

Rural Regeneration Strategy

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Rural and Market Towns area represents approximately 85% of the total land area of the Borough, and is roughly 815 square km. In excess of 40% of the Borough's population lives in the rural area. It is important to recognise that the rural area covered by this Strategy extends beyond the countryside and smaller villages. It includes the larger villages of Malpas and Tarporley, and the towns of Frodsham, Helsby and Neston. It also includes areas which are close to the Borough's urban centres – such as Christleton, Weaverham, Cuddingham and Willaston.

The rural areas of Cheshire West & Chester suffer from many of the same issues as other rural areas across England, including poor access to services, limited public transport, an ageing population and a critical lack of affordable housing. Despite the challenges affecting it, the rural area is an important asset. Its attractive natural and built environment, heritage and cultural infrastructure are a key part of the Borough's "value proposition" and significantly improve its quality of life offer. Cheshire West and Chester Council recognises that the rural area plays a key role in the character and economy of the county.

The Rural Regeneration Strategy (The Strategy), of which this is a summary, provides a framework which the Council will use to steer delivery of its regeneration services over the next 10 years. It will influence the way that it invests and supports its rural area, and the businesses, people and places within it. It sets out the Council's agreed approach to sustaining rural communities, the need for growth, and its views on the contribution that the rural area can make to improve the quality of life for all the Borough's residents.

The Strategy sets out a framework or road-map to guide the Council and its partners and assist CW&CC Regeneration Team with the preparation and implementation of its annual business plans.

The Council appointed a consultancy team, led by AMION Consulting¹ to work with relevant officers and Members to prepare the Strategy. Operationally it is "owned" by, and forms the basis of the Business Plan for, the Council's Rural Area and Market Town Programme Team. The Council wants to use the Strategy as an opportunity to:

- maximise economic potential;
- create access to affordable living for rural communities;
- empower and connect rural communities; and
- capitalise on our environmental potential.

It is important to note that it is a Regeneration Strategy that has been prepared.

It therefore has an economic focus. It is not a Green Infrastructure Strategy, a Tourism Strategy or a Farming & Food Strategy. Nor is it a strategy focused on the local economies of the larger rural towns.

Strategic Context

The Strategy sits as part of the evidence base and strategic framework supporting the Local Development Framework. It will be one of a series of strategies – including the Green Infrastructure Strategy, the Local Transport Plan and the Housing Strategy. The Local Development Framework will set the policy context for the future of the authority, and for addressing issues raised in the Rural Regeneration Strategy. It is therefore important to be clear that the strategy influences the Local Development Framework but does not set it.

The Council has an aspiration for growth involving an increase in population, housing, the local economy (measured by GVA) and employment. New development should be used to underpin local services, increase access to affordable and suitable housing for those excluded by market conditions, and attract younger working age residents into the area to improve the demographic profile of the local population.

The focus on economic growth will provide an incentive for the Council and its partners to create the conditions in which local enterprise can thrive. In the rural context this will mean providing positive and enabling planning policies which encourage sustainable economic development at farm scale, in villages and in the rural towns. It should also mean a focus on provision of high speed broadband, on improving the transport infrastructure and availability

of public transport in the rural area and on a long term strategy for the generation and consumption of affordable and sustainable energy.

At the same time, it will be necessary to consider, and address, pressures which may damage the area's natural and heritage environment. These will arise from development, but also from other issues such as the economic challenges faced by many farming businesses, the significant reduction in funds available to nature conservation and heritage organisations and the continuing impact on biodiversity and habitats of modern living – particularly the continual movement of people, goods and services.

Regeneration Challenges

The evidence base, which is included in the Strategy as a technical appendix, shows that Cheshire West & Chester's rural communities face some serious threats to their long term sustainability. These include:

- population imbalance;
- a shortage of the right sort of housing;
- unaffordable housing;
- withdrawal of services;
- limited economic opportunity;
- economic infrastructure including inadequate broadband coverage in many areas; and
- the increasing cost of fuel and energy.

What a growth-based strategy means

Reversing the likely impact of these challenges requires positive remedial action. It is clear from the evidence that if the Borough's rural communities are to have a viable and sustainable future it will be necessary to allow, and help them, to grow. However, a readiness to plan for growth absolutely does not mean a planning free-for-all. Growth simply for the sake of adding houses will not be likely to address the key challenges outlined above.

Based on the evidence reviewed in developing the strategy and the analysis of the population, of inward migration trends and of the requirements of the knowledge sector (so important to Cheshire West and its residents) it would seem reasonable to conclude that growth of 15% in the number of dwellings and households in the rural area, which equates to 8,000 new homes in the 20 year period between 2011 and 2030, is the minimum necessary to address the challenges identified

Achieving economic growth

Growth in the number of households is important, but will not be sufficient to secure the increase in the scale of economic output that is required if the Borough is to meet its growth ambitions.

The evidence shows that the rural area has been making a disproportionate contribution to Cheshire West and Chester's economic growth over the past few years. The rural area has the potential to continue this growth. Growth of 7% in the number of jobs available in the rural area (the preliminary target of the Cheshire & Warrington Local Enterprise Partnership) would increase the ratio of jobs available to the working age population in the rural area to a figure broadly in line with the current average for the Borough as a whole. An additional 7% growth equates to a further 3,800 jobs being created in the rural area over the next 20 years.

Simply creating an additional 3,800 jobs in the rural area will not be enough to ensure that the rural area makes a proportionate contribution to the Borough's economic growth ambitions.

To do this, the rural economy must also increase the value of its economic output by 50%, making it necessary to significantly increase the value of economic output created by each job. This can be achieved in part by attracting new businesses which operate in higher value sectors and markets but will also require existing companies (of low, medium and high output values) to increase their productivity by adding value to their output and exchanging lower value for higher value activity.

The role of the Council

The Council and its partners will need to be innovative and to leverage every possible means of attracting and enabling investment in the rural area. The role of the Council is threefold:

- it should lead on acquisition of funds for investment;
- it should make best use of its own assets to stimulate and attract investment; and

- it should provide the necessary enabling support, leadership and policy context to give the best possible opportunity to community groups, entrepreneurs and individuals to benefit from private investment in their businesses and communities.

In particular, in respect of the Council's enabling role, it should strive to provide the conditions, and support, to enable local activity and investment. It can do this by:

- a) creating policies within the Local Development Framework which maintain an attitude to development management which facilitates appropriate development and attracts entrepreneurs; and
- b) organising the way it does business so that many of its technical functions are outward facing and outcome focused.

Key ambitions and approaches

This level of change will not happen without a positive strategic framework, and it must be managed. The Council believes that the key ambitions and approaches set out below will help to shape the actions necessary to implement the Strategy, and the manner in which they are best delivered.

- attract and retain an additional 17,000 young people, families and people of working age within the rural area;
- meet the housing needs of the rural population through the provision of new homes which are well-designed, energy efficient, affordable and suitable for young people, families and the elderly;
- safeguard local services, cultural and community facilities and maximised their contribution to the vitality of rural communities;
- support sustainable economic development across the rural area, securing an additional 3,800 jobs, improving the competitiveness of local businesses and providing the conditions where enterprise can flourish;
- address market failure where it affects quality of life and economic success - the provision of public transport services and high speed broadband;
- reduce the consumption of fossil fuels and the related CO² emissions by 37% by 2020 (relative to 1990 levels); and
- protect the natural and historic environment, cultural and heritage assets and ensure that they are preserved for the enjoyment and benefit of future generations.

By adopting this Strategy the Council will commit to new ways of working and will:

- create and manage a positive and enabling planning framework which provides for smart growth in the rural area whilst ensuring the protection of the natural and historic environment;
- create an approach to asset management, spatial and investment planning which will enable local people to shape the future of their communities and to take responsibility and ownership of actions and investment which will secure their long term vitality;
- create a new structure for rural governance which will ensure that a single and strong rural voice is heard within the Borough's strategic and technical decision-making forums; and
- manage and utilise public assets in the rural area in a manner that will support the ambitions and plans of local communities and that ensures that they make the best possible contribution to the vision, objectives and ambitions embedded in the Strategy.

Thematic strategies and actions

The Strategy includes a series of thematic strategies and actions :

- Accessibility
- Housing
- Enterprise, innovation and skills
- High speed broadband
- New ways of working
- Energy and climate change
- Natural and historic environment

It also provides recommendations in respect of the implementation and delivery elements of the Strategy. It is designed to inform the Business Plan for the Rural Area Regeneration Team and the proposed Rural Area Partnership Board. It is recommended that the (new) rural Area Partnership Board should manage and monitor progress made in delivering the strategy, whilst ensuring that it remains relevant and is supported by rural communities.

Accessibility theme highlighted as an example of the strategies focus on solutions

Within each of the themes referred to in section 8 above, there are many suggested interventions and actions but of particular note is the proposal for a Rural Metro. This involves the creation of hubs for the delivery of services at or near schools. The hubs proposed are where there is the most likelihood of linked trips, that is, a journey from the rural community to a council service hub, education facility, health centre or employment opportunity. Hubs therefore minimise the need for travel altogether or ensure efficiency by encouraging linked trips to key services. The diagram in figure (i) below demonstrates the proposed hubs forming part of a "Rural Metro" concept.

Hubs on their own cannot be successful unless they are accessible and whilst secondary schools are generally accessible, improvements are required to ensure the locations can operate as service centres. Given the challenging operating conditions facing traditional public transport services in rural areas, the Strategy recommends that community transport initiatives will have a significant role to play, involving a 'Community Interest Company' that is formed by a third party not currently involved with the existing Community Transport operators. In line with the localism agenda, it is envisaged that existing local assets can be used more efficiently by employing them in a number of uses. For example the school bus can be used to take children to school as normal. Once finished the bus could be employed to circulate rural settlements in the vicinity of the hub to provide a regular service. Social service vehicles and other local assets could be employed in the same way.

Furthermore, a key element of the proposed Rural Metro is centred on park and ride. This has been a great success in Chester with four existing facilities located on the outskirts of the City. These sites were designed to help reduce congestion in urban areas and on busy commuter roads and to encourage the use of public transport. It is envisaged in the Strategy that the park and ride concept could be extended to include additional sites that are located in key outreach locations that are approximately five miles away from the city centre.

Potential locations include the areas around Saughall, Mickel Trafford and Tarvin, where the A51 splits to form the A54. The area around Ashton Hayes and Delamere currently has particularly low levels of accessibility to key services by existing forms of public transport. Given the character of the area, traditional public transport options are unlikely to be feasible and therefore this is considered to be a good location for a rural park and ride facility to serve the north east areas of Cheshire West and Chester. Similarly, Tarporley is considered to be a good location for serving the eastern areas of Cheshire West and Chester.

Tattenhall, Farndon, Broxton and Malpas are all located to the south of Chester and suffer from low levels of accessibility to services. A park and ride location in one or more of these areas would greatly enhance accessibility in the largely rural area. Furthermore, the Tattenhall, Malpas site and Broxton site could tie into existing public transport services such as the number 41 and 41A buses which serve Chester, Waverton, Tattenhall and Whitchurch. In total, nine potential park and ride sites have been suggested by the rural Metro part of the Strategy.

Implementation and delivery

Governance

Another key recommendation of the Strategy is that the Rural West APB should be remodelled into a Cheshire West Rural Partnership Board and that Northwich and Rural North and Winsford and Rural East APBs should remain as they are but should cease to deal with rural issues and focus on the towns of Northwich and Winsford.

Positive planning framework

The Strategy seeks to support the development of the Local Development Framework by setting a series of "asks" required to enable delivery. Central to these are the need for a planning framework that positively enables growth to improve the future vitality and sustainability of rural settlements and communities and to ensure that rural communities be enabled to plan for their own future.

Monitoring and evaluation

The Strategy identifies the importance of establishing and implementing a monitoring and evaluation framework in respect of actions taken as a consequence of the Strategy. It sets out recommendations for implementing a framework consistent with the best practice already established by the Council in other activity and service areas.

The APB is asked to;

- Comment on the strategy
- Express views on the formation of a Rural APB
- Comment on the housing element of the strategy
- Comment on Broadband provision