

## Rural Skills in the West Midlands

The West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum (WMRAF) has a number of priorities for the rural areas of the region. The development of high-quality skills and related training is one of these. It is essential for improving economic success, employment chances and social progress in the rural West Midlands.

### Why are skills and training important in the rural West Midlands?

If we are to enjoy heightened economic development, our workforce must have the skills required by employers. Skilled people are essential for successful businesses; they carry out complex tasks and produce higher value products and services. They are more adaptable, enabling firms to respond better to changing global competition and technology. Higher-paid jobs will add value to the region's population.

Low skill levels are predominantly seen as an urban problem but there are pockets across rural areas especially in market towns, e.g. in Atherstone 41% of the working population has no qualifications, in Leominster 35%.

Low value added sectors predominate in many rural areas in the West Midlands. They create few skilled jobs, have persistent skill gaps and shortages and poor investment in training. Recovery from recession is likely to be fragile where there is high dependence on low value activity and poor workforce skills.

There is a mismatch between the skills available and the skills employers are seeking. In particular in the green economy (including conservation, renewable energy and waste management), which rural businesses forecast will be an area of significant future skills need. In some parts of the West Midlands there is a shortage of skills required by farm businesses.

There is evidence of a lowering of young peoples' aspirations in some rural areas, suggesting a need for better career preparation throughout secondary education, including raising awareness of a range of careers, improved careers advice and work experience opportunities. Out migration is also reducing the work force, particularly in the 16-29 age range.

### What are the issues?

- There is a need to attract high value added industries in the information and communication technologies and other knowledge based sectors to rural areas. These have been identified as priorities for growth and for skills development by local authorities such as Herefordshire and Shropshire.
- Funding mechanisms do not reflect rural circumstances such as additional costs and difficulties in travel. This is a particular problem for young people.
- Schemes for the unemployed are complex and overlapping.
- There is often poor take up of apprenticeships on offer.
- Further and higher education courses are often seen by employers as inflexible and not sufficiently aligned with the needs of industry.
- There is a shortage of specific traditional craft and building skills.

#### Addressing the shortage of specific traditional craft and building skills.

Strategic work is co-ordinated by the National Heritage Training Group (which includes English Heritage and Heritage Lottery Fund). There is a Memorandum of Understanding on maintaining standards & best practice in the built heritage sector..

### What needs to be done?

1. LEPs have a key role in accessing the Regional Growth Fund which can be used to promote and provide direct support for

the development of high level skills in the West Midlands.

2. Make use of EU funded programmes, including Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE), for skills funding, including skills that may not result in qualifications but which can lead to employment or better employment.
3. Facilitate closer links between rural employers and schools and colleges. Providers need to be more flexible and business-focused in offering the type of training that local businesses require.
4. Improve careers guidance in schools on rural employment and enhance realisation that high level skills are needed.
5. Encourage Research and Development partnerships between further and higher education and local employers which will assist the development of higher technical skills.
6. Encourage the establishment of industry-based group training which has proven successful in recruitment and training and is a useful model for more scattered rural areas.

#### **Shropshire Partners in Care (SPIC)**

The caring professions provide significant employment in the rural areas of the West Midlands. SPIC is a not for profit organisation representing over 200 nursing, residential and domiciliary care companies. It is committed to maintaining and improving standards through providing training, advice and guidance to its members, managers and staff.  
<http://spic.co.uk>

**The Herefordshire Group Training Association** was established by local companies. It designs training in direct consultation with its customers. It also helps match young people seeking apprenticeships with firms in different sectors who offer them. [www.hgta.org](http://www.hgta.org)

7. Ensure that employability skills and generic skills such as communication, team working or leadership are taught in addition to technical and vocational skills. Work

experience placements can be valuable here.

8. Make better use of high speed broadband and other technical innovations in widening the range of skills and delivering training in rural areas.
9. Raise awareness of barriers and additional costs in providing transport in rural areas. Press for more effective co-ordination of public transport provision.

**Wheels to Work** was a West Midlands wide scheme to assist rural young people to get to work or training through the loan of a scooter. Serious consideration should be given to the funding and reintroduction of this highly effective project.

10. Seek input from employers and training providers in the land-based sectors regarding specific skills gaps that need co-ordinated action to address them.
11. Work with the National Heritage Training Group to promote the Construction Skills Certification Scheme Heritage Skills Card, the NVQ3 in Heritage Skills and the traditional building skills bursary scheme.

#### **Further information**

For further information and evidence see:

##### **West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum**

[www.ruralnetworkwm.org.uk](http://www.ruralnetworkwm.org.uk)

##### **West Midlands Regional Observatory**

Regional Skills Assessment 2007: Rural West Midlands supplement. November 2007  
[www.wmro.org](http://www.wmro.org)

##### **Commission for Rural Communities,**

Should I Stay or Should I Go? Rural Youth Transitions. August 2006.

[Read more](#)

##### **Commission for Rural Communities**

Research into the Aspirations of Young People in the Rural West Midlands. December 2006.

[Read more](#)

##### **CSCS Heritage Skills Card**

helps craftspeople who work on heritage buildings prove their competency and health and safety awareness.

[Read more](#)