West of England Rural Strategy
(Consultation Draft)
1. Purpose

The strategy aims to provide a framework for joint work on rural issues within the West of England. Its main objectives are:

- to provide a West of England strategic lead for rural issues
- to link and co-ordinate work carried out by partners in relation to rural issues
- to enable the West of England to access funding for rural areas
- to assist prioritisation of activities for the WEP’s Rural Strategy Group
- to ‘rural-proof’ West of England strategies.

The strategy is seen as a ‘high level’ document which sets a strategic framework and priorities for the rural parts of the sub-region. It does not seek to identify all the actions which will contribute to improving life in the West of England’s rural areas and recognises that many organisations will be involved in the delivery.

2. West of England area - description

The West of England encompasses an area of 132,700 hectares, covered by the councils of Bath and North-East Somerset, Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire. The Severn estuary forms the boundary to the west and the Mendips and Cotswolds to the south and east.

**West of England rural areas compared to the rest of the West of England**

Three-quarters of the land area of West of England is rural with over 100 villages, half a dozen market towns and over 2,000 farms. The eastern and southern fringes are Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and much of the area is dependent on rural activities. These facts are often masked by the proximity of the urban areas of Bristol, Bath and Weston-super-Mare. The urban/rural interface provides opportunities, as well as threats, to the rural communities. Many issues of concern to them are the same
as those of concern in urban areas, but may need to be addressed in a different way to meet the needs of rural communities.

The map below shows the West of England as defined by the Defra rural:urban classifications. The map is based on ‘output areas’, which consist of around 125 households and have a population of about 300. Although the government’s local authority classification for South Gloucestershire suggests it is an urban authority, the map shows that in large areas of South Gloucestershire people are living in hamlets or isolated dwellings.

West of England: Rural Urban Definition using Output Areas, 2005

West of England rural areas compared to other rural areas
The West of England rural areas are distinguished from other rural areas in the south west by the additional pressures caused by being within the sphere of influence of a combined urban population of 700,000, and, in
particular, arising from the considerable growth pressures on a population and economy already dominant within the region as a whole.

Although there are no remote rural areas - more than 10 miles from a city or town - in the sub-region, uniquely in the south west, the West of England rural areas suffer the same problems as more isolated rural areas; for example, access to services is difficult in some parts of the sub-region and, more generally, issues include falling farm incomes, a decline in rural services, a lack of affordable housing and management of the rural environment.

The 2004 West of England Rural Strategy identified some – still valid – distinctive characteristics of rural areas within the urban sphere of influence:

- Many people living in rural communities work in urban areas and look to the urban areas for leisure, retail and health/welfare services. This pattern offers benefits in terms of access to work and services but it also has the effect of drawing expenditure away from rural areas, making it more difficult to safeguard rural services.
- Many urban residents look to rural areas for recreational and leisure activities. This opens up opportunities for rural diversification (e.g. horse-related activities, leisure activities and catering), not normally present in more remote rural areas.
- The proximity of a large local market for agricultural products offers considerable potential for local food and produce initiatives.
- The concentration of population and the economic prosperity of the sub-region results in a lack of affordable housing in rural communities.
- Many rural areas accessible to the main urban areas face considerable development pressure – the effects are variable (e.g. an increase in the value of agricultural land and low investment in maintaining land).
- The population base of the West of England and the level of movement between the main urban centres (and between many rural areas and the urban areas) means that many rural communities are relatively well served with public transport services compared with low population density rural areas.
3. **Rural strategy group and WEP**

Prior to the formation of the West of England Partnership (WEP) in 2005, a Rural Development Steering Group was established under the umbrella of the former West of England Strategic Partnership. This transferred to the WEP and became the Rural Strategy Group.

In January 2004 the Rural Development Steering Group produced a strategy. This was a comprehensive document identifying 6 major work strands and outlining issues, strategic objectives, operational objectives, current actions and projects, and scope for new actions in relation to each. It was a useful overview of activity, effectively taking a pooled approach to tackling rural issues.

Meetings up to the end of 2006 were focused on accessing funding from the Rural Renaissance Initiative. In February 2007 it was decided to take stock. The rural issues were still much the same but the Rural Strategy Group needed to reassess its position. The environment had changed in the following ways:

- The growth agenda in the West of England has been gaining in prominence, since the West of England’s recognition as one of England’s Growth Points areas in October 2006
- The West of England Partnership’s office has been established with staff who can provide some support to the Group and help give it a distinct identity, away from the day-to-day work on rural issues and in rural areas by the unitary councils
- Local Area Agreements, based on 35 indicators drawn from national list of 198, have become a major focus for service provision for councils and their partners through Local Strategic Partnerships; and in the sub-region 5 or 6 common indicators are likely to be included in a Multi-Area Agreement
- The Rural Renaissance Initiative is functioning effectively and approving projects, which have been delivering benefits in rural areas
- The Rural Strategy Group is in a position where it can take a more strategic approach to the rural issues identified and it now needs to identify what is its role, as distinct from the role of partners individually, particularly the three councils with substantial rural areas within their boundaries.
4. Policy context

This is the first rural strategy developed under the name of the West of England Partnership. It is evolving at time of increased focus by government on the city-region concept and an expectation of substantial housing growth in the West of England in the next two decades. In our area the city-region is the same as the sub-region. The aim of the strategy is to ensure that the needs of the rural population and the rural environment are prioritised, and that resources – including services – are made available to people in rural areas, as decisions are made about the area over the coming years.

Unlike areas with county councils and a history of working with rural communities, there are no reliable key statistics which clearly distinguish between WoE rural and urban areas on major issues, eg unemployment, population growth and so on. The only data we have refers to the council area overall or, in relation to some data sets, to wards.

5. Vision for rural areas and link to WEP vision

In 2005 the WEP developed its vision for the area in twenty years’ time. Drawing on this, the proposed vision for the rural areas is:

A rural vision for 2026:

- **A rising quality of life** for all, with healthy lifestyles, access to better quality healthcare, affordable housing of all types and the development of sustainable communities
- **A prosperous rural area** with a buoyant economy where the gap has been closed between disadvantaged and other communities
- **Sustainable communities** including easier travel, thanks to transport solutions that link communities to employment opportunities, local services and cultural attractions, and the control of and reduction in congestion

Success against these aspirations should be secured in ways that are energy efficient, protect air quality, minimise and manage waste and protect and enhance the natural and built environment.
6. General actions

Under each of these aspects of the vision sits a number of general actions, identified by the Rural Strategy Group, which have to be addressed in order for the vision to be met (some of these issues cut across more than one aspect but to simplify it at the detailed action planning stage we have allocated issues to one aspect only).

By ‘sustainable communities’ we mean places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They embody the principles of sustainable development, which they do by:

- balancing and integrating the social, economic and environmental components of their community
- meeting the needs of existing and future generations
- respecting the needs of other communities in the wider region or internationally to make their own communities sustainable.

At an early stage needs assessments should be carried out or, where this has already happened and these are still relevant, existing assessments should be built on. An analysis of needs and priorities in the sub-region is fundamental to ensuring that its communities are sustainable. Currently there is little or no data which distinguishes between the urban and rural areas. Improving our knowledge of the West of England is vital. In the meantime a review of information gained through the parish planning process may help to identify issues at the strategic level.

**Economy**

Diversify farming

There are 3,222 agricultural or horticultural holdings in the West of England and approximately 4,200 people working on them, full time or part time\(^1\). Farming around the urban area experiences pressure on land prices from speculation related to development. However, there is potential for diversification, taking advantage of the proximity of the population concentrations of the urban areas, both as consumers and as potential leisure users of the countryside.

Actions might include:
- Business advice/support

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\(^1\) Defra, June 2007 Agriculture and Horticulture Survey
- Support for home working & local business start up
- Information delivery – Fresh Start, REG
- Use of community assets
- Advice on best practice – RDA funding
- Promotion of leisure tourism
- Provision of business units, including craft workshops.

Enhance skills
‘Providing a highly skilled and well-educated workforce in which all communities experience equality of opportunity in the labour market’ is a priority across the whole of the West of England. Additional work is needed to ensure that the rural workforce receive the help they need to ensure that young people are in education, employment or training, to support working age people off benefits and into work and to increase the percentage of people qualified to at least NVQ level 2.

Actions might include:
- Identification of core skills & training requirements
- Work with employers to match skills
- Provision of training opportunities

Improve market access
Business support and support for the social economy are both needed to ensure organisations are best equipped to access markets, particularly in the West of England itself. There are already several well-established and thriving farmers markets and, conscious of the desire to keep food miles in particular to a minimum, it is in everyone’s interests to fully exploit the potential for local sales of goods and services.

Actions might include:
- Making access to urban markets integrate with rural provision and networks
- Provision of consultancy and marketing advice
- Promotion and support for sustainable tourism

Ensure economic growth
The rural areas of the West of England are relatively well-placed for growth. However, with a downturn in the national economy they
need to use every advantage (proximity to markets, attractive environments, etc.).

Actions might include:
- Ensuring local services in rural areas are fit for purpose
- Facilitating supply chains and supporting co-op development and marketing
- Identifying future markets, economies and priority sectors
- Promoting local trades
- Encouraging innovation
- Providing a variety of good quality workspace.

**Quality of Life**

Reduce flood risk
There is concern, particularly following last year’s floods in Gloucestershire, that many rural areas within the sub-region are vulnerable to flooding, particularly along coastal areas. Existing...
communities need reassurance that measures have been taken to ensure their safety and clearly any new development requires flood risk assessment and mitigation action.

In addition actions might include:
- Naturalistic solutions
- Greenspace/woodland in new developments.

Encourage healthy lifestyles
Our image of rural areas tends to be that they are ‘healthier’ than urban areas. The reality can be different: further from work, shops and from most sports facilities, it can be harder to eat healthily and take exercise.
The Institute for Rural Health’s survey of rural PCTs\(^2\) identified transport and geographical access to services as major constraints to the delivery of healthcare. Other issues highlighted were:

- patients presenting at a later stage in the disease process
- decreasing uptake of service with increasing distance from service
- delivery of services to greatly increased populations during the summer for PCTs situated in tourist areas, which impacts particularly on minor injury and accident and emergency services
- out-migration of the working age population and increasing levels of in-migration of older people, which can increase the burden on existing services.

\(^2\) See [www.ruralhealthgoodpractice.org.uk/index.php?page_name=section1_chapter5_research_results](http://www.ruralhealthgoodpractice.org.uk/index.php?page_name=section1_chapter5_research_results)
Actions might include:
- Supported access to leisure facilities
- Reviewing provision of peripatetic facilities
- Improving cycling and walking routes for all sectors
- Provision of local health initiatives.

Enhance environment
The West of England is very fortunate with the variability and quality of its physical environment. The areas of green space have been mapped and are identified on the following website: [www.greeninfrastructurewest.org](http://www.greeninfrastructurewest.org).

The Forest of Avon covers the entire West of England area outside the two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Its Plan (available at [www.forestofavon.org/forestplan.html](http://www.forestofavon.org/forestplan.html)) identifies 7 strategy areas.
Actions might include:
- Protection and promoting use of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (Cotswolds & Mendips)
- A range of activities relating to the Forest of Avon
- Promoting improvement to the landscape and ensuring the upkeep of public rights of way
- Promoting local sustainability, for example by
  - reducing food miles
  - increasing use of allotments
- Encouraging the environmental economy
- Ensuring environmental quality in new developments
- Facilitating easy access to the countryside
- Tackling problems of road safety, speeding and parking

Improve air quality
Across the West of England traffic congestion is a major cause of air pollution. Area-wide measures such as reducing congestion and encouraging more environmentally sustainable forms of transport, along with more localised traffic management at pollution 'hot spots' can help to improve air quality.

Actions need to link with transport action and might include:
- Reducing out commuting
- Promoting local employment
- Planting more trees
- Burning less carbon fuels.

Improve waste management
The Joint Waste Strategy sets the scene for the actions being taken across the whole of the sub-region. In rural areas local projects could supplement the work of the four councils by, for example, encouraging composting.

Actions might include:
- Establishing community waste and energy projects
- Finding ways of using unwanted resources.
**Sustainable communities**

Energy action

Climate change requires urgent action to reduce our use of fossil fuels. This includes making more use of fuel from renewable sources.

Actions might include:
- Promote energy efficiency – in homes and in industry - and tackling fuel poverty
- Encouraging local energy solutions
- Promoting local energy markets, through public investment
- Encouraging use of bio-fuels, etc.
- Promoting micro-energy solutions
- Investigating the exploitation of tidal energy.

Provide affordable housing

The average house prices for the three councils with rural areas are (these figures are from across the whole council areas, not just the rural areas)³:

- Bath and North East Somerset £233,179
- North Somerset £185,257
- South Gloucestershire £200,842

The Draft Revised Regional Spatial Strategy (July 2008) shows that the ratio of the lowest quartile house prices to the lowest quartile earnings in the West of England is 7 to 10 times and suggests that Local Development Document policies should routinely require more than 35% of housing to be affordable. It recognises that this requires a step change in the provision of affordable housing and also suggests that there should be a greater focus on ensuring that the right type and kind of housing is developed. The Strategic Housing Market Assessment for the West of England, Mendip and West Wiltshire is due to be published in September 2008.

Actions might include:
- Identifying opportunities for building.

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³ Land Registry House Price Index, 28 July 2008
Better transport provision

Good transport links are vital for access to and from rural areas, enabling people to get to work and services.

Actions might include:

- Promoting and supporting rural transport solutions
- Car sharing schemes
- Encouraging councils to increase subsidies to bus companies
- Provision of a single point of access to local community transport bookings
- Encouraging local employment opportunities
- Providing access to employment and social opportunities
- Improving transport to health services.

Index of Deprivation 2007: Barriers to Housing and Services

Source: CLG 2007

- Least deprived 10% nationally (Population 78,257) (65)
- Below national average (Population 229,670) (212)
- Worse than national average (Population 572,300) (357)
- Most deprived 10% nationally (Population 54,773) (21)

Improve rural life for young people

There is a real desire to retain young people in rural communities and an awareness that this has to start with the involvement of young people in identifying and overseeing the implementation of
any measures aimed at young people themselves. Actions might include raising awareness amongst the wider population of the need to keep young people in rural sustainable communities.

Local education
Rural communities want local schools, particularly at primary level, but without a certain number of pupils, there is a danger that they will not be financially viable. It will help if the buildings can be used for other purposes as well.

Actions might include:
• Encouraging fuller community use of schools
• Promoting the possibility of community ownership
• Funding assistance through low rent or grants.

7. Cross cutting themes

All actions need to be implemented with regard to:
• Sustainability, taking account of the social, economic and environmental aspects (see definition of sustainable communities on page 7), eg through energy efficiency, providing opportunities for community involvement and ownership, protecting and enhancing the natural and built environment and ensuring that the implications for the longer term are taken into account.
• The needs of equalities groups, ie both to meet statutory requirements (such as those under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995) and to meet good practice requirements (such as taking into account the needs of young people and the needs of older people).

Sustainability needs to be better understood in terms of the relationship between the rural areas and the major conurbations of Bristol, Bath and Weston-super-Mare.

It would be useful to agree and promote an improved definition of ‘sustainable’ for the West of England, which would then need to be recognised as cross-cutting all activity.
8. General comments on how the vision will be achieved through the Rural Strategy Group

The Rural Strategy Group recognises that there are many organisations and individuals whose will be working in rural areas and whose actions will help achieve the West of England vision. There is a distinction to be made between the facilitating of the Rural Strategy through the Rural Strategy Group and the delivery by the unitary authorities and other partners. The West of England Partnership and its groups have a facilitating, rather than a delivery role. It will:

a) **promote an integrated city region, which will help to underpin the success of its rural areas**: The urban areas are seen as an opportunity for the rural community and links between the two need to be fostered.

b) **help to maximise opportunities for accessing funding**: The Rural Strategy Group will do this through a continuing dialogue with SWRDA and other organisations

c) **provide an integrated approach with its other groups**: The Rural Strategy Group will work more closely with other West of England Partnership groups. It will do this by:

   - Briefing group members on cross-cutting issues
   - Inviting key members to RSG meetings to discuss particular issues and develop a joint approach

d) **ensure that rural issues are recognised in the delivery of the growth agenda** by engaging with the development of the Delivery Plan and subsequent planning

e) **ensure that opportunities to promote the rural strategy are translated into action where there is benefit by doing so**

f) **ensure that people with local knowledge, particularly in relation to the countryside, are consulted and in touch with decision-makers**; for example, through parish/village planning. This strategy has taken account of an analysis of issues raised through town and parish planning. The Rural Strategy Group would support
strengthening (eg through more Quality Parishes) the work of town and parish councils and extending the work to new areas. Additional ways need to be found to reach less vocal areas.

g) **ensure that action is taken to address appropriate economic growth of the market towns** (Chipping Sodbury, Clevedon, Keynsham, Nailsea, Norton-Radstock, Portishead, Thornbury and Yate)

h) **ensure that the needs of particular groups (eg young people, older people and Black & minority ethnic groups) are identified and taken account of in delivering the strategy.**
Appendix 1: Policy context

Since 2000 there have been a number of major policy documents published. These are summarised below.

National

- **PPS7 Planning Policy Statement on Sustainable Development in Rural Areas**
- **Rural Strategy** published by Defra in 2004 in response to recommendations by Lord Haskins in his 2002 review of rural delivery and to a review of the White Paper. It set 3 priorities:
  1. Economic and social regeneration
  2. Social justice for all
  3. Enhancing the value of our countryside
   It also brought in new definition of **rural**.
- **Affordable Rural Housing Commission’s Final Report**, published in May 2006, suggested that a key aspect of achieving more affordable rural housing was leadership at all levels taking on the issue, making the case for development, backing ideas and helping make it happen.
- **Local Government White Paper – Strong and Prosperous Communities** published in October 2006 has many proposals in relation to communities and services. These include:
  - Encouragement of communities to take over the management or ownership of assets such as community centres, redundant school buildings or green space
  - Building on parish councils’ powers to provide local services
  - Extending the power of well-being to parish and town councils which satisfy criteria based on the Quality Parish scheme
  - Simplifying and speeding up the process of establishing a parish council.
   These aspects are included in the **Local Government and Public Involvement Bill** currently in its committee stage and due to become law in the autumn.
- **Rural Delivery Review** – Lord Haskins reported on progress in November 2006
Regional – main documents

- *Regional framework for prioritisation and delivery for rural areas* was developed by each Government Office and submitted to Defra in March 2005.
- *Draft Revised Regional Spatial Strategy* – the Inspection Panel reported following the Examination in Public in April – June 2007 and the government has responded to their proposals. The resulting revised Strategy is now being consulted upon (to October 2008).

There is an Integrated Regional Strategy website at [www.justconnect-sw.co.uk](http://www.justconnect-sw.co.uk) which aims to encourage integrated working across the whole set of regional strategies. In the longer term the government’s *Sub-National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration* proposes that the Regional Economic and Spatial Strategies will be combined.

**Sub-regional**

**a) West of England Vision**

This focuses on improvements for everyone in the sub-region, with specific mention of:

- benefits of the distinctive mix of urban and rural areas
- access to jobs, learning, health care, leisure and other services in rural areas
- public transport investment and connectivity in rural areas.

**b) West of England Economic Strategy**

This sets out a vision and objectives for the economy of the sub-region. Under the heading of *Infrastructure, Regeneration and the Environment* Objective 6 is ‘To promote the regeneration of market towns and improve the economic well-being of rural areas.’ The strategy says that in support of this objective, the following initiatives will be pursued:

- establishing objectives for the roles of the ‘market towns’ as a basis for investing in their enhancement;
- reviewing the West of England Rural Strategy; and
- implementing the Rural Renaissance Programme and other initiatives, aimed at supporting rural areas.

Under the heading of Tourism Objective 1 is ‘To promote Bath, Bristol and Weston-super-Mare and the rural areas as tourist destinations.’ The strategy says that in support of this objective, the following initiative (sic) will be pursued:
- securing a greater understanding of the tourist markets served by the West of England
- preparing marketing campaigns and programmes.

c) **West of England Tourism Development Plan**
   The plan notes that the West of England’s rural areas help provide a variety of environments to tourism to the area and also that tourism in rural areas provides an opportunity to regenerate rural communities. A key theme of the marketing message will be access to the countryside.

d) **Joint Local Transport Plan**
   **Transport vision for rural areas:** To achieve sustainable transport provision in rural areas, whilst enhancing the local environment, integrating land use and transport planning and improving travel choice, improving accessibility and reducing social exclusion.
   **Rural Transport Supporting Statement**
   This sets out the background and priority issues in rural areas including:
   - the high number of people travelling to work by car
   - the high accident severity because of traffic speed
   - the critical issues of location of service
   - high and growing car ownership
   - when subsidy/set up funding is removed from rural bus services and they have to be cost effective, daytime services can be threatened, even if travel to work services survive
   - the rail network is sparse
   - tourism, although important for the rural economy, brings additional traffic
   - problems of lorries on rural roads.
   It identifies 18 actions as its strategy for 2006/07 to 2010/11.

e) **West of England Housing Delivery Plan, approved by the WEP in February 2006**
   This recognises the need for affordable homes, and the particular needs of rural communities, although the actual numbers are still subject to changes to the draft RSS. It also identifies actions required in relation to particular groups of people in housing need. Rural housing need will be identified as part of the Strategic Housing Market Assessment currently being undertaken.