improve supply chains](#)
- [Direct Selling and Distribution](#) and [promoting regional and local food](#)
- [Developing infrastructure and farm based tourism and recreation](#)
- [Promoting sustainable public sector food procurement and healthy eating](#)
- [Securing environmental benefits from agriculture](#) and [new and non-food products and services](#)
- [Promoting sustainable waste management in the farming and food industry](#)

Headlines and highlights include the following:

- **Food and Drink Information Centre** improved access to specialist information;
- **Heart of England Fine Food** support for trade & sector development;
- Regional network of **Food Parks** to support SMEs in facility sharing;
- Sales and **distribution** network for high value added products; and
- Support **innovation** in deriving benefit from organic, novel and industrial crops

The team can be contacted through www.farmingandfood-westmidlands.org.uk

Case Study 2 - Rural Business Connect

Regional partners have been working together to address the needs of rural businesses. Evidence from a number of sources indicates that the uptake business support in rural parts of the region is low. This reflects the make up of the rural economy: large numbers of small and micro businesses; geographically disperse; and, barriers to accessing advice.

Partners recognize that there is a wealth of business advice and support available. Rural businesses need to become aware of this and advantages of taking it up.

The proposal being developed by partners to address these issues is 'Rural Business Connect'. A single gateway for rural business advice in the region backed by a shared 'routing' system that ensures enquiries are handled consistently through and between brokers and provider. To enable this there will be facilitation at sub-regional level that will be accountable and managed by a local partner team. The facilitator's role will be to overcome these barriers to improve the uptake of business support services and improve co-ordination of business support activity in rural areas.

Case Study 3 - International Agriculture & Technology Centre (IATC)

The IATC is the new Centre that acts as the focus for the UK agriculture and related technologies sector for the development of the UK's international trade potential. IATC was established by Advantage West Midlands (AWM) in partnership with the Royal Agricultural Society of England (RASE), UK Trade and Investment (UKTI) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). The Centre also provides the key point of contact for all worldwide enquiries, regarding the sourcing of UK products, services, technology and science.

- It is widely recognised that the UK has a wealth of expertise and experience right across the food chain from sophisticated and environmentally sensitive agricultural production technologies to leading edge food quality and hygiene standards. The IATC works with the UK industry to develop and deliver an annual programme of international trade development in this country and abroad;
- Sounding board;
- Liaison, communication and awareness raising;
- Exhibitions, shows, seminars and other export promotion events.

Case Study 4 - West Midlands Rural Skills Leadership Group

The West Midlands has led the development of a region-wide focus on rural skills and is the first region to develop a group with this sole purpose. Regional partners have learnt from this experience and have established the West Midlands Rural Skills Leadership Group (WMRSLG). This is a senior level group that will guide strategic activity on rural skills and act as a focus for the regional implementation of rural skills initiatives.

The group will work to develop a better understanding of rural skills issues. To inform their work Advantage West Midlands is undertaking a baseline study of rural skills across the region. This will complement evidence collected by partners and the skills work undertaken by the Cluster Opportunity Groups. Based around this growing evidence base RSLG will influence regional activity and develop the rural skills action plan.

The county based LSCs have the responsibility to review provision for post-16 learners, the extent to which it meets the needs of the learners. These reviews (Strategic Area Reviews, or STAR) will then guide LSC funded provision. It will also inform and influence the development of the regional rural skills action plan. The LSCs will hold the chair of the WMRSLG.

The Group will:

- act at senior level to guide the strategic analysis of demand and supply of rural skills (not just land-based skills)
- rural proof all rural skills project proposals
- report to the Regional Skills Partnership to make sure rural skills take on an appropriate importance
- act as a focus for the regional implementation of the different skills initiatives
- commission task and finish activities necessary to deliver rural skills in the region

Supporting the RSLG will be a 'network' of rural skills stakeholders, who will receive papers from the WMRSLG meetings for information and comment. This will be an open network, allowing anyone with an interest in rural skills issues to join. An extranet, is proposed, which could be linked to the existing Rural Affairs Forum extranet service. An annual conference, including workshops to debate emerging issues, will be developed. AWM will co-ordinate this conference.

Case Study 5 - Environmental Economy Project

Across the region there are a number of environmental sites and assets that are under-valued and could play a larger part in the region's economy, such as the Peak District National Park, in North Staffordshire. There are several designated areas of outstanding natural beauty; a world heritage site at Ironbridge; two community forests and parts of the national forest. The region's access network also represents a key asset, through which our high quality environment can be accessed.

Recognising these environmental assets could contribute more to the region key partners are working together to explore and develop opportunities. The environmental economy project aims to demonstrate:

- how the high quality environment can be a driver for sustainable economic development and regeneration;
- how economic activity can help to secure a high standard of environmental management; and,
- to identify practical approaches and projects for its achievement.

The project steering group has previously guided the development of the Rural Regeneration Zone High Quality Environment Flagship group and development paths for environmental projects.

The contribution the River Severn makes to the economy and to the quality of life of those who live near to or use the river is not understood. Part of this project is to examine the contribution made by the River Severn in economic, social and environmental terms.

Case Study 6 - Supporting Village Halls and Community Buildings

There are approximately 1000 community buildings across the region each with the potential to play a key part in community regeneration. Many already make an important contribution to the social economy by providing the local infrastructure from which key services are delivered such as health and child care initiatives. There is a growing recognition of the strategic importance of this network of locally controlled and managed multi purpose centres in facilitating community regeneration and in delivering key services. Increasingly community buildings are providing a source of local venues for accessing new learners and hosting ICT resources – bringing information and other online services into the heart of many isolated and remote rural communities. Broadening the role and function of community buildings is a key strategy to ensuring their long-term sustainability.

The West Midlands Rural Community Council Network (www.wmrccn.org.uk) aims to promote voluntary action and improve rural life. With support of AWM the network has undertaken a region wide audit of community buildings, identifying their role in community regeneration.

This project has:

1. Provided core regional data on the provision, functions and services of 675 community buildings. The database will be maintained by WMRCCN.
2. Accessible information on the potential of community buildings particularly in relation to regeneration.

This will allow the RCC's to identify the needs of the community buildings and provide relevant support. The base line information will be used by the network to influence key agencies funding decisions.