

## Briefing Paper

### Rural Evidence and Policy – Northwest Priorities

March 2009

#### Introduction

The Northwest Regional Development Agency, in common with all the Regional Development Agencies in England, is in the process of preparing a Regional Strategy. These regional strategies will become operational in 2010 and will replace the existing Regional Employment Strategies, Regional Spatial Strategies and Regional Housing Strategies.

This briefing paper looks at how the Northwest Regional Development Agency is tackling this issue with regard to the rural areas within the region. Two of the things that it has done to address these issues are to publish a rural policy statement and to commission research.

Northwest England is a large and diverse region. It is centred on the cities of Manchester and Liverpool and contains a significant urban area based on Greater Manchester, Merseyside and South Lancashire. However, parts of Cheshire and Lancashire are rural and Cumbria contains some of the most rural countryside in the United Kingdom. It also contains some of the most deprived rural areas in the United Kingdom. The Regional Strategy and what it says about rural Northwest England will therefore be significant.

#### **Northwest Regional Development Agency's Rural Policy Statement: Building on Potential in our Rural Areas**

The Northwest Regional Development Agency has published a Rural Policy Statement entitled 'Building on Potential in our Rural Areas'.

The background to this policy statement lies in the 2001 outbreak of 'foot and mouth' disease that exposed the lack of diversity, stability and resilience in the rural economies of Northwest England. It was concluded that the traditional foundations of rural economies are vulnerable because of long term productivity issues in the agricultural industry and a heavy dependence on a regular stream of visitors to maintain income in the tourist industry.

In 2003 the Northwest Development Agency published a plan 'Rural Renaissance' that they regarded as ambitious and innovative. It advocated a marshalling of £390million of partners' funding to support the delivery of an agreed set of strategic priorities. It supported the creation of sub-regional rural partnerships to improve the capacity of rural areas and respond to new investment. The principal of local delivery resulted in planning for a more resilient future that was led by local strategic decision makers.

The range of initiatives supported reflected the diversity of issues in rural areas and the Development Agency consider that their strategic interventions and investment created a strong foundation for growth in rural areas. They consider that their success reinforces the case that economic development in rural areas gives significant benefits to the region as a whole. They consider that working together on a common agenda made Northwest England better prepared to work under an maintain involvement in the government led Rural Delivery Frameworks.

It is possible to ask whether we are looking at a permanent effort by the Development Agency to keep rural economies standing through the maintenance of partnerships and central funding – or whether we are looking at short-term initiatives to ensure that rural economies have a self-sustaining future. The Development Agency considers that capacity to deliver remains a crucial issue. Despite Rural Renaissance the ability to form local partnerships in some areas is still considered to be weak. Also, the Development Agency considers that stimulating ‘leadership’ in rural areas to tackle ongoing capacity issues is a long standing issue. They also consider that closer working relationships across the Northwest Development Agency are required to ensure that they maximise the impact of their investments.

The Northwest Development Agency have identified the following challenges:

- Maintaining effort on achieving a sustainable future for farming and food production in rural areas
- Achieving a balanced approach to sustainable land use in Northwest England
- Reaching a clear understanding of the Northwest Development Agency’s role in strengthening rural communities – in particular services and infrastructure
- Whether once successful market towns are able to withstand the impact of recession. There is some evidence that they are not with Appleby in Westmorland, for example, having suffered significant job losses during the past six months due to the closure of locally based businesses and larger businesses closing local branches
- It appears to be imperative to move market towns on to a position that sees them looking at Regional Development Agency funding as only one part of a programme rather than the keystone. However, it is not clear how this can be achieved
- Bringing rural investment in line with sub-regional priorities

The Northwest Development Agency considers that three factors are driving the rural economy in Northwest England:

- The need to improve productivity and grow the market – Economic activity in rural areas accounts for about £21billion or 23% of Northwest England’s Gross Value Added, but the pattern varies significantly between different parts of the rural economy as considered further below.
- The need to grow the size and capability of the workforce – While worklessness is not the foremost issue for rural areas there is a crucial need to increase the proportion of higher value added jobs
- The need to create and maintain conditions for sustainable growth – Rural Northwest England is an area of stable business formation. However, low productivity and low growth in rural areas remains a dominant issue.

Key facts about rural Northwest England that are highlighted by the Development agency are:

- 20.5% of the region's economic output with 24.3% of rural Gross Value Added generated by the manufacturing sector.
- 80.1% of the working age population are economically active.
- 27% of the region's business stocks, 77% of these are micro-enterprises.
- Business density 13% higher than the regional average at 46 per 1,000 resident population.
- £16,494 of Gross Added Value generated per capita, higher than the regional average.
- Resident earnings are 7.5% higher than workplace earnings.
- 32.7% of the working age population have NVQ level four qualifications or above.
- 1.3million total population accounting for 19.5% of the regional total.
- 24.7% in distribution/hotels; 23.9% of employment in the other services sector; 16.9% in financial and business services and 13.6% in manufacturing.

The Regional Employment Strategy recognises the rural economy as a key growth asset and the Northwest Development Agency intends to implement plans to ensure ongoing growth in the rural economy as part of the Regional Rural Delivery Framework. The three rural policy priorities of the Development Agency are therefore:

- Ensuring Ongoing Sustainable Growth in the Rural Economy
- Creating a Skilled Workforce within Sustainable Rural Communities
- Sustainable Diversification of the Economic Base of Rural Areas

The Development Agency intends to ensure ongoing sustainable growth in the rural economy through intervention centred on improving profitability, creating new enterprise and allowing rural businesses to network, collaborate and connect with the market place. They consider it important to realise the true potential of enterprises in transforming rural economies and that this requires 'Place Renaissance' for economic growth focused on priority key service centres.

The Development Agency intends to create a skilled workforce within sustainable rural communities by:

- Meeting the skills needs of sectors with significant growth potential.
- Investing in the development of intermediate and higher level skills in the workforce.
- Increasing the participation of all potential workers in training.
- Improving succession planning to sustain the economic fabric of rural communities.

The Development Agency intends to achieve the sustainable diversification of the economic base of rural areas by:

- Broadening the economic base of rural areas where consistent under-performance and disadvantage are issued.
- Developing initiatives that tackle the root causes of low productivity and low performance in the rural economy.
- Modernising and diversifying key employment sectors.

The Development Agency intends to implement their policy by:

- Commissioning Intervention and providing Strategic Leadership to drive sustainable growth and improved access to economically important services.

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- Exploiting the integration of planning and economic policy (the Regional Strategy 2010) to really benefit rural areas
- Mainstreaming solutions through their core programmes
- Directly commissioning strategic activity to deliver their priorities but work with partners to deliver activity sub-regionally.
- Defining sub-regional priorities and delivering solutions to address issues at an appropriate level reflecting regional policy
- Ceasing to treat rural areas as a separate case where 'mainstream' sub-regional programmes can bring benefits to rural areas
- Ensuring that programmes such as the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) complement rather than duplicate sub-regional activity

It is expected that the Development Agency will concentrate on its first and third priorities. Analysis, however, demonstrates that there is a significant difference in the economic situation of rural areas that are easily accessible to major population centres and those that are not with most of the economic opportunities arising in the former. The more remote areas are suffering decline because of poor access to services and a lack of diversification in the economic base.

### **State of the Rural Northwest 2008**

In May 2008 the Northwest Regional Development Agency commissioned consultants to prepare a report on the state of the rural Northwest. The report was completed in October 2008 and is informing the Development Agency's policies on the development of rural areas.

The aims of the study were to:

- Refresh the 2005 State of the Rural Northwest report. This proved difficult in some areas as the 2005 report made extensive use of the results of the 2001 census that will not be updated until the census of 2011.
- Carry out a more sophisticated analysis reflecting:
  - Spatial variations in the economic, social and environmental performance across different types of rural area
  - How challenges and opportunities vary in different types of rural areas
  - Policy implications for the Regional Strategy 2010
- Be a 'regional' study.

The Study Methodology was to produce an 'intelligent' dataset. This was achieved through consultation on the indicators and agreeing a final shortlist with the Study Steering Group. The dataset was selected for:

- Strategic relevance
- The importance of the indicator in understanding the drivers of rural performance
- The ability to 'cut' by the urban/rural classification used by the Department for Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).
- Regular updates to enable monitoring against the Regional Rural Delivery Framework

Geographical 'cuts' were made in three ways:

- The Department for Food and Rural Affairs definition, including the Local Authority District (LAD) and Super Output Area (SOA) definitions.
- A variant developed by the consultants based on accessible and remote local authority districts

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- A subsequent sub-regional analysis of headline indicators based on additional analysis commissioned by the Development Agency in December 2008.

The different definitions produce different results. For example, the Super Output Area definition identifies a greater difference between rurality in Cheshire and Cumbria than the local authority district definition.

The study found that rural areas in Northwest England contain 19.5% of the population, 20.3% of the employment and 20.5% of the Gross Value Added. This meant that productivity in rural areas at £32,100 was higher than in urban areas at £31,700. However, there were significant differences in the position in different rural areas. In the 'significant rural areas' being those closest to urban centres they found 9.3% of the region's population, 10.5% of the region's employment and 11.0% of the region's gross value added with a productivity of £33,400. 'Rural Fifty' areas that are more remote had 3.4% of the region's population, 3.1% of employment, 3.2% of gross value added and productivity of £33,000. The more remote 'Rural 80' areas were found to perform less well with 6.9% of the population, 6.7% of the employment, 6.3% of gross value added and productivity of £29,600.

The study found that residents of rural areas are relatively well qualified.

Comparison of the average weekly earnings of residents in rural areas with the average weekly earnings of people who live in rural areas showed that while in Northwest England in total these two variables were similar, in rural areas the average earnings of residents exceeded the average earnings of those who worked there. This arises from the fact that people with relatively high earnings often work in urban areas and live in rural areas. One effect of this is that the relatively high earners cause house prices to rise above a level that is affordable to those who work locally. The ratio between house prices and average incomes was found to be greatest in accessible rural areas although the ratio was high across the region.

The gap between the gross weekly earnings of residents and workers averaged 7.5% in rural Northwest England. However, it was greatest at 12.4% in rural Cheshire and 8.6% in rural Lancashire with a lower gap of 1.9% in rural Cumbria. The study also showed that the gap was greater in 'accessible' areas than in 'remote' areas. This probably reflects the greater accessibility of rural Cheshire and rural Lancashire to relatively high-earning commuters who work in adjacent urban areas.

Access to services is an increasing problem in rural areas with the closure of Post Offices and other services. The survey also found that CO2 levels are surprisingly high in rural areas due in part to patterns of economic activity and in part to relatively high usage of cars.

Comparison of the position in rural areas in the three non-metropolitan counties in Northwest England also revealed significant differences as shown below:

LAD Classification	Share of Northwest Total in 2008			
	Population	Employment	Gross Value	Productivity
Rural Cheshire	8.8%	9.5%	10.9%	£36,200
Rural Cumbria	6.1%	6.7%	5.6%	£27,200
Rural Lancashire	4.5%	4.1%	3.9%	£30,300

This analysis shows that rural Cheshire enjoys high levels of employment, gross value added and productivity. In contrast, rural Cumbria has high levels of employment but low levels of gross value added and low productivity. Rural Lancashire has higher productivity than rural Cumbria but has a lower level of employment. This is obviously connected to the conclusion discussed above that rural areas that are accessible to urban areas tend to enjoy higher levels of productivity than rural areas that are more remote. However, one explanation for the variations is the relatively high level of agricultural and other land based economic activity in Cumbria and that the differences may reflect a different economic structure rather than a lower level of productivity in comparable activities. 'AWICS', for example, is based in rural Cumbria but has a high Gross Value Added.

Rural Cheshire also shows a higher level of Value Added Tax registration rates and people with qualifications at or above level four than either rural Cumbria or rural Lancashire.

This information is consistent with the conclusions of other studies that have shown that Cumbria has the worst performing sub-regional economy in the European Union with the exception of parts of Bulgaria and Rumania.

The study concluded that there are 'twin track' economies in rural Northwest England giving rise to challenging questions and implications for policy.

The implications of the 'twin track' economies are:

- How economic growth can be managed sustainably in rural areas with strong city linkages.
- How to improve the quality of employment to tackle low workplace earnings and 'working poverty'.
- The implications for housing affordability of the high earnings differentials between resident and workplace earnings in accessible rural areas

The study concluded that micro-businesses and home-working are important for both economic and community sustainability. This implies challenges in the delivery of business support, managing the environmental impact of home-working (including balancing the CO2 trade offs) and the efficient use of Information and Communications Technology for productive home working.

There is a need for more innovative delivery mechanisms to manage the situation in which access to services is falling especially in sparse rural areas. In view of the ageing population it is considered that there is a need to maximise the economic potential of active older workers.

It is not clear that planning systems are flexible enough to respond to new opportunities. There are conflicting pressures on land use. The study identified a need to harness economic, social and environmental value of rural assets.

Some rural areas were found to have a high level of CO2 emissions due to industrial activity and road use. This raises the challenge of reducing environmental impacts without compromising the economic gain for Northwest England as a whole from commuter flows.

Since the publication of the study the recession has become deeper. The consultants consider that while the fundamental issues highlighted in their report remain valid, current economic conditions are bringing about new challenges and opportunities for rural areas.

The challenges include:

- The relatively high reliance of micro and small rural businesses on personal finance
- Cut backs in services and retail closures in market towns. Market towns are found to be critical to the vitality of rural economies and are currently under pressure due to the downturn in the retail sector. In many market towns 'Woolworths' used to be the largest single retailer and they closed in the autumn of 2008.
- Loss of employment at large scale manufacturing plants.
- Low wages for rural workers make it harder to secure mortgages and there are reduced housing completions.
- Difficulties in raising awareness of support available.
- Stalled infrastructure investments – including the New Squares Development in Penrith that was halted in the autumn of 2008 when the funder withdrew financial support from the developer leaving the community with a 'mothballed building site' and the local authority with limited options.

The opportunities include:

- Government support for a low carbon future. There are therefore opportunities for nuclear, wind, wave and biomass energy; and carbon sinks that are all industries that already have a strong presence in rural Northwest England.
- It is reported that confidence in business is slightly higher in rural areas than in urban areas. There is also some evidence that levels of business start ups are being sustained better in rural areas than urban areas.
- Reduced levels of income and wealth and falling currency values could create opportunities for tourism.

The study concluded with the following key messages:

- Rural areas account for about 20% of Northwest England's population, employment and gross value added.
- 25% of businesses in Northwest England are in rural areas.
- Rural and urban economies are strongly integrated and interdependent.
- Issues, challenges and opportunities vary across different types of rural area.

The potential role and contribution of rural areas to the Regional Strategy 2010 was identified as follows:

- Rural areas are home to highly skilled populations.
- The economic contribution of businesses located in rural areas is important.
- Rural areas contain high quality, distinctive environments that attract visitors, skilled people and businesses and offer quality of life and health benefits.
- Rural areas have an important role in tackling climate change (including nuclear, wind and biomass power) and taking advantage of low carbon opportunities, energy and food security and sustainable production and consumption.

There are fears that planners are too cautious to address these issues.

## Regional Strategy 2010

The Northwest Regional Development Agency has issued a 'Principles and Issues Paper' for consultation. It was published in February 2009 and consultation is open until 30<sup>th</sup> April 2009. The paper is not, however, a Regional Development Agency paper as it has been produced in partnership with all stakeholders in Northwest England. It is possible to respond to the consultation online at [www.nwregionalstrategy.com](http://www.nwregionalstrategy.com).

The Northwest Regional Strategy 2010 is a single regional strategy that integrates strategies that existed previously:

- It is the joint responsibility of the Northwest Regional Development Agency and For Northwest (the Leaders' Forum).
- It will ultimately replace the Regional Employment Strategy (RES), Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) and Regional Housing Strategy (RHS).
- Legislation and policy guidance is expected throughout.

However, some consider that the timescale for preparation of the Regional Strategy 2010 is too tight to allow any significant changes to be made to the strategies that are already in place.

During 2008 evidence has been gathered to inform the Regional Strategy 2010. The issues paper was issued in February 2009 and is out to consultation until April 2009. Strategies will be further developed during 2009 and the Strategy produced in 2010. Running in parallel with this there is a sustainability appraisal.

The Principles and Issues paper considers assumptions, strategy development, goals, the unique offer of Northwest England and challenges and identifies the issues that arise from these. It is supported by evidence including the State of the Rural Northwest 2008 report and the 'State of the Region' report of the Regional Intelligence Unit.

The introduction to the Principles and Issues Paper states that:

*"The Northwest Region has made significant progress in the last twenty years. Skills levels have risen and overall prosperity has increased. But important challenges remain such as ill health, worklessness, productivity, and social inclusion. On environmental sustainability we have made limited progress relative to the rest of the UK or some of our global competitors. Regeneration in our city centres has been impressive, but we still have areas of considerable deprivation. As part of the world economy the region has the opportunity of rapidly emerging markets in Brazil, Russia, India and China. It also faces the global challenges of ever scarcer natural resources including food and energy security, improving sustainable consumption and production patterns, and adapting to climate change.*

*"The UK and Northwest economies are in recession. This is affecting the different parts of the region in varying ways. Working with national Government, the region has put in place immediate actions to enable businesses, communities and individuals to manage the effects of an economic downturn. But it is also important to position the region for future sustainable recovery and long term resilience and success. It is therefore the right time to think about the future drivers of the regional economy.*

*“There will be many lessons we will need to learn from this recession, as well as dealing with the aftermath of it. We will need to think carefully about the nature of future growth. Big questions include the importance of the retail sector and the high street in the future, if financial services will drive growth again, a possible rapid shift in consumption patterns, and identifying the opportunities arising from the recession. We do know that the future is very uncertain, with the likelihood of rapid technological and social changes, which themselves could drive growth.*

*“We also know that there will be increasing, and sometimes competing, land-use pressures on the countryside, urban fringe, open spaces and brownfield land. All will be needed to deliver economic growth, infrastructure, housing, energy, adaptation to increased flood risk and climate change, recreation, less intensive farming, food and a valued landscape. The amount of land available could also be reducing due to climate change. Indeed climate change may be the single most important issue facing the region, country and world at this time, so developing a low carbon economy will therefore be essential to delivering sustainable growth and remaining competitive.*

*“All these issues mean that we must ask ourselves fundamental questions about how our economy and society work. We will need to be radical in considering how we can integrate environmental, economic and social issues to achieve economic prosperity without unsustainable use of resources. We will need to address what sustainable models of business look like post recession, where the jobs of the future will come from and any fundamental long term changes in the world economy. For example, future models of growth may rely less on consumerism and credit and be based on more efficient use of natural resources.*

*“Despite being in a global economy some of these pressures on resources could lead to increasing "localism" with stronger clustering of activities, increased home working and increased focus on local communities. We need to understand how we can develop alternative models and measures of growth that reflect the importance of quality of life, culture and quality of experiences. All of these are potential long term trends and this paper suggests a number of specific assumptions about how they might affect the region over the next 20 years.*

The assumptions that have been made include:

- Northwest England is becoming increasingly integrated economically. The Development Agency considers that this is good.
- It is imperative to compete on quality and differentiate the economic offer of rural Northwest England.
- Innovation is required to address climate change and carbon reduction targets.
- Volatility in the price and supply of gas, oil and other natural resources will continue with increased prices in the long term likely.
- Food and commodity prices are expected to fluctuate.
- People will still need to commute and travel for work and leisure.
- Cities and other urban centres will continue to be the main focus for living, economic activity and growth.
- There will be an ageing population and lower than recent levels of immigration.

The goal of the Development Agency is sustainable economic growth. This means economic growth that can be sustained and is within environmental limits, but also enhances the environment and social welfare and avoids greater extremes in future economic cycles. This includes addressing: Environment, Employment, Community, Health, Housing, Connectivity, Vibrancy, Low Carbon, Education, Productivity and Equity.

The Strategy will be a framework for sustainable economic growth of the Northwest rather than a detailed plan for each place. It is intended to be a vision of long-term success delivered through competitiveness and differentiation. The intention is to develop a unique offer as a place to live, work and succeed, based on complementary assets and the strengths of Northwest England.

The potential elements of a unique Northwest England offer are considered to be:

- The region has 'critical mass' with diverse culture, sport, image and environment.
- The workforce is relatively high skilled and low cost with great connectivity.
- The region has significant environmental assets and employment land.
- Clean energy generation and security.
- Advanced engineering and materials.
- Opportunities to develop biomedical, digital and creative businesses.
- Facilities for innovation, science, research and universities.
- International ports and airports.

The final point may ring hollow in Cumbria where efforts to develop Carlisle airport have been ongoing for many years but have failed, so far, to come to fruition; and where the ports of Barrow, Whitehaven, Workington and Maryport have received significant investment during recent years but cannot seriously be described as international ports.

The challenges that have been identified for rural Northwest England include:

- Ill Health and economic and social impacts.
- Relatively poor housing stock, housing choice and supply of new build.
- Deprivation, inequality and poor social cohesion.
- External perceptions and low expectations and aspirations.
- Attraction and retention of people.
- Low education and skills profiles.
- Low employment rates.
- Low enterprise levels.
- Challenges to competitiveness.
- Transport – congestion and public transport cold spots.
- High levels of energy use and poor utility infrastructure.
- Challenge to integrate urban areas with rural hinterlands (some people in rural areas feel that the use of expressions such as 'hinterlands' imply a dependence of rural areas on urban areas that does not reflect reality).
- Volume and management of waste (Although recycling services in some rural areas, such as Eden, are very poor. The provision of doorstep collection of recyclables and local recycling centres could improve recycling rates).
- Climate change and flooding.
- Threats to and management of environmental, cultural and historic assets.

The Development Agency also considers that rural Northwest England is behind other regions of England in the development of skills and is certainly behind most regions of Europe.

The issues that are identified in the consultation paper are:

- Low Carbon Economy, Resource Use and Water
- Urban Growth
- Connectivity
- Places and Communities
- Natural Environment and Rural Areas
- Skills and Talent
- Health and Worklessness
- Innovation
- Advanced Manufacturing
- Nature of Growth and role of the Public Sector

The consultation paper asks the following questions:

- Do you believe that things have fundamentally changed as a result of this recession and that issues of climate change, low carbon economy, competing land use pressures and the nature of future growth are important to consider?
- Do you agree with the assumptions above? If not, what alternative assumptions would you make? Are there any assumptions missing?
- Do you agree that the focus of this strategy should be on sustainable economic growth and contribute to sustainable development?
- In the delivery of this, do you agree with the elements outlined above? Are there elements missing? How would you prioritise them?
- How do you believe these aims and goals should best be measured?
- Do you agree that these elements adequately summarise the Northwest's unique offer in a world economy? Are there any current or future potential elements missing?
- Do you disagree with any of these statements?
- Do you believe these elements will still be unique about the Northwest in twenty years' time?
- Do you agree with the challenges outlined above for the Northwest over the coming twenty years? Are there any missing?
- Do you agree that the list of major issues for the region to address via the Regional Strategy are correct and will lead to sustainable and equitable economic, social and environmental wellbeing? Are there any issues you would remove? Are there any issues missing from your perspective? How would you prioritise these issues?
- Do you agree with the assertions made in these issues? Have you got any specific comments on the issues raised or the inter-relationships between them?

## **Conclusions**

The Government intends that the new system of Regional Strategies will lead to more 'joined-up' Planning, Economics and Housing than has been the case in the past.

This paper has looked specifically at the implications for rural Northwest England. The Northwest region is very diverse and, as well as containing the two great cities of Liverpool and Manchester and the urban areas of Greater Manchester, Merseyside and South Lancashire – also contains the rural areas of Cheshire, Lancashire and Cumbria.

The studies that have been carried out to inform the Regional Strategy confirm that there are specific rural problems and issues. However, they also confirm that rural areas share many problems with urban areas including the affordability of housing. However, they also confirm that different rural areas face different issues. In particular, rural areas that have easy access to urban areas can attract commuters and investment that raise incomes and property values to a level that 'price out' people who are employed locally. In contrast more remote rural areas suffer from low incomes, lack of services and lack of opportunities.

It is to be hoped that the Regional Strategy for the Northwest 2010 will offer some hope and deliver some benefits for people who live in rural Northwest England.

It is also to be hoped that Regional Strategies will deliver the same benefits for people who live in rural and urban areas throughout England.

**Adrian Waite**  
**March 2009**