

Sustainable Rural Communities:

a review of rural issues in Wiltshire

Executive Summary

April 2008



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 Mere 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. Alternatively, please contact:

Steve Milton
Overview and Scrutiny Team Leader
Salisbury District Council
PO Box 2117
Salisbury
Wiltshire SP2 2DF

scrutiny@salisbury.gov.uk

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.

Sustainable Rural Communities:

a review of rural issues in Wiltshire

Final Report

April 2008



Sustainable Rural Communities

Introduction by Councillor Catherine Spencer

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 Mere 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.

The 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 Implementation Executive."

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Catherine Spencer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Lead Member

Sustainable Rural Communities Scrutiny Review Group

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Terms of Reference of the Review

The Council's Planning and Economic Development Scrutiny Panel commissioned the Sustainable Rural Communities Scrutiny Review Group in May 2005 as part of the Panel's work programme.

The original terms of reference and scope of the review are set out below:

- (i) To identify which particular facilities contribute to the economic and social wellbeing of rural communities.
- (ii) To review the effectiveness of the present policies in the Local Plan in protecting and enhancing social and economic activity.
- (iii) To examine how planning policy elsewhere has been used to protect and promote such facilities in rural settlements.
- (iv) To identify key principles which should underpin new Local Development Framework policies.
- (v) To identify needs which could justify requirements for developer contributions.
- (vi) To identify other measures that may help to maintain, assist and supplement economic and social activity in rural communities.

Following the consultation exercise that concluded in Spring 2007 the review was broadened to look at other important issues that most consultees felt were inseparable from the areas we had studied. This involved an extensive rewrite of the review. Then came the announcement on Local Government Reorganisation in Wiltshire and that required a further rethink. *As a result the report now focuses on the role that the new unitary Council can play in building sustainable rural communities in Wiltshire.*

Membership of the Sustainable Rural Communities Review Group

Councillor Catherine Spencer (Conservative, Western & Mere) – Lead Member

Councillor Richard Beattie (Conservative, Tisbury and Fovant)

Councillor Elizabeth Chettleburgh (Liberal Democrat, St. Edmund and Milford)

Councillor Michael Fowler (Conservative, Knoyle)

Councillor John Holt (Liberal Democrat, Wilton)

Councillor George Jeans (Independent, Mere)

Councillor John King (Conservative, Laverstock)

Councillor Jane Launchbury (Conservative, Downton and Redlynch)

Councillor James Spencer (Liberal Democrat, Bulford)

Steve Milton in the Council's Democratic Services Unit supported the Scrutiny work with the help of Lindsay Mertens (who left the Council in 2007).

Methodology

1. The review was undertaken in accordance with the Council's new scrutiny arrangements and included the following research methods:

A Planned Approach

2. The review group was working to a clear project plan agreed by the Planning and Economic Development Overview and Scrutiny Panel. The project plan proved a useful tool by which progress could be monitored and it provided the basis for progress reports to the Planning and Economic Development Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

Desk Research

3. The Scrutiny Team assembled a list of publications, papers and documents and a list of references is included at the end of the report. A general bibliography can be found with the supporting papers.

Interviews

4. Interviews were conducted with:
 - Sarah Hughes (Forward Planning)
 - Claire Mawson (Economic Development)
 - Alan Osborne (Head of Financial Services)
 - David Milton (Forward Planning)
 - Jane Ferguson (Legal and Property Services)
 - Representatives of local parish Councils.
 - Ivan Annibal (LGA Rural Advisor and founder of the Rural Excellence Beacon Mentoring)

The transcripts of the interviews have been included in the supporting papers. Questions were submitted to the participants in advance of the interviews and the transcripts were approved by the interviewees prior to publication in accordance with Council's normal scrutiny procedures.

Other Local Authorities

5. The review group analysed the approaches adopted by other similar and best performing authorities as part of the review process, including the Beacon Councils identified in 2005.

Consultation

6. All parish, district and county Councillors in the district were consulted on the preliminary findings of the review. A discussion paper was sent to all these parties and district and county Council officers, and responses were co-ordinated via the Council's rural Area Committees. The discussion paper and a breakdown and summary of responses are included in the background papers that support this review.

Best Practice Research

7. The review group has considered a large amount of best practice materials from the government, beacon councils and other agencies. A list of these materials can be found in the bibliography.

Changes in the Countryside

8. The review group has considered a significant body of evidence that shows how rapidly rural life is changing. This trend is evident in Wiltshire.

Employment

9. The decline of the agricultural industry as the major employer in rural areas¹ 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.² Areas in South Wiltshire are more dependent on agriculture than other parts of the county. In the Mere community area 10% of workers are employed in the agriculture sector compared to the County average of 3%.³ A review of the Department of Communities and Local Government Indices of Multiple Deprivation for the five most sparsely populated areas in South Wiltshire showed that all five ranked lower in 2007 than in 2004 indicating an increase in deprivation. This may have been influenced by rising house prices and lower average incomes for families dependent on rural industry and agriculture⁴. Consequently, the demographics of rural communities have changed. Increasingly, rural villages are becoming homes for professional classes who commute out of the area⁵ and, crucially, access services outside their local community.⁶ This situation is only likely to get worse unless the wage gap between rural and urban workers begins to narrow.

Affordable Housing

10. Rural areas lack affordable housing⁷ for local people. This results from limited supply, restrictions on development and very high demand, which drives up house prices. When affluent families choose the scenic Wiltshire countryside for the location of their second or retirement home this adds to the problem.⁸ As a result, those living on lower incomes, and especially young residents, are forced to move away from the countryside in search of well-paid work and affordable homes. As a consequence, trade in local shops is reducing, local businesses are struggling to recruit, school numbers are declining, and the numbers of volunteers for community activities are falling⁹. Change and development will be essential if rural communities are to grow and thrive in the future. In 2005/06, only 60 affordable housing units were completed in South Wiltshire and the majority of these were associated with larger housing developments in Salisbury and Amesbury. This level is too low and often the new housing does not benefit the local communities in which it is built. This is the main reason for resistance to rural housing developments. Where local housing schemes are developed in partnership with parish Councils for the benefit of the local community, success is far more likely.¹⁰

¹ Agriculture now employs just 6% of the rural workforce, compared with 25% in manufacturing (Consultation response, Alistair Cunningham, WCC Head of Economic Regeneration and Resources)

² Wiltshire and Swindon intelligence Network agricultural and horticultural employment rates in South Wiltshire 1990-2005

³ Wiltshire and Swindon intelligence Network: Mere Area profile 2004

⁴ ONS Labour Force Survey 2005 shows agriculture and horticulture wages 30% lower than the national average (£328pw v £474pw)

⁵ 2001 Census (average travel to work in Western and Mere area of Wiltshire was 23.19km compared to national average of 13.3km (bearing in mind that 17.6% of all people employed in the area work from home compared to the national average of 9.16%))

⁶ SDC Climate Change Survey 2007 73% of rural residents access supermarkets more than 5 miles from their home.

⁷ Consultation response (Alistair Cunningham, WCC Head of Economic Regeneration and Resources)

⁸ SDC Council Tax records (500 homes in South Wiltshire 2007)

⁹ Report of the Rural Advocate 2007 p6

¹⁰ Ibid p7

Demographics

11. Over the past 20 years, the proportion of people aged 15-24 in rural areas has fallen from 21% to 15%.¹¹ Consequently, the average age of rural residents has increased. This is particularly marked in rural areas of Wiltshire such as Tisbury, which has 7% more people of pensionable age than the county average.¹² These changes have significant consequences for rural services - decreasing demand for rural schools and increasing demand for already strained rural health care services. Reviewing the National Indices of Multiple Deprivation produced by the Department of Communities and Local Government, shows that in several areas of South Wiltshire older people were experiencing greater hardship in 2007 than they were in 2004 although there is no uniform pattern across the area. Older people can become isolated from the communities in which they live. Initiatives that help them continue to live independently in rural areas, and/or help them contribute through employment or volunteering are both necessary and valued. Such initiatives bring improvements to an individual's long-term health prospects, their quality of life and to the vitality of rural communities. Our research shows that greater efforts are needed in this area.

Access to Services

12. As highlighted above, changes in the rural employment and housing markets have produced areas dominated by affluent professionals (or retired professionals) who often access services outside the local community.¹³ This, combined with the growth of online services, has contributed to a reduction in demand for local services. The review group has reviewed the consequences - widespread closures of banks, post-offices, village shops, schools and pubs. The loss of these services is made worse by the financial incentive associated with the conversion of such buildings for residential housing use. While new forms of service provision such as the Internet and mobile services have helped to mitigate this to some extent, 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.

Community Spirit

13. Cumulatively, these changes have slowly eroded the vitality of our rural communities. If unchecked, the familiar perception of traditional village life will be consigned to history. The migration of local people in search of work and housing serves to disturb traditional bonds whilst transient populations find less time to contribute to community activities. The closure of local services compounds the loss of community cohesion and feeds the vision of rural villages as little more than urban dormitories. This is a bleak picture to paint, but does go some way towards expressing the feelings and fears of many rural residents.

Changing times

14. We want the countryside to remain a living place. Change need not be negative. Farm shops and local produce markets are becoming more widespread as awareness of climate change and sustainability increases. The Internet now provides opportunities for people to work from home and access a wide range of services online. Investment in public transport is beginning to improve rural

¹¹ Ibid p2

¹² Wiltshire and Swindon intelligence Network: Tisbury Area Profile 2004

¹³ SDC Climate Change Survey 2007

bus services. Community policing teams have returned to villages and more primary health services are now delivered from local GP surgeries. These trends present a more positive picture and serve to illustrate the complexity of the issues involved.

A shared priority

15. The issues facing Wiltshire are not unique. Developing sustainable rural communities is a priority identified in the Rural White Paper 'Our Countryside: The Future - A Fair Deal for Rural England' and Lord Haskin's Report on Rural Service Delivery. More recently, the Rural Advocate Dr Stuart Burgess¹⁴ has called for a stronger lead from central government, Matthew Taylor's review of Affordable Rural Housing was launched in December 2007 and the Rural Services Network's 'Call for Action' to the government was published as recently as March 2008. More locally, the South West Rural Delivery Framework is addressing common themes across the region and, within the County; the Wiltshire Rural Executive is working to respond to local issues. There are many policy documents on rural issues at national, regional and local level which have identified many of the issues analysed in this report, including DEFRA's Rural Strategy 2004, the Curry report, the Haskins report, the South West Sustainable Food and Farming Plan, the Regional Rural Development Framework and the Wiltshire Community Strategy. The rural beacon Councils chosen in 2005 have added to the body of best practice that now exists on the subject. *This report seeks to draw all these sources of information and advice together into a coherent strategic approach for Wiltshire.*

A shared evidence base

16. 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 let the evidence guide 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.

¹⁴ Report of the Rural Advocate 2007 (Countryside Agency)

Treating the Causes of Decline

Can Councils make a difference?

17. The preceding summary demonstrates the complexity of the challenge facing the Council and its partners. There is no single cause of rural decline; rather, there is a whole raft of complex interconnected and interdependent issues - some of which are driving positive changes while others are having a more negative impact. The sheer scale of the issue led the Group to question whether social intervention could begin to check the decline - and even to challenge whether this is an achievable expectation in Wiltshire. But evidence reviewed shows that in some areas (such as Cumbria¹⁵) social intervention has made a significant impact on the causes of rural decline. Where such action has been most successful, it has been the result of coordinated activity by the main public service agencies acting in concert with the voluntary and business sector. Recognising this as a key to effective intervention, the review group believes that *the new Wiltshire Council must seek to work within existing and emerging partnerships to join up fragmented public services and policies into a coordinated, coherent and focused rural strategy for Wiltshire.*

Getting down to the roots

18. Whilst funding can help to shore up declining services in the short-term, developing a strategy to ensure the long-term survival of rural communities requires a deeper appreciation of the causes of decline. Ultimately, rural services have suffered due to a lack of demand. Using public money to prop up failing businesses through rate reductions and grants is both wasteful and pointless unless the underlying causes of decline are addressed. This will require:
- A good supply of affordable local housing
 - More varied and higher paid employment opportunities for local people within local communities
 - Support for farmers and agricultural industries
 - Support and encouragement for agricultural diversification
 - Maximising the benefits of tourism and recreational use of the countryside
 - Protection for vital local services and facilities such as local shops, post offices, pubs, banks and garages
 - Improved access to health, public protection and social care services - particularly for the elderly, vulnerable and the very young
 - Self-help activities that engender community spirit - such as parish planning
 - Promotion and extension of local markets and trade cooperatives
 - A recognition of the value of faith, cultural and arts activities
 - Promotion of traditional customs and crafts
 - Sustained democratic engagement
 - Support for traditional sports, leisure pursuits and social activities.

¹⁵ Rural Regeneration Cumbria (RRC) began operations on 1 April 2003, and was the first rural regeneration company in the UK. Cumbria County Council and the North West Development Agency are principal shareholders. Within 3 years of operation the Company had secured £35m investment in regeneration funding and was supporting 350 local projects.

Recognising the complexity of the task

19. Some of these issues fell outside the original terms of reference of the review, which was commissioned to investigate the role that planning and economic policy can play in encouraging rural sustainability. However, we considered that it would be wrong to ignore such important issues and so we have tried to address them in this report. Of course, we recognise that some of the issues are beyond the influence of funding alone and so the review group has explored practical, realistic measures that the Council and its partners (and from 2009 the new Wiltshire Council) can undertake to start making a positive difference to our rural communities. The review group feels that, combined with the efforts of those living in these local communities, the Council and its partners are in a good position to begin the difficult task of tackling rural decline and supporting the continued existence of vibrant and sustainable rural communities.

Recognising our responsibilities

20. Local public service providers have a duty to provide an equitable level of service to all residents. And yet, we have seen evidence that the level of service received in our rural areas falls short of that available to those in urban areas. This was reflected in a recent budget consultation survey carried out by Salisbury District Council that shows that satisfaction with Council services is much lower in the rural Tisbury and Mere areas of the district. We feel there is a simple explanation - people living in those areas feel resources are directed disproportionately into urban areas. As an example, black box recycling services have only this year been rolled out to residents in rural areas whereas in Salisbury this service has been running for at least three years. This is hardly equitable and it should not take a report of this nature to draw attention to the inequality. *Rural residents pay the same level of Council tax and they should receive the same level of service.*

Respecting the needs of rural areas

21. We feel that government policy often overlooks the needs of rural communities or gives only cursory consideration to the impact of policies in such areas. Inspection regimes often reinforce the problem by driving demands for efficiency and speed of service - in rural areas service provision is more expensive and takes longer to deliver. We feel that with the creation of a new unitary Council for Wiltshire we have an opportunity to redress the balance by making sure that local policies and services take full account of the needs of Wiltshire's rural communities. *This must be achieved by systematic 'rural proofing' and through commitments included in the Local Area Agreement.*

Rural Proofing

22. Rural proofing is defined by the Countryside Agency as: "... the process by which the potential impact of policy and decision-making on rural areas is evaluated, taking the needs of those who live and work in the countryside fully into account."¹⁶ The idea is set out more fully 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' (2005). We have examined that report and feel that it is essential that the new Wiltshire Council has regard to its main recommendations, which are adapted overleaf:

¹⁶ Countryside Agency (Rural Proofing report to the Government of 2002, p8)

- Rural Proofing needs to be integrated into mainstream decision-making and review processes, by linking it to existing mechanisms and frameworks. It is not about having a new blueprint or a checklist – even though this may be helpful as an aid. This requires strong support and leadership from both political and administrative arms of the authority
- It is important for authorities to develop their understanding, perceptions and information bases in terms of both statistics and the views of those who live and work in the countryside.
- Rural Proofing can be achieved only through integration into the full range of unitary planning processes.
- The roles of major public services should be joined-up through local partnership working in liaison with the Countryside Agency, GOSW and other regional bodies with a strategic remit.
- The most appropriate ways forward for unitary Rural Proofing are likely to include elements of the following:
 - Community strategies and strategic plans such as the Local Area Agreement and Local Development Framework
 - Review activity including performance review and scrutiny
 - Integration of Rural Proofing with corporate plan priorities
 - Using the Local Strategic Partnership and other networks for accessing other stakeholders
 - Developing an information and evidence-based analysis
 - Area committees and forums
- Unitaries need a clear purpose and flexible approach to Rural Proofing as well as resources and capacity to deliver action to address the issues set out in this paper.
- Rural Proofing is not an end in itself, it should lead to improvements in the quality of life for those living in rural areas

23. *We commend the report to the Implementation Executive and urge consideration of its conclusions and recommendations during the reorganisation of local government, the development of the Local Area Agreement and the establishment of the Wiltshire Assembly (LSP).*

The role of the Local Area Agreement

24. A local area agreement (LAA) is a three-year agreement between Wiltshire Councils and central government. The Local Area Agreement describes how local priorities will be met by delivering local solutions. It also contributes to national priorities set out by the Government. The Local Area Agreement is negotiated between the local strategic partnership - the Wiltshire Assembly (LSP) - and the Government Office for the South West. Wiltshire County Council (and in due course Wiltshire Council) is the lead partner and negotiates the Local Area Agreement on behalf of the Wiltshire Assembly (LSP) and is the only body accountable to government. Other key players include the police and the primary care trust. We believe the Local Area Agreement is a key vehicle

for addressing the needs of rural communities. *We are disappointed that the ambitions in the draft Local Area Agreement for Wiltshire do not specifically refer to the problems associated with rural deprivation. We feel that unless these are included, rural issues will become of secondary importance as the new Wiltshire Council and the Wiltshire Assembly (LSP) rightly focus on the themes within the Local Area Agreement. We would like a firm commitment from the Implementation Executive and from the Wiltshire Assembly (LSP) that rural regeneration will be a specific focus of the present and future Local Area Agreements.*

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.'

A Rural Commission for Wiltshire

Partnership working: paradise lost

25. Through our research, we have found that there are a great number of national and local agencies providing services to rural communities in south Wiltshire. These include the various departments of Salisbury District Council and Wiltshire County Council, The Police, Salisbury NHS Foundation Trust, Wiltshire Primary Care NHS Trust, Wiltshire College, The Community Safety Executive, Access and Rural Transport Partnership, South Wiltshire Strategic Housing Board, The South Wiltshire Economic Partnership, The Wiltshire Rural Executive, The South Wiltshire Strategic Alliance, Churches Together, South Wiltshire Action Against Poverty, South Wiltshire Diversity Partnership, Parish and Town Councils, Wiltshire Wildlife Trust and the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB Forum among many others. In addition, there are a huge range of national bodies with an interest in the subject: The Council for the Protection of Rural England, Country Landowners Association, Countryside Agency, English Heritage, English Nature, Environment Agency, Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, National Farmers Union, National Trust, the New Forest National Park Authority, and many others. It is encouraging that so many agencies have recognised the importance of building sustainable rural communities, but *there is real evidence of duplication, wasted resources, blurred accountability, confusion, lack of focus and many missed opportunities*¹⁷. *We feel that rather than adding value, this huge array of partnerships, agencies and organisations is inadvertently contributing to the problem. This situation must be improved.*

Local Government Reorganisation: paradise regained?

26. The introduction of a new unitary Council for Wiltshire will bring together all local authority services, with a single set of priorities and policies. It will also provide a unique opportunity to rationalize the confusing plethora of partnerships, into a single strong local governance structure for Wiltshire minimising bureaucracy and focusing clearly on local priorities.

The Wiltshire Rural Commission: Clarity and focus

27. The establishment of a rural task force was one of the suggestions raised in our discussion paper, and one that elicited a strong level of support. Whilst some consultation responses state that a further rural group is not necessary, we have found that the current structure of partnerships is confusing and largely ineffectual (with some exceptions). We believe rural regeneration should be a clear focus of activity not an add-on to an existing partnership. For this reason we are proposing the creation of a new Rural Commission for Wiltshire, working under the umbrella of the Wiltshire Assembly (LSP). This will rationalise existing partnerships and avoid further duplication by subsuming their roles into a new and more powerful body with a clear focus and dedicated support.

The Wiltshire Rural Commission: a strategic player with national influence

28. We have recommended the creation of a Rural Commission to coordinate needs assessments and services and to develop short, medium and longer-term rural action plans. We consider that this strategic approach is essential if Wiltshire is to be successful in attracting inward investment from national and European funding streams. Results of our consultation exercise indicated support for the proposal that this Commission should have clear terms of reference and powers to produce a

¹⁷ Tavistock Institute review of partnership structure and working in Wiltshire

rural strategy, bid for funding, monitor policy and direct activity. Giving the Commission this level of authority would help to ensure that it carries real weight when negotiating for improvements in rural services and ensure it is not seen merely as a 'talking shop.' Moreover, we believe that the Commission should be able to lobby nationally when this is seen to be appropriate.

The Wiltshire Rural Commission: working with the Community Area Boards

29. Consultation responses to the above suggestion reflected clear support for this sort of strong new partnership, particularly from district and parish representatives. However, parish and local councillors also recognized that to be sustainable this partnership must have the ability to facilitate local level action by working directly with local communities. It is important that any new Rural Commission builds on local grassroots knowledge to ensure that it operates with clear and realistic goals in mind. We believe this can be achieved through the new Community Area Boards, by ensuring local parish and town councils are involved in local decisions and the development of local action plans and targets. *To facilitate this we believe the Community Area Boards should have access to funds to facilitate rural regeneration projects and executive powers to enable them to shape the future of the places and communities they will represent.*

The Wiltshire Rural Commission: an evolving role for the Wiltshire Rural Executive

30. The consultation process did indicate some concern about the impact of any recommendations on the work of the Wiltshire Rural Executive. We recognise that the Executive has played a positive role in the past, but we believe it lacks the resources or political punch required to tackle the problems we have studied. It may be possible to reinvigorate the Executive through its transition to the new Wiltshire Rural Commission. We believe the resources of the Wiltshire Rural Executive should be brought into a central policy unit alongside other policy and research officers within the new Council where it may be better placed to support the work of the Rural Commission. However, we do not have strong views on that, it will be a matter for the new Council to decide.

The Wiltshire Rural Commission: resourced to deliver

31. We believe that three things will be vital to the success of any new rural initiative - financial resources, officer support and local executive powers. We believe the new Commission should be supported by an integrated policy team to ensure work is coordinated across the new Council's service units and across the statutory and voluntary sector in Wiltshire. Financial resources will be essential. Developing sustainable rural communities will require, amongst other things:

- The commissioning of expert research and analysis
- Knowledge management through data sharing and data mapping
- Development of bids for external funding
- Targeted local seed-corn funding
- Publicity and promotion
- Performance management

RECOMMENDATION R03:

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

- 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).
- 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.
- Developing and adopting by the end of 2010 a new rural strategy and action plan for Wiltshire, in partnership with the Wiltshire Assembly (LSP).
- 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.
- 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.
- Setting up a standing overview and scrutiny panel on rural issues.

Developing Sustainable Rural Communities: Meeting the Costs

Where will money come from?

32. The ideas outlined in this report will require funding if they are to come to fruition. While it is clearly sensible to develop more effective partnership arrangements, funding additional services and rural projects is a more difficult problem. We feel that it is important not to raise expectations unless there is an effective means of delivering the actions that are required. Partnership and funding must go hand in hand. From where will such additional funding come? The review has identified several potential major sources of funding, which are currently not used to full potential - second homes council tax, planning contributions, supplementary business rates and external funding. We know that public services and local councils are under considerable financial constraint. *However, with goodwill and commitment, existing resources may be used more effectively and by working together, we may be in better shape to take advantage of external funding opportunities.*

Second homes Council tax

33. There are around 500 second homes in rural South Wiltshire. There are only seven districts in the South of England with a higher percentage¹⁸. This has contributed to extra demand and rising house prices (although it is by no means the only factor). High prices mean that rural homes are beyond the reach of most rural families. Weekenders do not use local services or facilities, their children do not attend local schools and less of their income goes into the local economy. Over time we are seeing the impact this is having on village life. We believe that this can be mitigated if the income from second homes council tax is used to fund rural regeneration.

£1m per year for developing sustainable rural communities in Wiltshire

34. In 2003, the government gave local councils powers to reduce the council tax discount on second homes from 50% to 10% meaning that the Council can now claim a much higher level of council tax from weekenders (we believe that the discount should be removed completely). Second homes in South Wiltshire currently generate over £270,000 in Council tax (of which approximately £25,000 is retained by Salisbury District Council and just over £200,000 by Wiltshire County Council). The Countryside Agency has urged Councils to use these additional resources to tackle the negative impact that second homes have on rural villages and services, and has requested a change in legislation to permit billing authorities – in our case, the district council – to retain all the additional resources raised from second homes. The review group strongly supports this approach – an approach that is operating effectively in other parts of the country. *We recognise that the new unitary Council could receive around £1m per annum in second home Council tax, if minimum discounts are applied consistently across the county. We believe that this money should be reinvested in developing sustainable rural communities.*

Pooling resources: the Sustainable Rural Communities Fund

35. We very strongly urge the new Council to agree to this approach and believe that this should form the basis of a 'Sustainable Rural Communities Fund' into which other money and external funding may be pooled. We think that parish and community groups should be able to bid for these funds to

¹⁸ 'Babyboomers in big houses.' Anna Clarke, Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research, Cambridge University

support local community projects that promote regeneration and sustainability – projects that may arise from parish plans for example. These funds would help to lever in external funding which frequently requires a level of local match funding. We believe that some of the money should be used to support the provision of a dedicated policy team, but the majority should be devolved to the local Community Area Boards to support local regeneration initiatives.

The Sustainable Rural Communities Fund: strong local support

36. Consultation responses in relation to this recommendation indicated strong support for this use of second homes council tax, particularly from parishes. Parishes also support the view that funds would be best managed locally by area committees or area boards which are in touch with local issues and know best how to prioritise funding at this level. In addition, parishes have suggested that such a fund should also be used to provide ongoing revenue support for local services and projects - this issue has arisen several times during our research. However, in order to maximise the use of the fund, encourage sustainability and to discourage public subsidy dependency it is suggested that the funds should be used to support one-off capital projects or time limited seed corn revenue funding. *Ongoing revenue funding for rural services should be a matter taken up separately by the Wiltshire Rural Commission through its strategic work with partner organisations and should come from the appropriate public service budgets where this is considered apposite.*

The Sustainable Rural Communities Fund: application and ring fencing

37. We feel that it is important that the proposed Sustainable Rural Communities Fund should be carefully safeguarded to prevent the funds being annexed into existing service budgets - although this should not preclude the use of the funds to support initiatives proposed by such service areas. We believe it would be appropriate for a proportion of the Wiltshire Rural Regeneration Budget to be allocated towards operational and central support services (we suggest no more than 10%). A further proportion could be allocated to support strategic priorities and bids (we suggest 30%), but a substantial proportion (we suggest no less than 50%) should be made available for distribution by the local area boards to support projects developed locally or managed by local groups. We believe that the distribution of these funds should be based on evidence of local needs, should follow the policies and priorities established by the Wiltshire Rural Commission and should deliver measurable improvements in local wellbeing. Policy and criteria guiding bids for funding from such a pool should be overseen by the Commission with powers delegated to area boards to distribute the funds.

The Sustainable Rural Communities Fund: strategy linked to funding

38. A suggestion raised during consultation was that an independent body be charged with maintaining and distributing a rural fund. However, the review group feels that such an approach would remove control of the funding away from the bodies that should most influence it. The review group does feel it necessary to ensure that funds are protected from diversion elsewhere and *it is therefore essential that the establishment of a rural fund goes hand in hand with the establishment and implementation of a rural strategy, the creation of a Wiltshire Rural Commission and the development of a robust funding policy.*

Business rate supplements

39. In October 2007, the Government published a white paper setting out proposals to provide new powers for local authorities to levy a supplementary business rate to raise funds for local economic development, where there was support for this from the local business community. This followed the recommendations of Sir Michael Lyons' Inquiry into local government finance. The Government's proposed model for business rate supplements involves four levels of protection for business:

- Revenue from supplements will only be available for spending on economic development in addition to existing plans. Proposals will be subject to detailed statutory consultation.
- A national upper limit of 2p in the pound will be set on the level on supplements that can be levied (the current Business Rate in South Wiltshire is 44.6p in the pound for larger businesses).
- To protect smaller businesses from disproportionate burdens, properties liable for business rates with a rateable value of £50,000 or less will be exempted from paying supplements.
- Where the supplement will support more than a third of the total cost of the project, local businesses will have the final say.

Business rate supplements: big money, big potential

40. In South Wiltshire it is anticipated that the proposed supplementary business rate would apply to 292 businesses and raise approximately £978k per annum (in the region of £4m county-wide). The Review Group welcomes the government's intention to exempt smaller businesses from the levy and is mindful of the need to avoid placing an unnecessary burden on larger businesses. Nevertheless, the Group recognises that, if a significant proportion of this funding (at least 50% is suggested) is added to the proposed Rural Regeneration Budget the additional revenue could make a very significant contribution to the sustainable rural communities programme. Again, it is considered this would have most impact if a significant amount of this additional revenue was added to the funds controlled by the Community Area Boards to support local regeneration and other local infrastructure projects. If the management of this budget was brought within the remit of the Wiltshire Rural Commission it would require no additional officer support and this would result in a higher proportion of the revenue being applied directly to support local regeneration projects.

External funding: taking advantage of the opportunities that exist

41. Throughout our research, the review group has identified many external funding opportunities, which are available for rural projects. However, these funds can be hard to access, requiring a robust evidence based case to support bids (which can be costly to achieve in itself) and levels of match funding may often be hard to obtain. If the rural communities of the district are to access much needed external funding, it is essential that a robust and co-ordinated approach to external funding is established. It is encouraging that the Council has made strides to improve this with the employment of an External Funding Officer who works to advise and support parishes and community groups. Wiltshire County Council has also established a resource to support bids for external funding. The review group welcomes this and recognises the progress that has been made. However, with the transition to a single Council for Wiltshire, the time is right to look at how this might be addressed more effectively in the future.

A 'joined-up' strategic approach

42. The impact of rural decline is not confined to local authority services - it impacts on all public services. The review group considers that in the new Wiltshire Council, it essential that external funding becomes a primary role for the Wiltshire Assembly (LSP) so that public resources and expertise can be pooled. This would also facilitate the sharing of data between agencies and a deeper understanding of local issues and priorities. In coming to this conclusion, the review group did consider whether it might be more effective to have a dedicated bidding team within the proposed Rural Commission. On balance, it was felt that this might overly limit its remit and focus. We believe this resource would be best located in the new authority's corporate policy unit.

Learning from best practice

43. Recognising the strong competition for regional, national and European funding, the review group consulted Ivan Annibal, Assistant Director of Economic Regeneration for Lincolnshire County Council and advisor to the Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs on the most successful approach to accessing the opportunities available. Based on research and this independent expert advice, the group believes that there are a number of key approaches that will enable South Wiltshire to be more successful in its bids for external funding. Whilst the review group recognises the efforts of the Council to access funding available, it feels that the approaches set out in the following paragraphs, if not already employed, should be adopted.

Working with partners

44. A joint approach with key partner organisations is essential. In Wiltshire, this has been pioneered through the External Funding Network and we feel that the transition to a single council for the County provides an opportunity to strengthen this approach. We feel that Recommendation RO7 will address this issue effectively in the future.

Developing a common evidence base and sharing data

45. The needs of local communities should be comprehensively assessed and documented to allow the Council to quickly respond to funding opportunities when they arise. Where information is already available (such as the Council's parish planning database, community plans and the Wiltshire and Swindon Intelligence Network), the co-ordination of relevant information to give the most comprehensive overview and identify gaps which require further research and investigation should be included within the roles of officers involved in the bidding process.

Raise the profile: raise the game

46. The Council must be inventive in its bids for funding and actively promote the unique features of the area if it is to be successful. Research and independent expert advice shows that where this approach is adopted authorities are more likely to gain access to funding. Much can be learned from those areas that are successful - such as Cumbria - and similar approaches should be adopted locally.

Devolving funding to community area level

47. The review group recognises that the creation of a Sustainable Rural Communities Fund is dependent on the agreement of the newly established Implementation Executive and ultimately the

new Wiltshire Council. We recognise that there will be competing demands for resources but we believe that the evidence considered during this review clearly demonstrates the need for a more proactive approach that can only be achieved through the provision of an appropriate level of resources. This is supported by the national guidance and best practice that we have reviewed. *The proposals set out will help to arrest rural decline and to provide the new Community Area Boards with an important local role.*

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.

The Role of Planning Policy and the Local Development Framework

Planning and place shaping

48. An important aspect of the Review Group's work has centred on the role of planning policy in building sustainable rural communities. The review group has undertaken a great deal of research and met with officers of the Council's Forward Planning unit to discuss what measures may be available to the Council. We have also discussed these issues with parishes and undertaken a wide reaching consultation exercise on a range of proposals. The consultation and research we have undertaken shows a very good level of support for our recommendations in this area.

The local development framework (LDF)

49. The Council has adopted a wide range of planning policies to regulate development in the district. The review group has examined these in detail. Currently, the Council and the Wiltshire districts councils are producing their new planning policy framework - the Local Development Framework (known as the LDF). It is hoped that the policies included in the Local Development Framework will reflect the outcome of this review, through:

- The allocation of rural sites for affordable housing and employment (including smaller start-up units)
- The facilitation of farm diversification and rural industry
- The channelling of financial gains from development into local infrastructure
- The protection of important rural facilities, and
- Close alignment with the Wiltshire Local Area Agreement (LAA) and the Sustainable Community Strategy for Wiltshire.

Local Development Framework: policies sensitive to the needs of local communities

50. The Council has undertaken a comprehensive survey of rural amenities and this work will establish the extent to which the planning policies may need to be strengthened in order to afford greater protection for facilities and encourage new provision where they are lacking. During the consultation process particular concern was raised about the long-term sustainability of village and church halls. These halls are an important focus of village life and the contribution they make to the community should not be under-estimated. It is important that the role of such facilities is addressed in the new planning policies of the Local Development Framework.

The role of larger villages

51. South Wiltshire is characterised by a large number of very small villages and hamlets, and a smaller number of larger villages and towns. Usually, the larger more sustainable settlements are the focus of rural services such as shops, schools, medical centres and libraries. Our consultation revealed that all rural settlements require access to facilities in order to sustain the life of the community. These important facilities are often shared with other nearby settlements, or provided as mobile services, such as libraries and vets.

Strategic 'hub' approach

52. With resources so limited, it may be more cost effective to focus new housing, employment and regeneration funding on a smaller number of strategic 'hub' settlements that serve a wider community area - often river valley settlements. This approach is in line with the latest national and regional spatial planning policy. To be effective this would need to be linked to transport improvements to ensure that those in more remote areas can access services. This might also provide an effective way of targeting new development and protecting the character of the smaller settlements. Based on research and interviews with leading officers, the review group believes that this approach would enable developer contributions to be invested in these strategic 'hub' settlements to support, sustain and develop rural services and facilities.

Problems with the 'hub' theory

53. The review group believes this 'hub' approach has much to commend it and fits well with the introduction of the proposed Community Area Boards as part of the reorganisation of local government services in Wiltshire. However, in practice some villages may not be keen to be the target of new development and this will probably be acceptable only if the new development is of the highest quality, preserves the traditional character of the settlement and serves local housing needs. Significant safeguards will be needed to overcome local opposition. There are other hurdles to overcome with this approach such as the fact that some small villages focus on 'hubs' outside the County – such as Shaftesbury, Gillingham, Romsey and Andover and that the success of such an approach is dependent on significant transport improvements in rural areas. Encouragingly, there are examples of successful community transport schemes in Wiltshire including the local LINK voluntary car schemes and the Tisbus and Connect2Wiltshire bus schemes. These schemes should be supported, developed and increased.

The 'hub and hamlet' theory

54. The other problem with the hub theory is that it may act to restrict development in the smaller villages and hamlets and while this may help to preserve the character of those settlements, it may also contribute to the decline of those villages as living, working, vibrant places. Over time, there is a risk that these smaller settlements will be home for mainly the wealthy, retired, professional commuters, weekenders and holidaymakers. To prevent the 'gentrification' of the countryside we feel it is important that smaller villages should continue to accommodate smaller scale and sensitive infill development for social housing and employment uses. To achieve this, the Local Development Framework would need a two-tier strategy, what we call the 'hub and hamlet' approach. This would see larger scale commercial development and employment uses directed towards sustainable hub settlements, while smaller scale affordable housing and employment developments would continue to be encouraged in the smaller villages and hamlets. *In identifying hub settlements it will be important to have regard to the suitability of transport infrastructure and road links.*

Developer Contributions and Planning Policy R2

55. The review group has also looked in detail at the Council's planning policy known as R2. Policy R2 requires developers to contribute (usually but not always financially) towards open spaces and recreational facilities - to address the statutory requirement for open space provision associated with all residential development. In some cases (usually in association with larger developments) local

planning policies can also require developers to pay financial contributions towards off-site local infrastructure projects – such as schools and community facilities. At the moment, the application of these contributions is very limited and the review group believes that this should be addressed as a matter of urgency. We therefore welcome the Government's announcement that it intends to bring forward legislation to introduce a new charge, entitled the Community Infrastructure Levy, to enable local authorities to secure a bigger contribution from developers towards the costs of local infrastructure.¹⁹ This idea received widespread support during the Government's consultation on the idea.

Developer contributions aimed at the right targets

56. Our own research has revealed strong support for the idea of linking developer contributions more closely to the needs of local communities in this way. The review group believes that developer contributions could be used to support the rural infrastructure much more effectively – as it has in other parts of the country such as Cambridgeshire where a 'developer contribution calculator' is used to assess the contributions that should be made.

The national picture: a new development levy?

57. The government's proposals are still at an early stage. The Council has expressed some concerns that any money raised from the Community Infrastructure Levy should be retained locally. This group remains concerned about this and awaits further clarification from the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG). Just as the review group feels that it is imperative for income generated from second homes Council tax to be returned to the local authority most in touch with the needs of its communities, so we believe that the same approach should be taken in relation to developer contributions.

Capital or revenue: how should contributions be used?

58. During the review suggestions were made that the ongoing revenue costs associated with the maintenance of local facilities should be included within the scope of the R2 Policy. However, the review does not support this view - feeling that this may lead to subsidy-dependence. While the review group would be happy to see planning contributions used to support one-off or capital maintenance projects or 2-3 year seed-corn funding, the Review Group believes that ongoing revenue costs should be funded from mainstream and sustainable revenue sources such as council budgets, parish precepts, commercial sponsorship or fees and charges.

Can contributions be added to a central fund?

59. In relation to these developer contributions, our consultation found support for more flexibility in the application of these funds across the district. The review group supports this insofar as current legislation will permit. At present, developer contributions may only be collected on the basis that they are necessary to mitigate the physical impact of the development. This prevents contributions being taken from a development in one area and spent in another. Our view is that it should be possible to spend contributions in a settlement that provides services to smaller satellite settlements - based on the 'hub and hamlet' approach that we discussed earlier. Clustering settlements in this way would provide far more flexibility in the application of planning gain, enabling support for

¹⁹ Planning White Paper, Planning for a Sustainable Future, published on 21 May 2007

strategic as well as local services and amenities. We believe this would help to ensure that all rural settlements have reasonable access to a good range of services and amenities. In coming to this view, we remain convinced that parish councils should continue to have access to funding from planning contributions to support local projects. *We believe that any assessment used to decide where such contributions are applied should first address the needs of the settlement in which the development takes place before considering the needs of settlements further afield.*

Policy development on the right track

60. The review group therefore welcomes the Council's decision to continue developing its Local Development Framework policies to widen the application of developer contributions and considers that the following recommendations should be considered during the development of those detailed policies:

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.

Planning Policies that Protect

Planning policy and market forces

61. Planning policies can also help to protect rural services and facilities from closure and ensure that land allocated for employment is not used for more commercially advantageous uses. Research considered by the review group has indicated that it can be fairly easy for developers to circumvent these policies - by arguing that a business premise or local facility is no longer viable; that attempts to market such premises as going concerns have failed or that such premises are only essential if there are no others of a similar nature in the village. This can result in protection for only the last remaining shop in the village. The review group feels that this is a particular problem in South Wiltshire where over 100 rural businesses have been the subject of 'change of use' planning applications over the last five years - around 20 each year. Across Wiltshire, that could mean the potential loss of 75 rural business premises every year. This gives cause for real concerns and indicates that early action is needed to arrest this decline. Our research and consultation has indicated that where rural businesses are lost, the impact on village life can be severe. The loss of businesses (mainly to housing) is already having a severe impact particularly in the smaller and more remote settlements. In view of this concern, the review group strongly supports the need for the Local Development Framework to set out robust policies to protect important rural business premises.

Individual rights and public obligation

62. Consultation responses have reflected a great deal of concern about the change of use of business premises and strong support for more robust viability tests. However, a number of responses raise concerns that these should not be as stringent as to negatively impact on local vibrancy by causing the retention of failing and degenerating businesses that are neither patronised by or an asset to the community. Some consultees have stated that the increase in 'change of use' applications is a symptom of other economic factors - particularly the upward pressure on house prices. We agree with this analysis and conclude that it would be wrong to penalise those running rural enterprises if the Council is not itself working to tackle those underlying causes of decline.

Planning for change

63. The review group also noted the views of the independent expert we consulted. Ivan Annibal pointed to the need to anticipate and adapt to the changes in rural demographics and dynamics that are likely to occur. One of these changes may be the relocation of many business sectors to rural areas as business property prices are likely to be cheaper than in urban areas, and internet capabilities are making the operation of businesses, in even the most remote of areas, more of a practical proposition. With such possibilities it is likely that changes in demographics, business sector attraction, house prices, density of population, attitudes towards development and the resulting village vitality will change considerably over the coming ten to twenty years, and the development of planning policies in the Local Development Framework should therefore take account of such possibilities. In recognising the potential of new technology to reinvigorate the rural economy, the review group is mindful that this also has the potential to further exclude and isolate the most vulnerable members of the community.

Landscape and the importance of place

64. Wiltshire is characterised by its rural landscape and its historic settlements. Large parts of the county are protected by special landscape designations including the Stonehenge World Heritage Site, New Forest National Park and the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The concept of landscape is inseparable from the human activity that has shaped it over time - and this defines our sense of Wiltshire as a place. The European Landscape Convention defines "Landscape" as *'an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.'* In this context, landscape protection means actions to conserve and maintain the significant or characteristic features of a landscape, justified by its heritage value derived from its natural configuration and/or from human activity. Landscape management is defined as action, from a perspective of sustainable development, to ensure the regular upkeep of a landscape, to guide and harmonise changes that are brought about by social, economic and environmental processes. *The importance people attach to their sense of belonging to a place is central to our view that rural regeneration must work within a policy framework that respects and enhances this sense of place. This will require strong forward-looking action to conserve, enhance, restore or create landscapes.*

Landscape, partnership and the Local Development Framework

65. We feel that there is a very strong link between local landscapes and local Councils' on-going work on sustainable development and community well being. Landscape management is not just another separate issue but one which is increasingly important in supporting other local authority objectives for sustainable food production, health improvement and education, for urban regeneration and rural development, and for community planning and social inclusion. It also has important links to green space initiatives, for promoting recreation and responsible access, and for the conservation of biodiversity and the historic environment. This reinforces our view that developing sustainable communities, community planning and the local development framework should be drawn more closely together and delivered through a strong partnership approach. The partnership approach requires all agents, from farmers to regional government to work together.

Landscape: its role in the future

66. The scenic character of the area creates an important sense of place and community identity. The land provides our food and other vital commodities. Many people rely on the countryside for employment, leisure and recreational pursuits, for family activities and relaxation. The combination of scenery, land and countryside has a significant impact on the wellbeing of local communities. We feel it is important that developing sustainable communities goes hand in hand with policies that protect and enhance the countryside, its important landscapes and habitats. To achieve this we believe rural regeneration and Local Development Framework policies should focus on:

- Making sure that important landscape areas are identified and protected.
- Minimising development on green-field and environmentally sensitive sites.
- Commissioning landscape assessments and management plans for important local landscapes.
- Developing biodiversity assessments and protecting or enhancing important habitats.
- Safeguarding landscapes with historic, artistic and cultural associations

- Safeguarding the landscape settings of important historic buildings and townscapes.

In their role of developing sustainable rural communities, Councils should:

- a) Work with landowners and farmers to support their local stewardship role.
- b) Raise community awareness about rural, environmental and sustainability issues.
- c) Raise awareness of the role of the countryside in national food production.
- d) Encourage access to the countryside.
- e) Promote the role and importance of the countryside

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.

The Role of Farming

The role of farming

67. In 2004, the total area of agricultural land in the United Kingdom was 18.4 million hectares, which makes up about 77 per cent of the total land area²⁰. British farmers and growers currently produce 60% of the UK's total food supplies and 75% of all foods consumed in the UK that can be produced in this climate. Agriculture not only provides a vital source of food, it also has a profound impact on employment, our landscapes, rural tourism and wildlife and biodiversity. An understanding of the challenges facing rural communities would be incomplete without consideration of farming's multi-faceted role in rural areas.²¹

Is farming in crisis?

68. British farming has come under increasing pressure in the last century. Economic trends since the 1990s have taken a particular toll on British farmers: between 1990 and 2005 the price of inputs used in food production increased by 25%, compared with the price of agricultural outputs, which fell by more than 9% in the same period. In short, it is costing farmers more to produce a product for which they are paid less. Although food prices have increased on the supermarket shelves, farmgate prices have failed to keep pace. The latest data shows that UK farmers' share of the value of a basket of food items fell by 22% between 1988 and 2006.²² Between 2003 and 2006 the retail price of food in the supermarket rose by 9% while farmers received an increase of only 4% at the farmgate over the same period.²³ On top of this, BSE, foot and mouth, and more recently bluetongue, have only worsened the plight of farmers to the point that some commentators speak of a crisis in agriculture.²⁴

Agriculture and the local economy

69. At the same time as farmers' profits falling, the total number of people employed in agriculture has also been in decline. This has a significant impact on rural communities, where traditionally the predominant employment was in the agricultural sector. In 2006, the total farming workforce was 534,000, which was 80,000 less than in 1996. Overall, the agricultural workforce now only accounts for 1.8 per cent of the national total, but in rural areas, this figure is approximately 4% - in some parts of South Wiltshire it accounts for 10% of local jobs²⁵. However these figures should not be taken in isolation. According to DEFRA, a 5% reduction in dairy production would result in the loss of 900 jobs in milk processing and other related industries. It is estimated that in the South West, livestock farming has an employment multiplier of 1.5, which means that for every 100 additional jobs generated in the industry, there will be an increase of 50 local jobs in other sectors.²⁶

Farmers as custodians of the landscape

70. It is apparent that the vitality of agriculture has an impact on the availability of locally produced food, as well as on the local employment opportunities associated both directly and indirectly with farming. However, it is important not to underestimate the role of farmers as custodians of the land in a broader sense. With 77 per cent of the total land area in the United Kingdom devoted to agriculture,

²⁰ Agriculture in the UK 2004, DEFRA

²¹ The Economic and Social Research Council 2006

²² ONS 2005

²³ DEFRA 2008

²⁴ Alan Spedding, 16 October 2007

²⁵ Wiltshire and Swindon intelligence Network: Mere Area profile 2004

a great many of the open spaces on which Britain prides itself are managed by farmers. In particular, fields, boundaries, hedgerows, bridleways and footpaths all make up the familiar features of the countryside. Without careful management by farmers, not only would the visual experience of the countryside be radically different, but access to it would be considerably limited. In this sense, farming is vital to the rural tourism sector, which contributes £14 billion to the economy, supports around 25,000 small and micro enterprises and underpins over 400,000 jobs.

Farming and wildlife

71. The UK Biodiversity Action Plan recognises the vital importance of agriculture in maintaining delicate habitats and promoting biodiversity. For example, wildlife habitats such as chalk downlands depend on long-standing farming systems, such as continual grazing by sheep and cattle to maintain close-cropped, wildflower rich turf. In acknowledgement of this important role, the government has introduced various 'agri-environmental schemes' that aim to promote conservation work, which otherwise farmers would not have undertaken. As a result of the Department of Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs' Environmental Stewardship scheme, for example, more than 4.1 million hectares of farmland in England were covered by conservation agreements. However, much of the routine maintenance that farmers conduct out of a sense of pride for their land is not compensated by such schemes. According to a joint National Farmers' Union/Campaign for the Protection of Rural England report published in 2006, farmers and growers carry out unpaid conservation work worth more than £412 million per year. This represents an 'investment' of £2,410 per year per average farm business, with the average farmer spending 2.5 weeks per year managing walls and hedgerows.²⁷

Diversification

72. In the face of the challenges described, a growing number of farmers have been forced to diversify their farms. Diversification projects include the reuse or new build of buildings for a variety of employment uses (such as workshops, offices, warehousing or retail units) and providing accommodation such as campsites and bed and breakfast. More recently, farmers have also explored the feasibility of operating large scale composting schemes and anaerobic digestion plants, turning a mixture of organic waste into compost or electricity, which in some cases can be enough to power several hundred homes. It is important that farmers are able to make profitable use of their land, but in order to perform the crucial custodian function outlined above, it may be necessary to extend the central government agri-environmental schemes to apply to routine maintenance. As the NFU/CPRE report notes, "*for landscape features to be maintained, either farm incomes must be maintained or management work needs to be funded in a way that reflects its true cost and value. If they are not, two things could happen. Some land might be left to become overgrown and lose its distinctive character. The remainder could be exploited ever more intensively for maximum output at minimum cost, or developed.*"²⁸

Conflicting demands

73. One of the areas of debate concerning diversification revolves around the conflicting demands made on a finite amount of agricultural land. As more land is set aside for non-agricultural uses or used to produce crops for bio-fuels, less is available for food production. In the longer term, economic pressures may

²⁶ RuSource 2006

²⁷ NFU/CPRE: *Living landscapes: hidden costs of managing the countryside* May 2005

²⁸ *Ibid*

increase this shift. Farmers are increasingly worried about their long-term future - will they be food producers, leisure providers or energy producers? We support the Rural Advocate's call for a longer-term national strategy for agriculture that addresses these conflicting demands, carefully assesses the implications of current changes and develops a more positive role for farming within wider society.

Strategic advice and policy support

74. We believe that the importance of farming should be acknowledged by the new unitary Wiltshire Council through the provision of a dedicated resource in the Corporate Policy Team to:

- Advise the new authority on rural sustainability issues and act as an advocate for rural communities and agriculture within the authority
- Ensure that rural proofing underpins the authority's strategies and plans
- Measure the impact of rural sustainability policies and actions
- Support the Wiltshire Rural Commission
- Ensure that the needs of Wiltshire's rural communities and farmers are properly represented at local, regional and national level
- Work with local partners to help secure funding for diversification, environmental stewardship schemes and sustainable rural initiatives
- Share research and intelligence with partners and help promote existing support services for farmers and agriculture.

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.

The Role of the Private Business Sector

Rural businesses at the heart of sustainable communities

75. Rural businesses provide employment for local people; provide goods and services that communities depend on and they are often custodians of the local landscape. In short, businesses are vital to the well-being of rural communities. *Creating an environment in which rural enterprise can flourish is a key to building sustainable rural communities.*

Public funding, private profit

76. Many of the responses to our consultation process raised the issue of public subsidy for local businesses. In truth, many businesses already receive significant support from the state - farming subsidies, bus subsidies, business start-up grants and discretionary rate relief for village shops, pubs, garages, etc. A number of rural businesses are run by the community with funding from parish precepts and some of the most successful businesses in the area - such as the Wilton Shopping Village - were originally supported by substantial economic development grants from the District Council. This shows that public subsidy is already supporting the local rural economy and it is important that this continues. *We urge the new Wiltshire Council to continue to grant discretionary rate relief to rural businesses such as shops, post offices, pubs and garages.*

Subsidising infrastructure not individuals

77. A further suggestion made by respondents has been that more funding subsidy is required to assist rural businesses to prosper. We have considered this carefully and feel that development funding should focus on start up units, land assembly, promotion and marketing, one off development funding, investment in economic infrastructure projects and investment in social facilities. We are doubtful that the provision of ongoing subsidies for rural businesses is the best use of public funding, although there may be cases where this is appropriate. We have not reached a definitive view on this and it is a matter that will need further discussion by the proposed Wiltshire Rural Commission.

Working with business for the community

78. Where we would wish to encourage more action is in the development of more rural produce initiatives such as farm shops, local cooperatives, local brand and market development, local purchasing consortia and the development and promotion of new markets for rural goods and services.

The role of rural Post Offices

79. The final few months of our review have been dominated by the highly charged debate over Post Office closures. We recognise that in purely economic terms, Post Offices are struggling to remain viable despite the best efforts of sub-postmasters and sub-post mistresses and government subsidy they receive. Advances in communication technology are hastening the decline, providing new ways of handling transactions. On the other hand, local communities attach great importance to post offices and the vital local services they provide. It is not just the physical loss of key services that so concerns people, but also the important contribution that local services make to the vitality and sense of community within rural settlements. The post office, village shop and the local pub are all important points of contact for the individual and the wider community. Without this social

interaction, individuals - and particularly the most vulnerable - can become isolated from their community. However, unless the Post Offices can adapt to change they will continue to close.

Local innovation supported by public funding

80. The importance of Post Offices and other key facilities to community wellbeing is an issue identified by the Rural Advocate, Dr Stuart Burgess. He is urging the government to support local initiatives aimed at protecting such vital social facilities. Dr Burgess highlights many examples where local communities have taken over the running of uneconomic businesses. He draws attention to cases where post offices have been relocated into village shops, community halls, pubs and churches; computer access being introduced into village halls; and churches doubling up as meeting rooms, drop in centres and music venues. More locally, we have seen examples of the community stepping in to save local shops at East Knoyle and Coombe Bissett. Further a-field, Essex County Council is negotiating a buy-out price from the Post Office in a bid to save some 15 branches from closure. We are encouraged by these initiatives and hope to see greater support for such measures locally. To achieve this, we believe the efforts of local communities must be supported by the Rural Commission and the local Community Area Boards utilising funding from the Sustainable Rural Communities Fund that we have recommended. In the longer term, we believe that Wiltshire should continue to lobby strongly for Government Grant mechanisms to better reflect the additional costs of delivering services in rural areas, particularly across sparsely populated areas. This would provide mainstream revenue funding to support such important initiatives.

Post Offices as Council contact points?

81. We have looked at the possibility of Post Offices becoming access points for Council services. On the face of it, this idea has a lot of merit. However, we are concerned that this may result in further public subsidy for failing businesses, and we do not believe this is sustainable in the longer term. In Essex, the Council is proposing to buy those rural Post Offices under threat of closure. This will provide the Council with a capital asset that it can retain. This is a more sustainable model, and may enable postmasters and post mistresses to be employed directly (maybe in partnership with the local parish council) to provide a combination of Post Office and council services. We believe this should only be considered as a safety net, in the most isolated parts of the County or where the Post Office is the only social enterprise in the village. We have not had opportunity to develop this idea further in this review, but we believe that it should be considered before the next round of Post Office closures is announced. *In proposing this idea, we are mindful of the Government's obligation - this is a national issue and we believe the government should take a lead before more rural post offices are closed.*

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.

Local Communities Taking a Lead

The role of the voluntary sector

82. It takes the drive, commitment and hard work of individuals to sustain village life. In urban areas, social, cultural and religious facilities are often within walking distance or a short bus trip away. In rural areas this provision is maintained largely by the unstinting work of volunteers. This includes the running of village halls, playgrounds, sports and leisure activities, arts events, fetes, clubs and youth facilities. We echo the Rural Advocate's view *'that the scale and diversity of voluntary and community activity in rural areas is a real strength. Rural communities are rightly proud of their voluntary achievements. Indeed that sense of community spirit and vibrancy is one of the main factors that attracts people to live in a rural area. It is also one of the aspects they fear will be lost if people are forced to move away, whether through lack of affordable housing or decreasing services or transport.'*²⁹

Funding and support

83. We have seen through the operation of the South Wiltshire Area Grants Scheme (SWAG) over the last 10 years that easy access to small amounts of money can make a tremendous difference in encouraging local voluntary and community activity. We believe that access to funding is key to sustaining voluntary activity and the sense of wellbeing that it engenders. However, access to support and advisory services from rural development workers is also essential. Rural or community development workers can help with the complexities of funding applications, signposting to other information sources and good practice, helping to build community consensus, or providing help when faced with the complexity and bureaucracy of local regulatory regimes.

Focusing support services in the right place

84. This support is often provided directly by the local authority (community development workers and community planners), the voluntary sector (often Community First) or through partnerships. The demand on the available resource is frequently stretched and long term funding is frequently uncertain and insecure. Increasingly, these community workers are drawn away from the community and into the office, with much of their time spent on 'corporate work.' We want to see community development workers and community planning officers in the communities, working directly with the voluntary organisations and parish Councils that so desperately need their expertise. We support Wiltshire County Council's commitment to put a community worker in every single community area across Wiltshire. We believe this will create an important support network in rural areas. However, we feel that it is crucial that the role of these workers is focused clearly on supporting local community groups and not the corporate governance needs of the new authority. First and foremost these officers should be advocates for the communities and groups they work with: a role that may require a degree of independence from the local community area board. *To be clear, we believe these workers should be advocates for the community rather than ambassadors for the Council.*

²⁹ Report of the Rural Advocate 2007

Sustainable communities: aligning local needs with strategic delivery

85. As discussed earlier, planning policy can help to boost the rural economy by identifying and protecting key facilities and providing a framework for social and economic regeneration. However, the review group notes that with the exception of adopted development briefs, planning policies do not generally make reference to a specific area and must therefore be broad enough to be effective across the whole district (and eventually the County). To achieve a closer alignment between local needs and planning policy, the review group feels that it is essential that parish and community plans become very closely aligned to the Local Development Framework process. We believe they should form part of the evidence base upon which planning policies are built. In this way the needs and aspirations of local communities can be delivered through the land use planning process. However, to achieve this, community and parish planning processes will need to be sufficiently robust and evidence led to withstand the scrutiny of planning inquiries and legal challenge.

Parish and community plans

86. We have been extremely impressed by the parish plans that we have reviewed. Our consultation has revealed widespread support for the concept of parish planning as a mechanism for embedding the needs and aspirations of communities into planning policy. The only significant concern is that increased regulation and rigidity in the parish planning process might discourage volunteers from becoming involved. Local authorities should offer financial and technical support but it is essential that the process is led by the local community and that it allows local people to shape the future of their community. If the accepted benefits of parish planning are to be realised a delicate balance will have to be struck. However, the review group strongly believes that to deliver real change, parish plans must influence planning policies and to achieve that they must be robust and evidence based.

Encouraging parish planning

87. During the consultation process we have become convinced of the value of parish plans. They identify a shared vision for the local community, priorities for local action and they help encourage community engagement. We would like to encourage more parishes and settlements to produce such plans, but to do that we feel some form of incentive might be useful. Some public sector funding programmes (such as the England and Wales Cricket Board's club development programme) depend on the recipients meeting certain eligibility criteria for grant funding. In the case of rural development funding, the existence of a parish plan should facilitate access to funding - or at least make this much simpler with some form of 'fast track' to funding. However, while we think this would encourage the development of plans, it should not exclude villages without plans from receiving funding.

Support for rural businesses

88. The Council offers discretionary rate relief to nearly eighty rural businesses each year and it is important that this vital support continues. However, this alone is not preventing businesses from closing. There are many ways in which other local authorities have tried to assist businesses – through external funding, through co-operatives and farmers' markets, through loans, investments, grants and local procurement schemes. The establishment of a Sustainable Communities Fund may enable support of this kind to be tested locally.

Supporting social enterprise...

89. Parishes play a vital role in sustaining local facilities and services. In some cases they have helped to purchase village shops and set them up as community businesses. Wiltshire Council could do more to assist parishes with such projects. Recent research from the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs suggests that there is 'no natural barrier' to the national growth of community-owned projects and this initiative has been extremely successful for parishes such as East Knoyle, where the opening of a volunteer-based community owned shop was celebrated in August 2006. However the review group is aware that other areas have encountered difficulty in maintaining a successful community-run business. It is clear that community-owned projects must receive the full and on-going support of the local residents in order to stand up to competition.

... but recognising the challenge

90. Providing support to social enterprises is complex and highly regulated. The Review Group has discovered that there are a number of projects and groups currently providing both assistance and strategic direction for this sector in Wiltshire including the Social Enterprise sub-group of the Wiltshire and Swindon Economic Partnership, the Development Trusts Association and Community First, for example. *More effective co-ordination of this work may help to prevent duplication of effort.*

Community Area Boards

91. Wiltshire County Council in its bid for unitary status set out an ambitious plan to create 20 Community Area Boards across Wiltshire to deliver a new local governance model. In South Wiltshire it is proposed that there will be 6 Boards - Mere, Tisbury, Wilton, Northern Area (Amesbury), Salisbury and the Southern Area (Downton, Redlynch, Whiteparish). These Boards will bring together elected members from the new Wiltshire Council and parish councils and they will be supported by a Community Area Partnership covering the same area that brings together officers of all the major services in the area - highways, housing, planning, social services, youth services, libraries, leisure, police, health, schools, etc. This presents a unique opportunity to enhance the democratic accountability of such services at community level and provide a democratic mechanism for local councillors to shape service delivery in their patch.

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).

Affordable Homes

Building on previous work

92. Although this review did not focus specifically on the provision of affordable and social housing, it requires a brief mention here. A scrutiny review carried out by the Council's Community and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Panel in 2004 examined this area in detail and we believe those recommendations are still largely valid today.

The effect of high house prices

93. The review group remains of the opinion that one of the main drivers of rural decline is soaring house prices. This is pricing local people - particularly young people - out of the countryside. The only way this can be redressed is through the provision of more mixed-tenure and affordable housing schemes linked to local employment opportunities. This will provide entry-level housing for those on more modest incomes and help dampen the rural housing market. Current national planning policies are directing development towards brownfield and urban areas. While the review group feels that a substantial amount of new housing needs to be allocated to the hub villages to help address the shortage of affordable housing, the hamlets should not be forgotten. If this does not happen we believe the situation could be exacerbated, with the price differential between urban and rural properties widening still further.

Rural housing that respects the character of the area

94. The key to this approach is for new rural housing developments to be well integrated into existing settlements and to be of sufficiently high quality design to respect the character of the villages involved.

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.

Conclusions

A local review of local issues

95. This cross-party, independent assessment of rural sustainability in Wiltshire is the first member-led review of its kind in the UK. We have examined an enormous volume of information and consulted a wide range of individuals and organisations. Our recommendations are based on the evidence we have reviewed and the views of those who contributed to our consultation exercise. We feel strongly that the recommendations in this report will go a long way towards addressing the issues we have identified and help to build sustainable rural communities for the future.

Sustainable rural communities

96. Our recommendations aim to initiate the development of a comprehensive sustainable rural communities programme for Wiltshire, based on a range of measures including:

- The provision of adequate affordable housing within villages to meet local housing demand
- The allocation of local employment sites supported by measures to sustain new and small businesses
- Policies that support farmers, agriculture and agricultural diversification.
- Promotion of the countryside for recreation and tourism
- Support for vital services and facilities such as halls, post offices, garages, shops and pubs
- Investment in the social fabric of rural communities such as transport, health and policing services.
- The development of village and community plans to drive future investment
- Supporting social enterprises - such as community shops, pre-school facilities and outreach services.
- Encouraging new and innovative ways of delivering services to rural areas - using outreach facilities, online services, and existing facilities - such as post offices, village halls, surgeries, schools, libraries, etc.
- Promoting and supporting community life - such as village fetes, local customs, country markets, village sports, country pursuits and hobbies, culture and arts, local crafts and traditional skills, the work of local faith groups and voluntary organisations, farming and local produce, etc.
- Involving local communities in their own governance by supporting parish Councils and delegating powers to local communities wherever possible.

A unique opportunity

97. The reorganisation of local government in Wiltshire presents a unique opportunity to rationalise the delivery of rural services. Ineffective partnership structures can be replaced with a less bureaucratic structure with clear aims and objectives. A Wiltshire Rural Commission can be launched to champion rural regeneration and coordinate action across the County. Key countywide strategic plans such as the Local Development Framework, the Wiltshire Sustainable Communities Strategy and the Local Area Agreement can be developed together as a seamless suite of policies for Wiltshire. Fragmented services can be brought together and integrated within a clear strategic framework. Financial resources can be pooled and earmarked to support local projects. Staff can be brought together within a central team to share and develop expertise to support local communities.

We believe this opportunity must be grasped now.

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.

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Contacts

For more information about this review or to view any of the supporting papers listed here, please contact:

Steve Milton

Lead Officer, Overview and Scrutiny

Salisbury District Council Scrutiny Team

PO Box 2117

Salisbury

Wiltshire SP2 2DF

01722 434255

scrutiny@salisbury.gov.uk

Or visit our website: www.salisbury.gov.uk/living-in-the-country.htm