

**Draft Leicestershire
Rural Strategy
2004 – 2009**

The production of this draft Strategy was co-ordinated by Leicestershire County Council on behalf of the Leicestershire Rural Partnership.



The members of the Leicestershire Rural Partnership are:

Leicestershire and Rutland Association of Parish & Local Councils

Blaby District Council

Business Link

Chamber of Commerce & Industry

Charnwood Borough Council

CVS Community Partnership

The Countryside Agency

East Midlands Development Agency (emda)

Government Office for the East Midlands

Harborough District Council

Hinckley & Bosworth Borough Council

Leicestershire Constabulary

Leicestershire County Council

Leicestershire Primary Care Trusts

Leicestershire Learning & Skills Council

Melton Borough Council

North West Leicestershire District Council

Oadby & Wigston Borough Council

Rural Community Council (Leicestershire and Rutland)

Draft Leicestershire Rural Strategy 2004 - 2009

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Foreword

By Mrs Lesley Pendleton CC - Chairman of the Leicestershire Rural Partnership

I am proud to present to you this Strategy, which sets out the issues that members of the Leicestershire Rural Partnership (LRP) intend to address over the next five years. The publication of the Revised Strategy comes within a year of my taking the chair of the Leicestershire Rural Partnership, and it gives me great pleasure to be able to establish, and communicate to you, a strategic position so soon.

This latest revision to the Leicestershire Rural Strategy comes at a time of great change for rural areas. On the horizon are extensive changes to the Common Agricultural Policy, with a shift away from production subsidies towards supporting environmental improvements and rural development. Department of the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) support to rural areas is also due for a significant review following recommendations, made in Lord Haskins' review of DEFRA, to devolve responsibility for delivery to local partnerships and organisations, such as the Leicestershire Rural Partnership.

The Rural Strategy will give Leicestershire an advantage when these changes are implemented, by establishing and outlining local concerns, priorities, and reflecting both the diversity of issues facing the countryside and rural communities themselves. It also demonstrates that organisations working in the county are able to work together to achieve beneficial outcomes for rural Leicestershire. This sets the county apart from most other shire counties, and I am proud that we are once again engaged in a strategic assessment of rural issues and solutions.

The LRP has a well proven track record of assisting rural Leicestershire, having been established over ten years ago, in 1993. Since that date the LRP has adapted to tackle a number of challenges and opportunities, including the Foot & Mouth crisis, organisational changes, funding opportunities that have been and gone, and much more. As Lead Member for Rural Issues at the County Council I am pleased to be able to continue providing support for the work of the LRP, as we recognise that there is a great deal of activity that needs to be carried out jointly with other partners. The County Council also recognises that joint work in rural Leicestershire needs to be co-ordinated, and I am keen to ensure that the Council fulfils its community leadership role by continuing to provide resources to facilitate this co-ordination.

I am confident that this Strategy will provide a sound basis for our continued work together for the benefit of rural Leicestershire.

Introduction

What is the Leicestershire Rural Partnership?

The Leicestershire Rural Partnership (LRP) has a formal membership of 19 organisations working in rural Leicestershire, with working links to more than 40 other organisations. A list of all partners is provided on the inside cover.

The Leicestershire Rural Partnership is a dynamic and evolving partnership that responds to changing circumstances and opportunities; its membership is flexible and is open to all relevant organisations.

Partners work together in order to benefit from shared knowledge and resources and to jointly address issues of mutual concern. Residents, voluntary organisations and businesses in rural Leicestershire all benefit from increased co-ordination, efficiency and improved service delivery.

The Leicestershire Rural Partnership seeks to deliver better services and quality of life by **doing, co-ordinating, influencing and advising**.

In its key **doing** role the LRP works closely with other cross-cutting partnerships (including "Leicestershire Together", the Leicestershire Local Strategic Partnership; the seven district Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs); and the Leicester Shire Economic Partnership (LSEP), providing a trusted and proven delivery mechanism for their rural objectives. Ensuring that LRP activity complements rather than duplicates the work of others is a key principle for the Partnership.

To achieve its vision, the LRP helps **co-ordinate** the activities of its member partners and works closely with other partnerships. Co-ordinating funding arrangements and helping partners to access funding are important aspects of this role, as is providing a focus for effective networking. However, the LRP activity is partner driven adding value to the work that partners are already undertaking.

The LRP's **influencing and advising** role includes shaping rural issues and policy development at the national and regional level, through its membership of the East Midlands Rural Affairs Forum. The LRP also seeks to influence and advise 'theme-based' groups and partnerships, such as Environmental Action for a Better Leicestershire (ENABLE), the Early Years and Child Care Partnership, the Learning Partnership, and key sub-regional partnerships such as the LSEP.

To enable the Partnership to effectively carry out these roles, a Rural Strategy is developed, implemented and regularly reviewed.

What is the Leicestershire Rural Strategy?

The Leicestershire Rural Strategy provides a strategic framework for the work of the LRP. It highlights the main issues currently facing rural Leicestershire and outlines the strategic priorities of the partnership in addressing these issues. These priorities will be informed by a series of European, national, regional and local policies affecting rural areas. An overview of such policies may be found on page eight and provide the wider policy context for the Rural Strategy.

The Rural Strategy has clear links to a number of other key strategies, including the Community Strategies that have been produced for each district and the county, and topic specific strategies such as the Leicester and Leicestershire Economic Regeneration Strategy and "Love Leicestershire", the Cultural Strategy for the county.

The Strategy is also informed by the knowledge and experience of partners, who have contributed to its development during a number of consultation exercises. These have included two partnership discussion events, termed "Development Days", and a series of visioning workshops at the 2003 Annual Conference "Rural Leicestershire in the 21st Century".

The Strategy outlines how community and partner priorities will be addressed through a number of strategic objectives. The Rural Strategy focuses upon issues which can be best addressed through joint partnership working; it does not seek to identify every issue of concern to rural Leicestershire. Many issues are already being addressed by individual organisations and other partnerships and therefore do not require additional action.

An interim Action Plan 2004 - 2005 will be published subsequent to the Strategy's publication. This will be followed by a three year Action Plan covering the period 2005 - 2008 outlining how partners in the LRP will work together to identify and secure the necessary resources to turn strategic objectives into practical projects, and in turn into real outcomes.

Vision for Rural Leicestershire

The Partnership's vision is that rural Leicestershire will be made up of thriving, inclusive and diverse rural communities, where:

- There is appropriate access for all to a range of services and facilities, and the opportunity to develop both existing and new facilities.
- A strong, prosperous and competitive rural economy benefits the whole local community, particularly marginalised groups and individuals.
- The rural environment is valued as an important asset in its own right, which should be protected and enhanced.

Principles underpinning LRP Activities

The following principles outline how the LRP will work.

Through its work, the LRP will:

- **Add value** to the work of individual partners by:
 - **Focusing activity** principally on those issues where the LRP is the most appropriate mechanism to deliver results. It supports and recognises the roles and responsibilities of other organisations and partnerships.
 - **Co-ordinating** activity in rural Leicestershire to avoid duplication and ensure that priorities are addressed effectively.
 - Acting as a **broker** between partners, external bodies and local communities.
- Enable projects to be implemented by providing **access to funding** from partners or securing external funding.

- Address sustainability issues:
 - By demonstrating and promoting **environmental sustainability** and seeking **financial and organisational sustainability** in initiatives funded through, and supported by, the LRP.
 - By the promotion of **social inclusion**, with an expectation of increasing inclusion where possible.
- Operate as an accessible **information hub** on all issues relating to rural Leicestershire by establishing effective internal and external communication structures that make it easy to share knowledge, good practice and information.
- **Engage effectively** with rural communities to develop 'social capital' and support local activity in response to, or in anticipation of, the needs and aspirations of those communities.
- Act in an **open & transparent manner**; by ensuring clarity over the Partnerships' role, and the contribution and expectations of partners. Partners need to feel an ownership over the work of the LRP, that they are given the opportunity to contribute to and shape that work, and that their contributions are valued.
- Represent the views of partners and rural communities on issues where there is consensus.
- Be **proactive** in anticipating the future needs and aspirations of rural Leicestershire and responding with appropriate measures.
- Develop **innovative and pioneering** responses to local issues and explore alternatives to traditional methods of service delivery, and the merits of continuing to support approaches that have proven successful.
- Recognise, support and strengthen the established roles of **Market Towns and Rural Service Centres** in serving nearby settlements.
- Undertake a rolling programme of monitoring and review to ensure that the principles and objectives are properly guiding the work of the LRP, and ensure that there is sufficient flexibility within organisational structures to adapt in response to internal decisions or external influences.

LRP Structure

The structure* of the LRP is as follows:

- a **Management Board**, responsible for determining the strategic direction of the LRP; monitoring/evaluating the work of Programme Teams; and liaison with other key partnerships.
- a **Co-ordination Group**, responsible for; the operational level of the LRP and processes such as project appraisal, plus co-ordinating the work of the Programme Teams and ensuring that effective linkages are made between Teams and with other partners.
- **Programme Teams**, responsible for the development, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of projects. Many Programme Teams operate through **Task Groups**, which often relate to specific projects, and are established to focus upon specific areas in more depth.

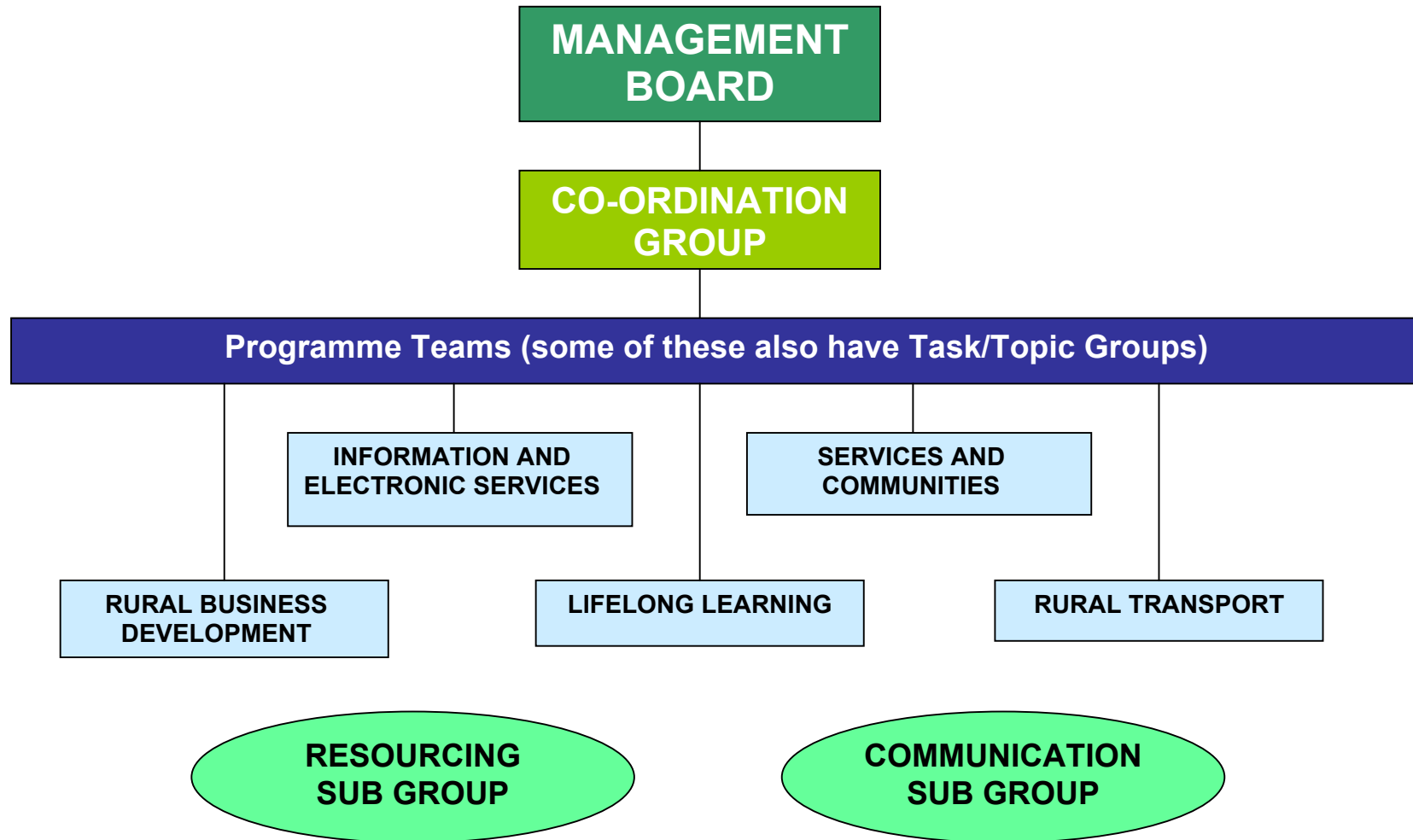
- Two cross-cutting Sub Groups;
 - a **Resourcing Sub Group**, responsible for identifying potential sources of funding and co-ordinating bids to support the LRP programme; and
 - a **Communications Sub Group**, responsible for supporting the work of the Communications Officer and for projects such as the website, conference, Annual Report, newsletter and other events/publications.

*See also Figure 1 LRP structure (page 6).

Individual projects are delivered by various partner organisations, with different organisations taking the lead.

Leicestershire County Council has established a support structure for the LRP by providing staff to co-ordinate, administer and communicate the work of the LRP. County Council staff also chair many, but not all, of the Programme Teams. Over the duration of the LRP's existence, the County Council has been the most significant single source of funds to support projects delivered through the LRP. Other organisations that have provided significant funding to the LRP include The Countryside Agency, emda and the Leicester Shire Economic Partnership (LSEP).

Figure 1: Proposed New LRP Structure (as recommended by Essjay Solution for consideration by the Management Board)



About Rural Leicestershire

Leicestershire is a predominately rural county, with 55% of the population living in just over 210 rural parishes. The County has over 300 settlements with a population under 10,000, which is a widely used definition of rurality. The majority of these settlements are very small, nearly half having a population of under 250. There is a clear pattern to the distribution of rural settlements, with Harborough and Melton districts containing a total of 70% of settlements under 10,000 population.

The County encircles the city of Leicester, and shares a border with Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Warwickshire, Staffordshire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire and Rutland. The majority of these adjoining counties are also rural in nature, although large urban centres of Nottingham and Derby lie close to the north and north-west of the county's boundary.

Leicestershire benefits from excellent national road and rail links. The south of the County is just over 1 hour from London by train, well within commuting distance. Many principal roads pass through the County, including the M1, M69, M42 and A14. Public transport in the County is based on a network of bus routes, of at least hourly frequency, linking to major settlements. Demand responsive (dial-a-ride) bus services, tailored more to the individual needs of residents have been introduced in some small settlements, and the expansion of these services and introduction of other transport initiatives is planned in the future.

Leicestershire can be broadly divided up into several landscape character areas, the main ones being the Wolds, Charnwood Forest and the Coalfields across the north, High Leicestershire to the east, and the Leicestershire Vales to the south. Woodland Cover in Leicestershire is below the national average, however it does include almost half of the National Forest.

Rural Leicestershire is also made up of a wide diversity of rural communities, each of which has its own unique set of geographical, social, economic, and environmental characteristics. Some rural settlements are located close to large urban centres and major transport arteries, others are more remote. Some look to Leicester and towns within Leicestershire for employment and services; with others having closer relationships with urban areas outside the County, for example with Nottingham, Derby, and Grantham. Many are strongly rooted in agricultural economy, whereas some have their origins in the industrial revolution. There are communities with active parish councils or other community groups but others have little in the way of organised community activity. Employment, service provision, incomes, educational attainment, crime and housing costs with vary, sometimes considerably, between each town or village. Whilst, therefore, each shares the experience of being rural, the rural experience in each can be very different. The LRP will need to be sensitive to these differences when devising projects and initiatives to meet local needs.

Policy context

The objectives of the Rural Strategy are shaped by policy at European, national, regional and local levels.

European

Reforms to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which come into force in 2004-5, will change the way the European Union supports the agricultural sector. Most subsidies will no longer be linked to volumes of production and direct payments for bigger farms will be reduced, allowing payments for environmental, quality or animal welfare programmes to be increased. These reforms are intended to make farmers more competitive and market-orientated whilst still providing income stability and introducing an element of support for rural development. The industry is likely to become more diverse and innovative as support mechanisms change and the pace of this change accelerates.

National

At the **national** level, the 2000 Government Rural White Paper *Our Countryside: the future – a fair deal for rural England* focuses on the Government's aim to 'sustain and enhance the distinctive environment, economy and social fabric of the English countryside for the benefit of all'. It established a vision of:

- A **living** countryside, with thriving rural communities and access to high quality public services;
- A **working** countryside, with a diverse economy giving high and stable levels of employment;
- A **protected** countryside in which the environment is sustained and enhanced;
- A **vibrant** countryside which can shape its own future and with its voice heard by Government at all levels.

The Rural White Paper set out to 'make a difference' to the quality of life in the countryside. It contains 261 commitments, more than 200 of which have either been achieved or seen 'real progress', according to Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State for Rural Affairs, in November 2003. Remaining challenges are now more clearly defined and fundamentally relate to the large variation in economic, social and environmental conditions between different rural communities.

Since the Rural White Paper was launched, however, all government rural policy delivered through DEFRA has been investigated as part of Lord Haskins' *Rural Delivery Review*. This was instigated following concerns that customers of DEFRA were not receiving the best services from DEFRA initiatives and due to organisational confusion in rural areas. The weight of this report leans towards Councils and local partnerships taking the lead in delivering rural services, and regional development agencies such as East Midlands Development Agency (*emda*) having a greater role in rural development. This shift away from centralised Whitehall control is necessary for several reasons, which can be summarised as:

- Poor accountability
- Failure to satisfy regional and local priorities
- Too many players
- Lack of co-ordination
- Confused customers

Of these five key themes for change, the one that will be of greatest relevance to the LRP is:

- To bring delivery closer to the customer by devolving greater responsibility to regional and local organisations for the delivery of economic and social policy.

The intention of the report is to make life better for everyone who uses, or delivers rural services. This will lead to fewer points of contact, greater local knowledge on the part of the deliverers, and more flexible responses to local needs. A strong and up to date Rural Strategy will provide the LRP with an agreed framework around which we can take advantage of new opportunities that may arise from the Rural Delivery Review.

Regional

At the **regional** level there are a number of strategies and initiatives that have a major impact on rural Leicestershire. The East Midlands Regional Assembly's (EMRA) Integrated Regional Strategy (IRS) provides framework within which other strategies can be prepared in a co-ordinated and complementary way. The IRS includes an agreed regional vision that the East Midlands 'will be a place where people want to live, work and invest because of our vibrant economy, our healthy, safe, diverse and inclusive society, and our quality environment'. A Review of the IRS is currently underway.

2003 saw the launch by *emda* of *Destination 2010*, the revised Regional Economic Strategy, with the aim of propelling the East Midlands into Europe's top 20 regions by 2010. The Top 20 ambition is about making economic, social and environmental progress in an integrated way - it's not about growth at any cost. The region's success will be measured against a Top 20 index that combines Income, Jobs, Equality and Environment. In 2003, the region's latest position was 35 out of 77 European Union regions.

The Economic Strategy has been developed within the policy framework provided by the IRS and outlines 12 steps the region needs to take to address the economic aspects of the IRS vision, from enterprise to urban regeneration. It also identifies six potential sectors to attract more investment and innovation. These are:

- High performance engineering
- Clothing and textiles
- Food and drink
- Healthcare
- The creative industries
- Environmental technologies

The Rural Action Plan, published in mid-2000 by *emda*, complements the Regional Economic Strategy by highlighting the key issues needing to be addressed in rural East Midlands to sustain and support rural enterprise. These include: learning and skills; enterprise and innovation; agriculture; transport; tourism; and market towns. Addressing these will enable rural areas to play their part in the region's aim of becoming one of Europe's top 20 by the year 2010, and to benefit from that aim being achieved.

Regional Planning Guidance for the East Midlands (RPG8) provides a broad strategic land-use planning framework within which Structure Plans and Local Plans are produced. It therefore influences development patterns in rural areas, including the quantity and distribution of economic and housing development. Revised RPG8 was considered at an Examination in Public in November 2003 and the final revised RPG should be issued in autumn 2004.

Reforms to the planning system will see the development by the EMRA of a Regional Spatial Strategy which will set the context for Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) produced by district and unitary councils. The spatial strategy and LDFs will be expected to more closely integrate land-use policy with other key policy areas.

Two key strategies due to be published (in 2004) will also influence the work of the LRP: the Regional Tourism Strategy and the Regional Housing Strategy. Tourism plays an important part in supporting the rural economy and the Tourism Strategy will seek to maximise the tourism potential of the region. The provision of housing in rural areas is an increasingly topical issue and the Housing Strategy will be an important influence on housing investment in the region, including the funding of social housing.

Rural issues are considered in the round at regional level by the East Midlands Rural Affairs Forum (EMRAF). EMRAF links with and influences the work of the Government Office for the East Midlands, emda and EMRA, but is independent of these bodies. Links to national policy are made through EMRAF's place on the Rural Affairs Forum for England, which is chaired by the Minister for Rural Affairs. EMRAF's roles and responsibilities include to:

- provide a forum for sharing information on issues and initiatives affecting rural areas;
- identify issues of concern to rural people and businesses;
- give views on new regional proposals affecting the region's rural areas;
- act as a conduit for regional views on national proposals affecting rural areas through its links with the England Rural Affairs Forum;
- review progress on implementing the Rural White Paper and key rural policies;
- suggest further policy developments needed to implement the Rural White Paper objectives;
- review service delivery to rural areas in the region to inform the above.

Think Farming and Food is an EMRAF produced regional action plan that seeks to achieve a sustainable future for farming and food industries in the East Midlands. The plan sets out a range of priorities and proposed actions to assist development, influence and direct change within the industry. The aim is to make a real difference by proposing actions in four areas: cross-cutting projects; sustainable agriculture; the food chain; and the environment.

EMRAF has also produced a Rural Charter, *Think Rural*, whose purpose is to engage organisations and companies in making a positive difference to the region's rural areas. Those that adopt the Charter demonstrate their commitment to achieving rural prosperity and providing a fair deal for rural areas to the benefit of all.

Local

At the **local** level, the *Leicestershire Community Strategy* has been prepared by Leicestershire Together the Leicestershire Local Strategic Partnership to help achieve the aim of improving the quality of life and the quality and co-ordination of public services in the county. It identifies a number of key issues that concern the people of Leicestershire and sets out the LSP's priorities for action to achieve the vision of:

- A vibrant and thriving county in which to live, work and play
- A county where all have access to quality services
- A county which looks to the future by maximising opportunities for its young people.

The seven district councils which in the County have each formed their own Local Strategic Partnership and developed individual *Community Strategies*. The majority make reference to issues in rural Leicestershire, the work of the LRP is helping to address some of these issues.

The County's culture strategy, *Love Leicestershire*, presents four themes, each of which will be of relevance to rural Leicestershire. These include:

- Strengthening Communities
- Celebrating Leicestershire
- Lifestyles and Health
- Building a Creative Economy

Organisations such as the Police, county and district councils and the Fire and Rescue Service have established a Crime and Disorder Partnership in each of the 7 districts. Each partnership has a *Crime and Disorder Reduction Strategy* in place, which sets out the priorities for the partnership for the three-year period it covers. This includes national priorities, such as reducing vehicle crime, and also locally identified priorities. Priorities may be based around a theme - e.g. to raise awareness of domestic violence - or around a geographical area - e.g. reduce retail crime in Market Harborough Town Centre, or both.

Parish councils, the Rural Community Council, community and voluntary organisations have a significant role in supporting and encouraging grass root community consultation and involvement including through Parish Plans, part of the Vital Villages programme supported by the Countryside Agency over the last three years.

Local Issues

Housing and Social Change

Housing choice for those on lower incomes in rural Leicestershire is narrowing. As average house prices in Leicestershire rise, many villages are increasingly unaffordable for a large section of the community. The lack of rental accommodation in many rural areas further compounds the situation.

This is having a significant effect on the social balance within many rural settlements. If lower income households find it more difficult to live in rural areas this would reduce the number of rural residents able to work for key local businesses and services. As housing opportunities attract those on higher incomes who may travel some distance outside of the village to work, there may be fewer beneficial social interactions within the community, such as shared schools and leisure pursuits. On the positive side, many villages do retain a vibrant community, often the result of considerable local effort and commitment.

Social change also brings, however, opportunities for businesses and services, through the development and introduction of new skills, experience and interests. Rural areas in Leicestershire are characterised by a significantly older age profile than urban areas. One implication of this is in the increased demand for care and healthcare in areas where service providers can have difficulty recruiting employees and providing cost effective services. Older people are at particular risk of experiencing isolation as they suffer from declining mobility with age, resulting in difficulty accessing services that are based further away. Valuable social and civic activity in rural settlements can, however, increase as a result of having greater numbers of older and retired residents.

Access

The defining characteristic of rural areas is their geography; their relative remoteness from urban areas and smaller populations. As a result, access to services (shops, healthcare, etc) and opportunities (jobs, leisure, etc) are more difficult for those without access to a vehicle. Public transport offers limited options when compared to private transport and as a result most households who can afford to will own a vehicle. This undermines the ability of public transport to adequately meet the needs of rural areas by further reducing the number of potential passengers.

The Index of Multiple Deprivation (2000) identifies the districts of Harborough and Melton, particularly parishes to the east of each district, as being the most isolated in terms of access to services and transport.

Services providers, such as Local Authorities and Primary Care Trusts, face the challenge of providing efficient services to dispersed rural populations. New technology continues to provide the potential for improving access to certain services and reducing the need to travel. However it should also be recognised that new technologies will not be suitable for, or accessible to, all residents and business.

Market Towns, and Rural Service Centres, have a significant role to play in providing access to services for their surrounding rural settlements, by functioning as service delivery hubs. To enable them to play this role, access to market towns and rural centres needs to be maximised.

Decline in services

Rural services, such as shops, post offices and pubs, face particular challenges to remain competitive, particularly as larger urban retailers are so accessible to mobile rural residents who increasingly shop and socialise outside the local community often near their workplace.

The continuing closure of services and pessimism about future market conditions are tangible indicators of the difficulty facing rural service providers. The loss or reduction of local services has the greatest effect on the least mobile rural residents, leaving them isolated and reducing their quality of life.

Inclusion

Social exclusion is “a short hand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low income, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown” (UK Government).

Despite the overall increase in the affluence and mobility of many rural residents, there remain groups and individuals within rural areas who have difficulty in accessing the sort of opportunities that most people enjoy and take for granted. Many issues influence this lack of inclusion and not all relate to income or mobility. For example a lack of local childcare provision can cause some household members to be excluded from certain work or leisure opportunities.

Young peoples experience of rural life may be different to that of older generations. Young people are often seen as a cause of social problems in communities, rather than resulting from them, which can lead young people to feel, excluded from the wider community. Young people often do not have a voice through which to channel their views and interests and to engage with others to act on their behalf. This can lead to increasing frustration amongst young people over the lack of facilities and opportunities in rural communities.

In many villages there may only be a small number of people, for a variety of reasons, experiencing levels or types of exclusion. This, combined with any perception of rural affluence, can make it difficult to both identify the issues and take effective action. The dispersed nature of rural areas can mean that there is a lack of formal or informal support networks for people who may feel isolated, including groups such as carers, disabled people and ethnic minorities.

The introduction of new technology may assist in addressing certain inclusion issues, however many issues require alternative and innovative responses

Economy

Despite recent setbacks such as the Foot and Mouth outbreak, the Leicestershire rural economy is outperforming the regional average, with higher rates of employment growth. Whilst agriculture is still adjusting, there are many examples of rural diversification and the development of new rural businesses, with recent migrants to rural areas being responsible for creating an average of 2.4 jobs each. Business advice and support to new and existing businesses remains of variable quality and accessibility.

Market Towns and larger rural settlements have to compete with urban centres, and can find it difficult to retain or develop successful local economies. The key to their success will lie in identifying and building on their strengths as a location for business.

Funding

Funding is available from a variety of sources, including the County Council and other partners in the LRP, to support activity in rural Leicestershire. Much of this is provided in the form of time limited grants, and often a maximum of 3 years funding is available. This can make it difficult to sustain initiatives over the long term. There is a proliferation of grant initiatives available, each with differing criteria and processes; this can make it difficult for individuals and organisations to obtain the required information, advice and resources.

Strategic objectives

The LRP exists to maintain and enhance the quality of life of rural communities in Leicestershire. This is predominantly achieved by supporting projects and initiatives within rural settlements, but can sometimes involve assisting the development or enhancement of facilities and services based in urban areas. There will, however, be a general presumption against the partnership operating in larger urban settlements (such as Loughborough, Hinckley, Coalville, Wigston and Oadby). Projects supporting more isolated rural communities, which suffer from poor access to services and facilities, will be given priority.

This section outlines the **strategic objectives** of the LRP in relation to six specific themes, agreed as a priority by the members of the partnership - Community Development, Accessibility, Rural Services, Economy, Young People and the Environment.

It also includes **case studies** of ten projects developed since the Second Rural Strategy was published in 2001 and highlights the **projects** to be developed during the early phase of the implementation of the Strategy.

This Strategy will be supported by a detailed action plan (see also Page 3), which will include targets and performance measures for all projects developed, supported and/or funded through the partnership. Performance by individual projects against projected milestones, outcomes and outputs will be assessed on a six-monthly basis by the Management Board and reported on the LRP website – www.oakleaves.org.uk.

Community Development

Through its work, the LRP will:

Enable rural communities, and the organisations working with them, to achieve their potential to be thriving, diverse and inclusive.

The LRP will promote and support:

- Effective and inclusive community participation and consultation processes by supporting their implementation, sharing outcomes and developing mechanisms that ensure a link between consultation and tangible results.
- The sharing of information, advice and resources to enable Parish/Town Councils and the voluntary and community sectors to work with communities and address their needs and aspirations.
- The development of social capital that empowers communities to address their own aspirations or improve quality of life.
- Activity that increases the influence of rural communities, and encourages other organisations to recognise and benefit from the contribution of community based organisations.
- Initiatives to help individuals and communities to develop themselves including through Learning and Skills Initiatives or Arts/Cultural Heritage Activities.

Case Study - Supporting Community Engagement

The LRP supports community engagement and participation by funding Community Development Officers employed by the Rural Community Council. These officers are currently supporting more than 50 community groups across the county to initiate and undertake processes such as Village Appraisals, Parish Plans, Village Design Statements and Visioning.

The aim is to develop the capacity of rural communities and support them in both the identification of local needs, issues and opportunities and the development of projects to address these needs. The role of the RCC is to develop links between communities and service providers, to ensure that the consultation leads to tangible improvements to local services and facilities and that the process engages all sections of the community.

The LRP hosts an extremely popular Community Consultation Seminar each Spring which attracts more than 100 representatives of consultation groups, Parish Councils and service providers, who all make the most of the opportunity to learn more about good practice in other parts of the county.

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Case Study - Leicestershire Mobile ICT Training

The Leicestershire Mobile ICT Training project was set up in April 2001 and offers 'first-rung' ICT courses in local venues. These specifically target isolated rural groups, including older people, women returners, unemployed people, rural workers/businesses, people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups.

Over 4,500 learners in more than 100 localities have benefited from the project to date. As a result of attending a short course, many people decide to continue their learning, either through new leisure pursuits or on accredited college courses. The real benefit is that people engage in learning in a local venue, at a time and pace that suits their needs and that they can learn alongside family and friends.

Local *learning champions* were used to make the links between communities and learning opportunities and to help with the planning and delivery of the courses. Courses have included taster sessions, word-processing, basic DTP, e-mail, Internet and digital photography.

Leicestershire ICT mobile training won an award as best Ukonline centre in the East Midlands 2002.

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Looking Forward – Community Development

Early actions to support the implementation of the Rural Strategy will include:

- ✓ significant support for community development and engagement processes, including Parish Plans, Village Appraisals and Rural Centre Healthchecks
- ✓ a programme of seminars to enable groups involved in consultation processes to network and share good (and bad!) practice
- ✓ grants for the development of projects to address the needs identified through engagement processes through a Community Chest
- ✓ practical support, through the Association of Parish and Local Councils, to help local Parish Councils achieve Quality Council status
- ✓ a rural Safety Initiative in Blaby district to empower communities and Parish Councils to tackle Crime and Disorder issues

Accessibility

Through its work, the LRP will:

Promote access to services, information and opportunities that is convenient, flexible, affordable and available to all.

The LRP will promote and support:

- The effective use of existing facilities and services, by ensuring that they can be used by the widest possible range of groups and individuals and are accessible to all who might use them.
- The development of an effective and integrated transport network, including all forms of transport provision, to enable equitable access to work, leisure, and social opportunities.
- The provision of accessible information which is of relevance, interest or use to rural communities
- Action to remove barriers to participation in economic or skills development activity

Case Study - Community Access Points in Post Offices

This project combines the “new with the old” by placing new technology in the form of Information Communication Technology (ICT) access points, into the “traditional” rural post office.

Post offices provide essential economic and social services, although many are struggling to survive in today’s climate. The project hopes to encourage people to see their post office as a source of information and advice as well as ICT services.

Initially seven post offices around the County were chosen to pilot the project – Coleorton, Great Easton, Newton Burgoland, Stanton under Bardon, Stathern, Syston and Whetstone. Members of the community in these villages do not already have access to the Internet in a location such as the library or village hall. Each was provided with a computer with Internet access, printer and associated furniture.

The computer is set to the leicestershirevillages.com portal as a default screen. The portal is another LRP project which provides a template for all Leicestershire villages to add on their own material such as local services, events, healthcare, night classes and tourist information.

The project also complements the “frequently asked questions” leaflet produced by Leicestershire County Council and available in all Leicestershire post offices outlining contact details for different service providers.

Contact Details:

Ray Smith, ICT Co-ordinator
Leicestershire Rural Partnership
Telephone: 01509 266918
E-mail: rjsmith@leics.gov.uk

Case Study - All Saints Church, Sheepy Magna

The Post Office at Sheepy Magna closed in March 2003 when the shop and Post Office were sold as a private residence. There is limited public transport to the nearest office, which is over a mile away. The Vicar of the church decided that a post office service could operate from the church vestry and also suggested placing a coffee area within the church, so that people could meet and chat whilst using Post Office services.

The existing links between the Post Office and the Leicestershire Rural Partnership enabled funding for the project, including for the physical adaptation of the church, post office equipment and security measures, to be secured from a variety of sources. The early involvement of a range of key partners meant that funding and planning permission issues were resolved early on, avoiding potential pitfalls.

The Post Office opened in December, operating as a satellite office from a nearby branch, and is being well used by local residents. A number of local people, who had not previously visited the church, now stop and enjoy a coffee and chat.

Contact Details:

Rural Services Co-ordinator
Leicestershire County Council
E-mail: policy@leics.gov.uk
Telephone: 0116 265 8098

Looking Forward - Accessibility

Early actions to support the implementation of the Rural Strategy will include:

- ✓ support for the East and West Leicestershire Rural Transport Partnerships to develop flexible transport provision to meet local needs
- ✓ a programme of projects to provide access to electronic services and information through the development of village and parish council websites – www.leicestershirevillages.com or www.leicestershireparishcouncils.org , on-going support for Post Office Community Access Points and continued promotion of the Leicestershire Together “Access to Broadband” campaign
- ✓ On-going support for the Learning Ambassadors project, through which learners encourage others in their area to take up the learning challenge (see Page 16), and Pubs and Learning initiative, which promotes the use of pubs as learning venues.

Rural services

Through its work, the LRP will:

Enable service providers and community groups to deliver effective and equitable services to rural communities.

The LRP will promote and support:

- The delivery of effective, equitable services that meet community needs. This will involve recognition of the particular social, economic and geographic characteristics of individual communities.
- The retention and enhancement of existing rural services and facilities whilst seeking alternative and innovative delivery methods that will be sustainable in the long term.
- The role of service providers in meeting specific rural community needs, by providing relevant information, advice, and resources.
- The development of community solutions to community needs by using the skills and knowledge of local people.

Case Study - Service Co-ordination Events

The “Review of Service Delivery” conducted by Leicestershire County Council in 2000 highlighted a need for enhanced communication and information provision between service providers across the County. The method adopted to address this was a series of networking events where different organisations can meet and discuss service delivery issues in relation to an individual settlement.

Fifteen Service Co-ordination Events have been held since 2001. The aim of these is to identify common concerns, threats and opportunities including, for example, the potential scope for combining services and for joint use of premises.

The events usually last about 3 hours and are held in a local village hall, library, school or other suitable venue. The background to the events is presented, followed by a discussion of service delivery issues affecting the settlement and the outcomes of any recent consultations. Each participant then briefly introduces themselves and the organisation that they represent. A networking session then takes place with actions recorded on “action slips” and written up into an action table.

All participants are contacted by the Rural Services Co-ordinator after 3 and 6 months to ask for updates on agreed actions. The outcomes of the events have been diverse, ranging from the establishment of adult education courses and ICT training to joint client advice sessions.

Contact Details:

Rachel Bridgeman, Rural Services Co-ordinator
Leicestershire County Council
E-mail policy@leics.gov.uk

Telephone 0116 265 8098

Case Study - Rural Services – A Good Practice Guide

Leicestershire success stories are in the spotlight in a new Good Practice Guide, which highlights new and innovative ways of delivering services to rural communities. The guide has been produced in order to share the experiences of organisations and communities in Leicestershire with individuals and groups locally, regionally and nationally.

The ultimate aim of the LRP is to deliver a better quality of service and use public money and other resources more effectively. It is hoped that the guide will help to avoid “reinventing the wheel” and enable Leicestershire projects to be replicated elsewhere.

The guide includes 22 case studies divided into four sections: Working Together, Learning in the Community, Supporting Rural Business and Sustainable Communities.

The projects featured are all success stories, but provide an honest assessment of potential pitfalls and difficulties faced by the contributors, which will hopefully help people interested in developing a similar project.

Ultimately, the guide showcases what can be achieved through partnership working!

Contact Details:

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Leicestershire County Council
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Looking Forward – Rural Services

Early actions to support the implementation of the Rural Strategy will include:

- ✓ financial support for village shops, public houses, garages and post offices through the Retail Support Grant and Post Office Development Schemes
- ✓ training seminars for village shopkeepers and sub-postmasters, to complement the grant schemes
- ✓ wide dissemination of the recently published Rural Services Good Practice Guide
- ✓ an on-going programme of service co-ordination events around the county (see above for details)
- ✓ support for the Rural Housing Enabler to promote and enable affordable housing schemes
- ✓ reprinting the Frequently Asked Questions leaflet that we made available through every post office in the county

Economy

Through its work the LRP will:

Help to develop a vibrant and sustainable rural economy by supporting business development that recognises local needs.

The LRP will promote and support:

- The co-ordination and delivery of business support to develop, or diversify, existing rural businesses and encourage entrepreneurial activity, particularly for uncompetitive sectors or those of greatest benefit to the rural economy.
- The sustainable development of the rural economy including support for social enterprises.
- The co-ordination and delivery of training to enable skills development
- The development of new markets for products of benefit to the rural economy
- Further research into the rural economy to enable more effective intervention.

Case Study - New Life for Redundant Buildings Grant Initiative

The “New Life for Redundant Buildings” scheme provides funding and training for owners of redundant buildings to transform empty and/or derelict buildings into new economic uses. The purpose of the grant scheme, which began in 1999, is to aid the diversification of the rural economy.

Not only does the scheme provide employment opportunities for local people, it also safeguards and restores important heritage landscapes and reduces the need to develop scarce and environmentally sensitive greenfield land.

Applicants can access free advisory site visits and feasibility studies, a detailed development package to obtain planning permission and 25% of building costs. They are assisted at every stage of the process, minimising the risk of being deterred by bureaucratic procedures.

The project has proved to be extremely popular; in 2002-03 26 stage one grants, 9 stage two grants and 7 stage three grants were paid. At the time of writing, approximately 50 applicants are going through different stages of the process. Completed projects have included a diverse range of uses for buildings including the conversion of a 19th century stables into an organic food supplier, a cattle pen into a rural training centre for agricultural workers and a disused railway station into a mail order stick insect supplier!

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Case Study - Farmers Markets

Leicestershire Food Links is an independent community enterprise, which aims to link local producers with local consumers in order to support the rural economy, protect the environment and improve health. In partnership with several local authorities, Leicestershire Food Links promotes and develops farmers' markets', where you can expect to find ostrich burgers, organic and specialist meat, hams and sausages, seasonal vegetables, honey, jam, organic bread and other baked products. Leicestershire Rural Partnership (LRP) funding has been used to employ a Farmers Market Organiser, who supports the popular Hinckley, Coalville and Castle Donington Farmers Markets.

LRP funding has also helped to develop a system for farmers' market certification. Any market using the name 'Farmers' Market' is required to have a robust system in place to reassure customers and producers that all food sold is really local and produced by the traders themselves. There are also uncertified farmers' markets' in operation across Leicestershire in Melton Mowbray, Lutterworth, Loughborough, and Market Harborough.

Leicestershire Food Links have also commissioned a report on the possibility of developing a marketing scheme for Leicestershire beef and lamb. The scheme helps to support meat producers, processors and retailers in the county; all of which were hard hit by the Foot and Mouth outbreak.

Contact Details:

Alec Duthie
Leicestershire Food Links
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Looking Forward - Economy

A number of economic projects developed by the LRP have been supported through the Leicester Shire Economic Partnership, these include:

- ✓ a scheme to enable the development of high quality visitor accommodation in rural Leicestershire
- ✓ support for a range of schemes in market towns in Leicestershire
- ✓ on-going support for the New Life for Redundant Rural Buildings scheme (see above)
- ✓ grants to farm businesses and rural micro businesses with less than 10 employees
- ✓ training for people employed in land-based industries
- ✓ support for the establishment of new farmers markets in the county (see above)

Young People

Through its work the LRP will:

Enable young people to achieve the best quality of life by helping them take action to achieve their aspirations or meet their needs, and improving their influence on organisations that work with them.

The LRP will promote and support activity which;

- Enables the gathering and sharing of information on the needs of rural young people, particularly the vulnerable and isolated.
- Engages with young people in an effective and participative manner, ensuring that they have appropriate influence over issues that effect them
- Facilitates action by young people, or those working with them, that responds to their needs in a timely and appropriate manner.

Case Study - Young Persons Citizens' Jury

Following the success of the Citizens' Jury on Rural Services in 2001, the Leicestershire Rural Partnership turned its attention to the needs of young people. The Young Persons Citizens' Jury was held in November 2002 and involved fourteen young people aged between 14-18.

The need for greater involvement of young people in the LRP was highlighted at Development Days and the 2002 Conference. Young people were also identified as a priority group during consultation on the (then) emerging Community Strategy for Leicestershire.

The event was organised as a series of modules/sessions within which the jury considered a particular question and then 'cross-examined' expert witnesses to help them formulate an answer. The jury then presented a summary of key findings and priorities for action, which they felt to be transport, information and health awareness. Other key issues included the role of schools and colleges in disseminating information, crime and safety issues and the need to get young people more involved in decision-making.

The findings of the jury were used as the basis of the youth chapter of the Leicestershire Community Strategy.

The LRP held a follow-up Event in May 2003, which provided the Jury with the opportunity to find out how their involvement in the Citizens' Jury had influenced decision-makers in Leicestershire.

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Looking Forward – Young People

We will work closely with Leicestershire Together to implement a range of projects to improve the quality of life of young people. These include transport schemes, a youth web portal and initiatives to tackle the involvement of young people in crime, both as victims and perpetrators. We will also consider how to engage with young people effectively and consistently, building on the work of the Citizens Jury.

Environment

Through its work the LRP will:

Support activity that conserves or enhances a diverse environment and an accessible countryside, which is an attractive place to live, work or visit.

The LRP will promote and support:

- An improved understanding of the environment and the effect it has, now and in the future, on social and economic activity in rural areas.
- A range of activities in conjunction with ENABLE (Environmental Action for a Better Leicestershire) including the promotion of energy efficiency, agri-environment schemes and environmentally sensitive farming, land management and diversification, the protection of key landscape and heritage resources and creation of new wildlife sites
- A sustainable balance of activity that maximises and enhances environmental resources, whilst protecting the countryside from inappropriate development.
- Sustainable access to the countryside.

Case Study - Leicestershire Wood Fuels Project

The threat of climate change has created a major opportunity for landowners and farmers to diversify into renewable energy production and the delivery of related services. The introduction of the Climate Change Levy on business energy consumption and the Renewables Obligation on energy producers has prompted an increasing switch away from fossil fuels. Both the Energy White Paper and the East Midlands Sustainable Energy Strategy identify wood heating as a promising new technology to reduce carbon emissions.

The Leicestershire Wood Heat Project was established to provide information, training and advice on wood fuelled heating and ultimately aims to develop a whole new business sector to the County. Not only does wood heating bring environmental benefits by reducing our contribution to global warming; it will also provide new sources of income for landowners and farmers by encouraging responsible management of new and existing woodland.

The Wood Fuels Project has supported the establishment of Rural Energy Trust Ltd, a not-for-profit company that provides information and advice on wood fuels and heating equipment. The project undertakes site assessments across Leicestershire, including schools and County Council premises, which are considering wood for heating.

Contact Details:

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Leicestershire County Council
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Looking Forward - Environment

Early actions to support the implementation of the Rural Strategy will include:

- ✓ improvements to the streetscape and open spaces in Leicestershire towns and villages
- ✓ on-going support for the Rural Heritage Economic Regeneration scheme (HERS) which regenerates commercial and historic community buildings and structures in designated conservation areas in selected settlements around the County

**For further information on the work of the Leicestershire Rural Partnership
please visit <http://www.oakleaves.org.uk>**