

West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum

Rural Priority Position Statements

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West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum (WMRAF) speaks for rural people and places in ensuring their needs and aspirations are taken into account in both local and national decision making.

Why have these Rural Position Statements been written?

The Rural Position Statements have been prepared by WMRAF for Board Members of Local Enterprise Partnerships, local authorities, communities and others concerned with encouraging enterprise and economic development in the West Midlands.

Urban and rural areas have many issues in common; the rural economy is as broad and as diverse as the urban economy, and there is a complex interaction between them. However, there is often a need to treat them in a different way due to the particular conditions found in rural areas.

The Statements reflect what WMRAF believes are the current priorities for the rural areas of the West Midlands:

- the Rural Economy and the Resilience of Rural Communities
- Rural Skills
- Affordable Housing
- Rural Broadband
- the Rural Environment.

Why are the rural areas of the West Midlands important?

Rural areas play a significant part in the life and economy of the West Midlands: 80% of its land area is rural, a third of the population lives there and a third is employed there. The population of rural areas has been growing faster than the national rate. The rural economy contributes

33% to the total Gross Value Added in the West Midlands.

What is different about rural areas?

Although both urban and rural populations have many similar concerns, there are differences between them which need to be taken into account when considering the development of enterprise in rural areas. They include:

- **Access to services.**
Rural areas vary in the makeup of their settlements and in their remoteness. There are a number of market towns with a good range of services. However, some places, including parts of Herefordshire, Shropshire and North Staffordshire, are particularly sparsely populated. Here services and facilities such as schools, shops and post offices, health provision, local authority services, and leisure facilities are often some distance away from where people live and difficult to get to. Consideration needs to be given to alternative means of access, for example using innovative technology for services like tele-medicine. Ensuring equity of access to services is important for both people and business.
- **Transport.**
Difficulties in accessing services, facilities and employment are exacerbated by poor availability of public transport. In many rural areas of the West Midlands provision is sparse, infrequent and does not operate in the evening or at weekends. Car ownership is, of necessity, high.
- **Employment**
Unemployment rates are often lower in our rural areas but there is less choice or quality in jobs available, wages are low and skills are less well developed and often poorly utilised. The risk of unemployment increases with a number of factors such as

being young (16-24), being older (over 55) or having no qualifications.

- **Income**

Many West Midlands rural communities have an appearance of affluence. However, rural incomes are lower than urban incomes, this differential being blurred by commuting. Those who both live and work in the countryside have lower income levels than those who live there and commute to urban areas. For example, in Bromsgrove District the differential is around £8000 per annum. There are consequent effects on, in particular, housing affordability.

Some rural residents are not in a position to commute. They may not drive or may have caring responsibilities, so could be economically hampered or excluded.

There is a question of how sustainable, both environmentally and economically, the West Midlands rural economy can be when people are dependent on private transport to get to work. A significant rise in fuel prices could considerably erode the apparent economic resilience.

- **Disadvantage**

Urban areas suffer more multiple disadvantage and therefore have higher scores in the Index of Multiple Deprivation. The West Midlands has developed a Rural Disadvantage Indicator which is more sensitive to rural areas. It drills down to smaller spatial units such as ward level and demonstrates that issues facing rural areas mean that there are distinct pockets of deprivation. It would appear to pick up deprived estates in market towns, villages and former coalfield communities, for example in some wards in the Malvern Hills, Oswestry, Cheadle, Leek, Ditton Priors, Atherstone and North Shropshire.

- **An ageing population**

Factors such as limited employment choices, quality of available employment and housing affordability, added to the need for younger people to move away to access further and higher education, results in an ageing population. This affects the viability

of services such as schools, and puts an increased burden on health and other services. Older people will find it more difficult to get work. Over the next 25 years the population aged over 50 is projected to increase by 24% in rural areas across the West Midlands compared to a 9% increase in urban areas. Employment rates for this group are of great concern

- **Rural areas are not homogenous**

The rural areas of the West Midlands include; market towns with a range of services and employment opportunities, villages close to our cities and conurbations where accessibility is good, and isolated settlements remote from centres of employment, services and leisure facilities, particularly in the west of the region and in Staffordshire Moorlands. The varying geographic and demographic conditions mean that different solutions will be needed for different circumstances.

- **Rural communities are resilient**

Rural communities have a strong culture of self reliance. This can be seen in the response to emergencies such as the severe floods of 2007 by places like Tenbury Wells and Sedgeberrow and extends to situations where the public or private sector cannot provide something and the community will find a way to deliver it, for example, a community shop, pub or post office. Community resilience should continue to be supported and encouraged.

Where can I find further information and evidence?

1. **West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum.** Reports of specialist seminars and task groups, forum discussions, publications and up to date news on the rural aspects of the region. www.ruralnetworkwm.org.uk
2. **West Midlands Regional Observatory.** Research and statistics about the West Midlands, including rural issues. <http://www.wmro.org>
3. **Rural Evidence Base 2010. July 2010.** Provides in depth understanding of West Midlands rural areas and tools to support policy development. [Read more](#)
4. **Rural Disadvantage; developing a Rural Disadvantage Indicator. 2010.** [Read more](#)
5. **Commission for Rural Communities: State of the Countryside 2010.** Useful reference for understanding key issues facing rural areas. [Read more](#)
6. **Commission for Rural Communities: Recognising Rural Interests Within Local Enterprise Partnerships.** [Read more](#)