



West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum
Annual Report 1 April 2008 – 31 March 2009





A Message from the Chairman

Our work is rarely glamorous but it is important

'Rural proofing' of policy is to subject it to a detailed scrutiny, asking whether it will achieve the desired effect in a rural context, and even whether the policy's aims and objectives are the right ones for our rural communities. It is time-consuming, exacting, and requires a substantial input from our specialist working groups. Our ultimate objective is to get policy makers themselves to "think rural" from the outset – Quality Assurance rather than Quality Control – because once a policy has been produced for consultation, it is usually very difficult to achieve substantive changes.

We believe that we have had some success, but there is always more to do.

In achieving what we have, I would like to express my thanks to all Forum members, our partners and all who have participated in our conferences and workshops.

I also wish to extend my very best wishes to my successor, Bob Forster, who took over in January 2009. Bob's impressive credentials will, I am sure, mean that the Forum will prosper under his leadership.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Nick Read". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rev'd Nick Read
Chairman

What is the West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum?

The West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum (WMRAF) was formally established in 2002. It was built on a pre-existing Rural Network within the West Midlands Region, which offered a forum for debating rural issues at a regional level.

We aim to:

- act as a sounding board for rural practitioners and delivery agencies
- reflect the needs and aspirations of rural people
- provide direction, leadership and co-ordination in respect of the rural agenda
- act as a conduit for rural views
- present these at regional and sub-regional and national levels

The establishment of the WMRAF was recognition that the regional agenda had become an important component of government policy and that having a strong rural voice at regional level, working with organisations such as the Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM), the Regional Development Agency (Advantage West Midlands - AWM) and the West Midlands Regional Assembly (WMRA), was important for the future well-being of rural communities and businesses.

The secretariat, is provided by the Government Office for the West Midlands, (GOWM), and financial support is provided by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the West Midlands Regional Assembly (WMRA). The Management Committee has developed a business strategy and work plan, which is reviewed in the light of new government initiatives and other external pressures.

Our Membership - The most important component

The most important component of the Forum is its membership. Members attend quarterly meetings, but also participate in a wide number of thematic groups.

Members are drawn from seven broad sectors:

- the countryside, environment and recreation
- the rural economy and employment
- rural communities and services, including the voluntary sector
- central government bodies
- regional bodies not otherwise represented
- local government
- sub-regional partnerships



Forum membership stands at about 40 delegates and each must have been nominated by their respective sector to act as its representative. They are responsible for accurately reflecting the needs and concerns of their networks, and for ensuring that information flows in both directions.

Introducing our new Chairman



Former chairman of the Regional NFU and the West Mercia Police Authority, Bob Foster outlines his vision for the West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum.

As your new Chairman, I am hoping to build on the good work of my predecessors Tony Harris and Nick Read, to build the WMRAF into a truly representative, forward thinking Forum, for all rural interests.

A Forum which not only reacts to outside influences, but helps to shape the thinking about our rural areas regionally, nationally, but also in Europe. It is truly important that rural areas contribute fully to the economy and well-being of this country and do this not only with rural partners and government but essentially with our urban partners, who have important roles to play for the mutual benefit of all those living and working in the West Midlands.

Forum Meetings and Specialist Working Groups in 2008/9

In addition to its quarterly business meetings, the Forum has also organised a number of specialist seminars during the year. These have been on:

- Water Management
- LSC/Lantra land-based sector review
- Business Support
- Wood Fuel

WMRAF has a number of its own working groups, and members contribute to many more thematic groups within the region. This has included:

- The English-Welsh Cross Border Working Group, leading the Cross-Border Core Officers Group, representing interests from a wide range of organisations and agencies on both sides of the border.
- The Phase Two and Phase Three revision of the Regional Spatial Strategy.
- 'Rural Proofing' the West Midlands' Economic Strategy Delivery Framework and its implementation.
- The Regional Implementation Plan (RIP) of the Rural Delivery Programme for England (RDPE).
- Provision of evidence to 'Living Working Countryside', the Matthew Taylor review of the Rural Economy and Affordable Housing and to the Department for Communities and Local Government 'Transforming Places; Changing Lives': A Framework for Regeneration Consultation.
- The West Midlands Cultural Strategy (subsumed into RSS Phase 3)
- The West Midlands Rural Economy group.
- The European Strategy Environment and Rural Group, (formerly the West Midlands Regional Rural Affairs Forum's European Rural Group).

Highlights of the year

Our Annual Conference considers the future



Our 2008 conference, entitled 'Building a Stronger Rural West Midlands', was held in November at the Bromsgrove Hotel in Worcestershire. Presentations were made on some of the region's notable achievements, and delegates looked to the future and at the important changes in regional governance, which will affect us. We were also given the opportunity to debate how an integrated approach to regeneration might achieve a stronger and more prosperous region.

Web-based Rural Evidence launched

Advantage West Midlands' Rural Evidence Base was launched at our Annual Conference. This is an extensive web-based resource that can be accessed by partners, as a source of evidence for their own work in developing rural policy and strategy. It contains vital evidence on the state of the rural West Midlands and hosts over 40 independent studies commissioned by Advantage West Midlands.

Rural Affairs Forum Members contributed to the Rural Evidence Base. Through participation in workshops and one-to-one consultations, we have provided expert knowledge informing the final in-depth study reports and some of the studies were undertaken in partnership with RAF members.

Facts from the Rural Evidence Base

£21 billion

contributed by the rural economy each year to the West Midlands Region

33%

of the West Midlands Region's population works in rural areas

80%

of the West Midlands Region is classified as rural

10.2%

of England's total organic production comes from the West Midlands Region



The research has been summarised in seven publications covering the Rural Evidence Base, Natural Assets Case Studies, Urban Rural Interdependence, West Midlands Rural Economy, Sustainable Rural Communities, Rural Access to Services and Sustainable Land Management. These are available to all partners, urban and rural, to inform policy and delivery.

www.advantagewm.co.uk/what-we-do/improving-places/rural-evidence-base.aspx

Ongoing Advocacy and Representation

The Forum is recognised as the Rural Partnership of both the West Midlands Regional Assembly and the Regional Development Agency.



Our new Chairman, Bob Forster, and the two Vice Chairs, Alison McLean and David Collier, continue to act as independent spokespersons for the Forum and represent it with a wide range of organisations. Nationally the eight RAF Regional Chairs have met quarterly with representatives of the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), the Rural Advocate, Dr Stuart Burgess, the Minister for Rural Affairs and senior Defra officials, to highlight and discuss issues of concern. There have also been regular meetings with representatives from each of the main regional stakeholder organisations, as well as invitations to participate in working parties and policy development.

EU Connects

In order to increase the impact of funding success, the region needs to increase the number of successful funding bids from first time applicants

Since EU Connects was established in 2007 as a pilot project, it has helped 37 organisations in the region to secure funding, worth €4.5 million, and assisted over 650 through free training, advice and capacity building. Given their success, the team has been expanded this year, so that bidding activity can be increased.

A European Rural Bidding Champion has also been appointed this year, to act as a catalyst in bringing forward more EU transnational funded projects from the rural parts of the West Midlands. This decision is based on research undertaken by EU Connects, which demonstrated that the rural parts of the West Midlands are not performing as well as other parts of the region in attracting transnational European funding.

EU Connects currently prioritises funding streams that:

- Develop policy between regions (INTERREG)
- Support environmental and nature conservation policies (LIFE +)
- Support SMEs and actions to improve efficiency and sustainability of energy (Competitiveness and Innovation Programme)
- Facilitates exchanges, study visits, industry work placements, development of educational tools and training under the Lifelong Learning Programme

By exchanging best practice, networking and learning from European partners through transnational projects, the rural parts of the West Midlands can be better placed to face their challenges.

English Welsh Cross Border issues



Since the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Welsh Assembly Government and the West Midlands Regional Assembly in 2007, English-Welsh cross border dialogue grows 'at a pace'. Substantial numbers of organisations have now signed the MOU, committing themselves to improved communications and co-operative working across the border. The number of thematic groups, which facilitate this co-operation and help to identify any barriers to progress, also continues to grow.

Of note has been the substantial input made by the Cross-Border Health and Social Care Group to the discussion on the future structure of the NHS in Wales and to the Welsh Affairs Select Committee's review of health care provision. Also significant has been the input from the Cross-Border Transport Group into the draft regional transport plan. The first joint English-Welsh Community Councils/Town and Parish Councils meeting took place during the year and a new Cross-Border Food Group has been established to look at procurement and marketing. The work of these groups is beginning to make a real impact on policy formation and delivery, contributing to the economic and social well-being of those who live and work along the border.

Rural Economy Group reports on recession and other key topics

The Forum Rural Economy Group also reports to the West Midlands Business Council. In recent months it has focused on the state of the rural economy during the current recession.

Through the year it has also made submissions to partners and stakeholders on water resources and skills issues, as well as the danger that rural businesses will be left behind in the rush for next-generation Broadband.



More Information

All Forum discussions are minuted and publicly available via the Forum's own website (www.ruralnetworkwm.org.uk) as is the report of the Annual Conference. Edited highlights of each meeting are available.

Contact Elie Baker, Secretariat
eleanor.baker@gowm.gsi.gov.uk
0121 352 5371

Contact details

Elie Baker, Secretariat
eleanor.baker@gowm.gsi.gov.uk

West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum
Secretariat
C/o GOWM
5 St Philip's Place
Colmore Row
Birmingham B3 2PW

Tel: 0121 352 5371
Fax: 0121 352 5335
Email: ruralenquires@gowm.gsi.gov.uk
Web: www.ruralnetworkwm.org.uk



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West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum Membership List

Sector	Member	Organisation	
Chair	Bob Forster		
Secretariat	Elie Baker	Sustainability & Rural Affairs Team, Government Office for the West Midlands	
Countryside, Environment and Recreation	Anna Hall	Environment Agency	
	Steve Holliday	West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership	
	James Steele	West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership & Sustainability West Midlands	
	Tim Johnston	English Heritage	
	Kate Warburton	National Trust	
Rural Economy & Employment	David Collier (Vice Chair)	National Farmers Union	
	Caroline Bedell	Country Land and Business Association	
	Sharon Gray	Learning and Skills Council, Shropshire	
	Christopher Harvey	Confederation of West Midlands Chambers of Commerce	
	Mark Davies	Business Link West Mercia	
	Sean Glennon	Transport and General Workers Union	
	Henry Lucas	Rural Hubs representative for the 5 West Midlands Shire Counties	
	Rev'd Peter Dakin	Chaplaincy for Agricultural and Rural Life	
Rural Communities and Services (including voluntary sector)	Richard Quallington	West Midlands Network of Rural Community Councils	
	Rowena Clayton	Department of Health, West Midlands Public Health Group	
	Michelle Harrison	National Federation of Young Farmers	
	Andrew Tyley	Association of Colleges	
	Prof Brian Revell	Higher Education	
	Sharon Palmer	Regional Action West Midlands	
	Bruce Undy	Regional Transport Partnership	
	Alison McLean (Vice Chair)	Commission for Rural Communities Board Member	
	Central Government Bodies	Steve Kennett	Director, Sustainable Futures Directorate Government Office for the West Midlands
		Bill Heslegrave	Forestry Commission
Rob Williams		Natural England	
Local Government	Roger Evans	West Midland Association of Parish and Town Councils	
	Cllr Beris Williams	West Midlands Local Government Association	
Regional Bodies (Not Listed Elsewhere)	Mark Pearce	Advantage West Midlands	
	Michael Oakes	Advantage West Midlands Rural Board Member	
	Rose Poulter	Advantage West Midlands	
	Gavin Willetts	Culture West Midlands	
	Olwen Dutton	Regional Assembly Secretariat	
	Richard Gabb	Regional Housing Partnership	
	Cllr Richard Hobbs (Warwickshire Police Authority)	Representing West Mercia, Warwickshire & Staffordshire Police	
	Sub Regional Partnerships	Penny Jones	Herefordshire Partnership
		Graham Biggs	The Shropshire Partnership
		Roger Bradshaw	The Stoke on Trent & Staffordshire Strategic Partnership
Glyn West		Worcestershire Partnership	
Caroline Oakes		Telford and Wrekin Council	
Mandy Walker		Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire Partnership	
Former Chair	Rev'd Nick Read		