

## Introduction

Life in the countryside is changing rapidly. Not all of the changes are adverse. However, the evidence we have examined shows that these changes can affect most severely the more vulnerable members of our communities - the young, the old and those struggling to make ends meet on lower incomes. Our research shows that the council and its partners do not always address the needs of these people in a coordinated way.



**Councillor Catherine Spencer**  
(Western and Mare Ward)

The cost of living in the countryside is increasing. The cost of rural homes has escalated to such an extent that it is very difficult for local people with average earnings to get onto the housing ladder. Despite this, demand for village homes remains high. This demand creates pressure for the conversion of existing facilities such as pubs, shops and post offices for housing and we have seen how this is beginning to erode the social fabric of villages.

Our review has looked at the role planning policy can play in helping to build sustainable rural communities; how funds can be raised to tackle decline; how communities can be more involved locally and how the council and its partners can work together more effectively. We have reviewed literature from many agencies, we have talked to key stakeholders and experts in the field and we have consulted widely on our proposals. The same key themes emerge repeatedly - affordable rural housing; accessibility of local services; the need for a strong and diverse rural economy and the role of the rural voluntary and community sector.

We echo many of the conclusions of the Rural Advocate Dr Stuart Burgess in his 2007 report. We agree with his analysis that the two most pressing priorities for action are the issues of affordable local housing and the development of a strong and vibrant local economy. We recognise that the reorganisation of local government in Wiltshire presents an excellent opportunity to make the changes that we feel are now required.

I am delighted to commend the recommendations to the Wiltshire Joint Implementation Executive.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Catherine Spencer".

**Councillor Catherine Spencer**  
Lead Member  
Sustainable Rural Communities Review

4th April 2008

## The Changes We Face

In our full report we document the changes that are taking place within Wiltshire's rural communities. The decline of the agricultural industry as a major employer has had a significant impact on job opportunities. Fewer than 1671 agricultural jobs remain in rural South Wiltshire and this has declined by an average of more than 1% every year for the last 15 years. Our review has revealed that the standard of living for those living in the most sparsely populated areas in South Wiltshire declined significantly between 2004 and 2007. This may have been influenced by rising house prices and lower average incomes for families dependent on rural industry and agriculture.

Rising house prices and a lack of affordable housing are causing problems and driving a number of adverse changes. When affluent families choose the scenic Wiltshire countryside for the location of their second home this or to retire, increases demand and drives up house prices. Those on lower incomes, and especially younger residents, are forced to move away from the countryside in search of well-paid work and affordable homes. Banks, post-offices, village shops, schools and pubs are closing due to a lack of local patronage.

New forms of service provision have helped to mitigate this to some extent, but it is the most vulnerable members of rural communities who are hit the hardest. The elderly, the poor, and the infirm do not have the easy option of travelling elsewhere to access essential services. As more affluent individuals move in, so the disadvantaged and the vulnerable become more isolated.

Cumulatively, these changes are slowly sapping the life from our rural communities. If unchecked, the familiar perception of traditional village life will be consigned to history.

We have tried to look at the hard facts. We did not want our review to be guided by our own experiences or views. We have let the evidence lead us to our conclusions. We are reassured that our review has met these aspirations - we can say this with confidence because our conclusions mirror those of other recent research reports - particularly the findings of Dr Stuart Burgess. It cannot be coincidental that independently we have reached the same conclusions.

Our full report runs to 45 pages and contains 27 recommendations aimed at addressing rural decline in Wiltshire. These recommendations are set out here, but readers may want to consider them within the context of the analysis set out in our full report which together with the supporting papers, can be viewed online at [www.salisbury.gov.uk/living-in-the-country](http://www.salisbury.gov.uk/living-in-the-country). Alternatively, please contact:

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

## RECOMMENDATION R01

That the Implementation Executive and Wiltshire Assembly (LSP) give a clear commitment that rural regeneration will be an area of specific focus in the Local Area Agreement.

## RECOMMENDATION R02

That the Implementation Executive give early consideration to the adoption of 'Rural Proofing' for the new Council's policies and services, based on the conclusions and recommendations set out in Ken Spencer and Steve Rogers' report for the Countryside Agency and the School of Public Policy, University of Birmingham entitled 'Rural Proofing for Unitary Local Authorities in England.'

## RECOMMENDATION R03:

That the new unitary Wiltshire Council should aim to put developing sustainable rural communities at the heart of its work by:

- (1) Creating a cabinet portfolio for rural affairs (to be reflected at Implementation Executive level until 2009) mirrored by effective scrutiny arrangements (and included within the remit of the Transitional Joint Overview and Scrutiny Board).
- (2) Seeking to agree with the new Wiltshire Assembly (LSP) to set up from 2009 a Wiltshire Rural Commission bringing together all major stakeholders to develop and take forward a rural strategy for Wiltshire.
- (3) Developing and adopting by the end of 2010 a new rural strategy and action plan for Wiltshire, in partnership with the Wiltshire Assembly (LSP)
- (4) Providing adequate resources and officer support to sustain the work of the Wiltshire Rural Commission and to progress a rural strategy for Wiltshire with supporting action plans.
- (5) Ensuring that the Community Area Boards are given a clear remit for developing sustainable rural communities, through the development of local action plans, by holding local service providers to account, by monitoring local outcomes, through the exercise of local executive powers and through the allocation of rural regeneration funds.
- (6) Setting up a standing overview and scrutiny panel on rural issues.

## RECOMMENDATION R04

That the money generated from 'second home' Council tax (potentially £1m pa in Wiltshire) should be ring-fenced from April 2009 to promote and support sustainable rural communities.

## RECOMMENDATION R05

That the Council lobbies the government, urging for a change in legislation to ensure that all future revenue derived from rural second homes is utilised for developing sustainable rural communities. Second homes Council tax should be retained by the collecting authority and used to address priorities agreed by the local authority and its partners in the area.

## RECOMMENDATION R06

- (1) That the Council supports the proposals set out in the White Paper: '*Business Rate Supplements*' and believes the new Wiltshire Council should use the proposed discretionary levy (or a substantial element) to support the development of sustainable rural communities. Such funds should be administered by the proposed Community Area Boards to support local regeneration projects
- (2) That Salisbury District Council, Wiltshire County Council, Wiltshire Council, and the Wiltshire Assembly (LSP) be encouraged to lobby the government in support of the proposed business rate supplement, asking that this measure is introduced as soon as possible and that revenues derived are applied locally by the collecting authority to support economic regeneration and the development of sustainable rural communities.

#### **RECOMMENDATION R07**

In considering the structure of the new Wiltshire Council, the Implementation Executive is urged to:

- (1) Establish a single Joint External Bidding Team for Wiltshire within the Corporate Policy Unit providing support to the Wiltshire Assembly (LSP) and the Wiltshire Rural Commission. This should include a core team of Council officers working in close liaison with officers from partner organisations; and
- (2) Ensure that funding for rural regeneration is distributed in accordance with strategic priorities agreed by the Wiltshire Rural Commission and allocated through the Community Area Boards along the lines set out in paragraphs 36, 37, 38 and 47 of this report.

#### **RECOMMENDATION R08**

The review group recommends that the new Local Development Framework for Wiltshire be based on a 'hub and hamlet' approach to sustainable rural development. This approach directs larger scale housing, employment and social infrastructure development to larger sustainable 'hub' settlements (towns and larger villages). It also continues to encourage smaller scale affordable and sensitive development in the smaller villages and hamlets, where this will support the continued vitality of those settlements and the viability of any remaining local amenities such as village halls, churches, sports clubs, pubs and shops. In identifying hub settlements, serious consideration should be given to the suitability of transport infrastructure and road links.

#### **RECOMMENDATION R09**

The Local Development Framework should facilitate the wider application of developer contributions to support rural facilities and services through a needs-based alternative to the current R2 Policy. This should require developers to make contributions that will be used to maintain and develop local services and amenities (not simply open space), based on the identified needs of the wider community area in which the development takes place.

#### **RECOMMENDATION R10**

As far as legalities will allow, the cumulative effect of small developments should be taken into account when calculating developer contributions and this should recognise that in rural areas infrastructure projects are less likely to relate directly to specific development sites – for example medical and social facilities may be some distance from a development site.

#### **RECOMMENDATION R11**

It is recommended that the appropriate level for the application of developer contributions should be Wiltshire's well-established community areas. In these areas, developer contributions should be used to fund strategic services that serve the wider community area as well as local facilities and amenities in the smaller settlements and hamlets - it is important that smaller villages continue to have access to this vital source of funding. This will encourage the long-term sustainability of larger settlements and provide accessible services for the smaller dependent satellite settlements.

#### **RECOMMENDATION R12**

The Local Development Framework should set down clear policies for the protection of rural businesses and amenities and include unambiguous viability tests to be met before any change of use is considered. In particular, the policy should contain clear guidelines setting out how such buildings and land should be independently valued and prominently advertised in order to meet the requirements of the policy. This process should include the early notification of the local parish Council in order that the Council may have an input into the advertisement of the premise and have adequate time to consider whether the business should be acquired on behalf of local residents as a community venture. Viability tests should not rely solely on prevailing market conditions, but also include an assessment of the long-term strategic, social and economic importance of the facility within the settlement. It should also incorporate a strategic assessment of the building in terms of its potential contribution to the local economy.

**RECOMMENDATION R13**

Recognising the way in which the Internet is set to revolutionise business and commercial practice and facilitate remote and mobile working, the Local Development Framework should provide encouragement for businesses to take advantage of online working and relocate to rural areas. This can be assisted by the commercial reuse of redundant agricultural buildings and the adaptation of existing properties to facilitate home working.

**RECOMMENDATION R14**

That the Implementation Executive be urged to recognise the importance of agriculture and farming in Wiltshire by making a commitment to provide a dedicated resource within the Corporate Policy Unit of the new Wiltshire Authority with a clear remit for Rural Proofing and for advising the cabinet on rural and farming issues (as set out in paragraph 74 above).

**RECOMMENDATION R15**

That part of the Sustainable Rural Communities Fund be earmarked to support farmers, where this can be linked to the wider social benefit of farming activities, such as increased access to the countryside, biodiversity and wildlife schemes, environmental and landscape stewardship, leisure and recreational schemes, tourism and regeneration, reuse of redundant buildings, etc.

**RECOMMENDATION R16**

That local authorities in Wiltshire join together to support the Rural Advocate's call for a longer-term national strategy for agriculture that addresses the conflicting demands of diversification, carefully assesses the impact of the demand for bio fuel crops and develops a more positive role for farming within wider society.

**RECOMMENDATION R17**

That the Wiltshire Joint Implementation Executive is urged to commission an urgent study of the measures available to safeguard rural post offices and other vital village amenities in Wiltshire.

**RECOMMENDATION R18**

That the new Wiltshire Council should continue to lobby the government (together with other rural authorities) for a review of the Revenue Support Grant mechanism so that it better reflects the additional cost of providing services in rural and sparsely populated areas.

**RECOMMENDATION R19**

That the new Wiltshire Council is urged to continue to grant discretionary rate relief to rural businesses such as shops, post offices, pubs and garages.

**RECOMMENDATION R20**

That the Wiltshire Joint Implementation Executive seeks to ensure that funding distributed through the Community Area Boards is used to support local community groups, voluntary services and community based projects that contribute to building and maintaining the sustainability of rural communities.

**RECOMMENDATION R21**

That the Implementation Executive seeks to ensure that the role of community planning and community development workers is focused on supporting community groups and voluntary organisations - working as advocates for the community rather than ambassadors for the Council. The responsibilities and job descriptions of these officers should be clearly defined to ensure that this important community focus is not lost.

**RECOMMENDATION R22**

To enable the aspirations and needs of local communities to shape local planning policies, more rigorous, evidence led approach to community and parish planning is needed. Mechanisms for supporting and validating such plans should continue to be strengthened. One measure that will facilitate this is the development of a common data resource that brings together high quality validated statistical data to support local plan making.

**RECOMMENDATION R23**

The Joint Implementation Executive for Wiltshire is requested to ensure that adequate resources are available to the Wiltshire Intelligence Network to enable it to become a single common statistical resource on which multi-agency plans can be based.

**RECOMMENDATION R24**

The Joint Implementation Executive for Wiltshire is requested to make a commitment to support parish planning across the County and encourage participation by streamlining access to funding for those parishes with accredited plans in place.

**RECOMMENDATION R25**

The Joint implementation Executive is requested to take urgent steps to rationalise support services for social enterprises. This should involve the creation of a single advisory service for Wiltshire (this could be located in the Corporate Policy Team or provided by the voluntary sector).

**RECOMMENDATION R26**

The review group recommends that the new Local Development Framework should provide for a significant level of new housing in the principal villages. Affordable and social housing schemes should be encouraged within the Local Development Framework and actively promoted within the smaller rural settlements provided they are of an appropriate small scale and address identified housing needs in the area.

**RECOMMENDATION R27**

The Wiltshire Implementation Executive is urged to:

- Adopt the recommendations set out in this report.
- Commission officers from all authorities and partner organisations to come together to plan for the implementation of the approach set out in this report in the run up to the commencement of the new Council.