

COMMUNITY SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
REPORT BY COUNICLLOR MAYSON, CABINET MEMBER FOR RURAL
REGENERATION AND STRATEGY

In response to the invitation of the Community Services Scrutiny Committee I am pleased to present the following report.

Introduction

Herefordshire is a county of 840sq.miles with a population of 176,900 a third of the population live in Hereford City, a little over one fifth live in the 5 market towns and a half live in the rural areas. Unemployment is 1.4% against a West Midlands figure of 3% and a national figure of 2.4%. However, wage levels in the county are low.

Key issues for the Rural Regeneration and Strategy portfolio are access to services and building the capacity of the local community.

1. Planning, Provision and management of regeneration activities across the County including Rural Regeneration Zone (RRZ) activity

1.1 Parish Council Liaison Service

This service acts as a first point of contact for members of the public wishing to contact their local Town or Parish Council. The Parish Council Liaison Officer liaises between the 138 Town and Parish Councils and Herefordshire Council by sending out regular correspondence and working closely with the Herefordshire Association of Local Councils (HALC) with which the Council has a Service Level Agreement.

Issues currently facing this service:-

- ❑ Quality Parish Status (QPS). One Parish Council has been the first to attain QPS with a further twenty working towards accreditation. There are implications for the Council in terms of service provision.
- ❑ Devolvement of services to Parish Councils – Central Government and Herefordshire Council have stated a commitment to explore where appropriate.

1.2 Rural Services

Herefordshire Council has become an associate member of the Rural Shops Alliance (RSA). This means that all the rural retailers on our database are automatically entitled to the benefits the RSA offers. Regular liaison is undertaken with the RSA, and post office representatives to forge links between these organisations and others involved with supporting rural shops, such as Business Link, in order to offer support such as funding information, training and networking. In addition, as part of the delivery of 3 of the Market Towns Initiatives, the Shop Front Grant Schemes delivered by the Delegated Grants and Programmes Team, covers businesses in the rural parishes. Some ninety village shops are supported through the Rural Shops Alliance Newsletter.

Issues currently facing the service:-

- ❑ Identifying projects to help and encourage rural retailers to become more professional.

1.3 Parish Plans

These are action plans developed by local communities. They set out a vision for the future of the community and list what actions will need to take place in order to achieve that vision. Herefordshire Council has described its commitment to supporting the development of Parish Plans in the Parish Plan Protocol. Approximately 30 parishes have completed plans so far with another 15 in progress.

Issues currently facing the services:-

- ❑ Originally grants of up to £5,000 were available from the Countryside Agency to support the development of Parish Plans, this funding is no longer available and alternative sources are being explored.
- ❑ Herefordshire Council's involvement post plan to assist communities to address the issues identified in the plan.

Performance Indicator:-

- ❑ Assisting 12 Parish Plan Groups for 2005/06 – 6 Parish Plan groups assisted so far.

1.4 Market Towns Initiative

The Council has supported the development of cross sector partnerships in each of the County's five Market Towns. An Officer and Assistant support each of the partnerships who have all successfully developed local strategies and action plans in consultation with their local communities.

Successes

Each town has been successful in securing Market Towns Initiative funding and other external funding to support the implementation of their strategies and action plans. Sums ranging from £300,000 to several million have been secured by each town. Successful projects have included shop front grants schemes in all 5 market towns, a debt redemption scheme in Kington and the Urchins scheme in Ledbury – an IT scheme to enable mothers to upskill whilst their infants were being cared for.

Issues currently facing the service

Long term sustainability for Partnerships and their activity are key issues facing the service. Different models for the future are being developed by the local partnerships. Leominster and Kington have already established Regeneration Companies and during 2005 the Ledbury Partnership established a Development Trust.

1.5 Community Finance and Enterprise

The Service works to support the development of Credit Unions and the social enterprise sector in Herefordshire. Social Enterprises are organisations that trade for a social purpose. This includes everything from co-operations to charitable businesses, selling a wide variety of goods and services.

Successes:

- ❑ Successes this year include the development of Social Enterprise Strategy for Herefordshire and Worcestershire, and support to enable a community enterprise to run a village shop in Yarpole

Current priorities:-

- ❑ Supporting the development of Moneybox, Herefordshire's Credit Union.

Performance Indicators:-

- ❑ Increase Credit Union membership by 200 in 2005/06

1.6 LEADER+

This is an EU and DEFRA funded programme that started in 2002 and ends in 2008. The basic remit of the Programme is to improve the rural economy and communities and has a total budget of £2.7m. To date approx. £1.2m. has been spent with a further £1.5m. to be committed. The theme that the LEADER+ bid was based upon was "Making the Best Use of Natural and Cultural Resources. The funding can therefore support projects based on the following issues: environment, culture, festivals, ecology, archaeology, tourism, and business development, training among others. GOWM administer the funding on behalf of DEFRA who have the responsibility for the programme on behalf of the EU. This programme has also attracted RRZ funding which is exclusively for the management of the Programme by 2 officers.

Recent success include:

- ❑ The development of a care farm near Bodenham that aims to educate people with learning or physical disabilities, behavioural problems, in an environment outside their natural boundaries.

This project has just agreed a Service Level Agreement with Herefordshire Council Social Services.

- The Lifescapes project which enables people to make choices about the landscape management around them. Identified by English Nature as an innovative and influential pilot, the project will map habitats where maintenance, restoration or reestablishment is needed.

Current priorities:-

- Identifying long term sustainability and scope for future programmes.

1.7 Herefordshire In Touch (HIT) Programme

The HIT Programme is a 7-year SRB programme finishing 31 March 2007. Total value of the programme, including the match funding is just over £12m. To date approx. £9.9m has been spent with approx. £2.4m still to defray.

Main aims of the programme:-

- Broadband availability, where economically justifiable, to the public, private, voluntary and residential sectors
- An e-gateway to enable integrated access to information, advice and networks
- A number of related projects to help build ICT capacity in their sectors, including the voluntary sector, youth services, business communities, eGovernment and Public Legal Electronic Access (PLEA).

One of the programme's successful projects is Youth Times, a youth training programme in media skills. The project has recently launched InSITE a youth webs site, on the new eGateway platform and has been nominated for two national awards; the Statesman's New Media Award 2005, and the Guardian's Public Citizenship 2005.

Current priorities

- The development of community access points in rural parts of Herefordshire, which will provide subsidised broadband access, learning opportunities, and online advice via the e-Gateway.

1.8 RRZ

In 2005/06 the RRZ budget is £8m rising to £10m in 2006/07 and £12m 2007/08. The RRZ covers a large part of Shropshire, most of Herefordshire and 2 small parts of Worcestershire. Herefordshire represents 47% of the population of the Zone. Almost all of the resource is capital monies for the next 2 years with an increase in revenue availability in the 3rd year. The RRZ is required to develop projects that have economic outputs eg. Jobs created, infrastructure activities. Funding is currently set aside in Herefordshire for the Learning Village and the Rotherwas Enterprise Centre and Edgar Street Grid. Priorities are determined and allocated through a 3 year Zone Implementation Plan.

Successes:-

- Leominster Access Road and Enterprise Park
- AWM purchasing the Station Road Industrial Estate to be linked with the Edgar Street Grid

Issues:

- Capital not revenue expenditure
- Inability to fund community regeneration

2. Co-ordinating approach to rural issues – community, transport, housing, economy through the Community Strategy (Herefordshire Plan) process

2.1 Herefordshire Thinks Rural Project

Herefordshire Council has commissioned a project to help it develop a new approach to identifying and meeting the needs of its rural areas and their communities. The intention is to build on the

Council's own best practice and that from elsewhere to achieve a more systematic and consideration of the rural context when designing and delivering Council services.

The Final report provides an analysis of the various information to formulate three parts of the Herefordshire Thinks Rural project.

- Key Characteristics of rural Herefordshire
- Findings in relation to Herefordshire Council's current understanding of and response to specific rural issues and needs
- Conclusions, Recommendations and Action Plan

2.2 Community Development

- The Community Development Service carries out a range of activities to improve the co-ordination and quality of community activity in Herefordshire with specific reference to the priorities in the Community Development Strategy and the Herefordshire Plan.

Recent successes include:

- Increased attendance of Public Bodies and Voluntary and Community Sector at Development Workers Forum

Current priorities:

- To develop and implement an Action Plan to accompany the Community Development Strategy

3. Liaison with local, regional, national and European bodies as appropriate

Herefordshire has been extremely successful in securing European funding to support regeneration of the County. Between 1995 and 1999 some £15 million was secured through the Marches Objective 5b programme. There have also been successful Leader and Leader+ programmes. Subsequently the County was successful in securing further European funding through the regions Objective 2 and Objective 3 programmes. The current programme runs to 2006. It is anticipated that some £20 million will have been drawn down to Herefordshire through these programmes. Herefordshire works closely with Worcestershire, Shropshire and Telford and Wrekin on European funding issues and there is a Joint Officer Group which co-ordinates this activity with strong linkages to regional partners including Government Office for the West Midlands.

Issues

Need to complete spend by end of Objective 2 Programme

Need to consider long term sustainability and opportunities post Objective 2

Need to consider the possible benefits that the new tranche of LEADER plus and other European funding could have for the county.

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