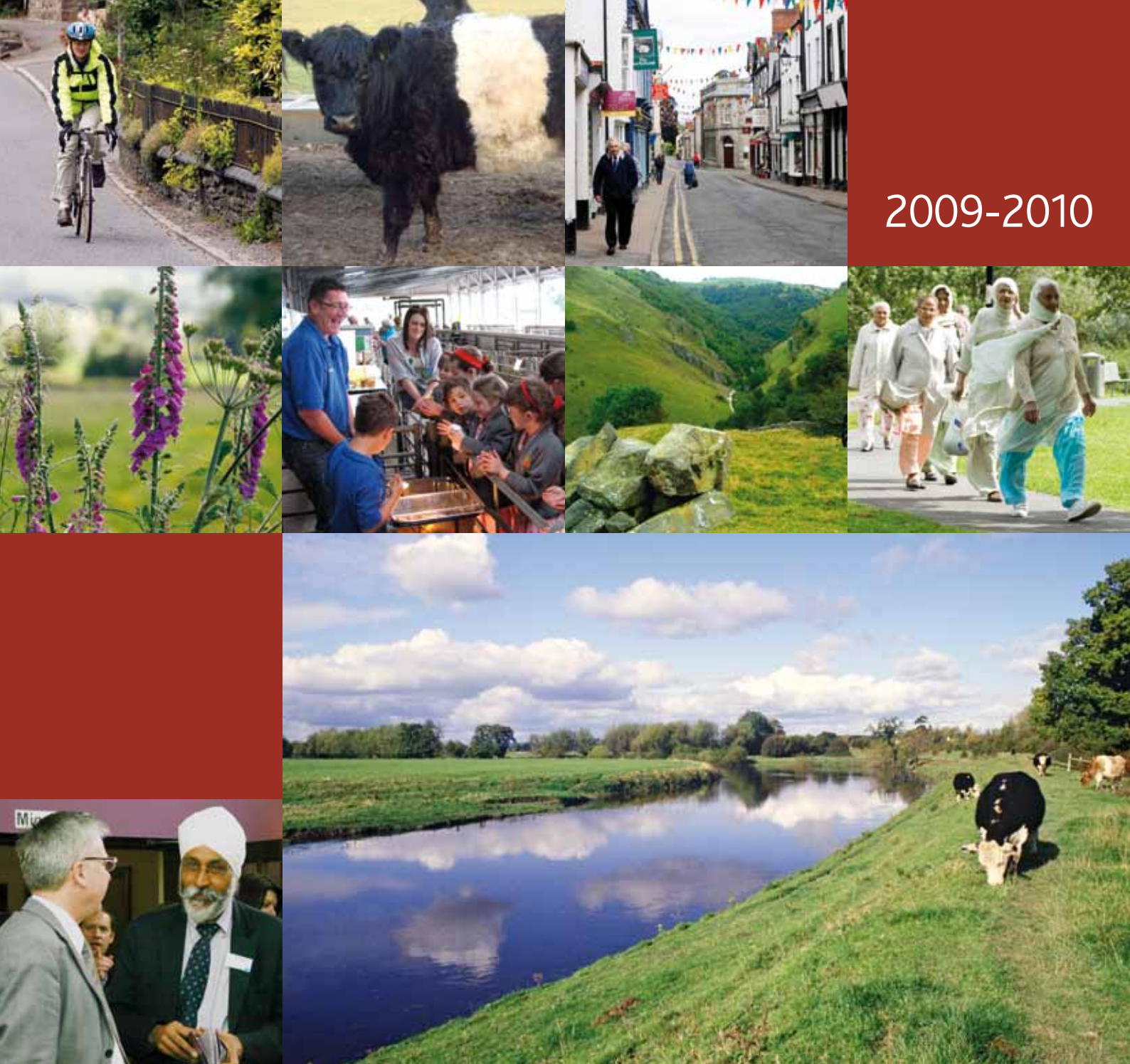


2009-2010



“Times are changing in many ways and, in 2010, we must change with them”

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## A Message from the Chairman



**“It doesn’t seem five minutes since I took my first West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum and yet, here we are at the end of my first year.”**

I must start by paying a tribute to Rev’d Nick Read, (past chair) for all his hard work over the previous six years. Taking over from Tony Harris was never going to be easy, but the achievements during his chairmanship proved him a more than capable successor.

Whilst an Annual Report must, by definition, look back at the previous year, I feel that we must also look forward to the future of the WMRAF.

Times are changing in many ways and, in 2010 we must change with them.

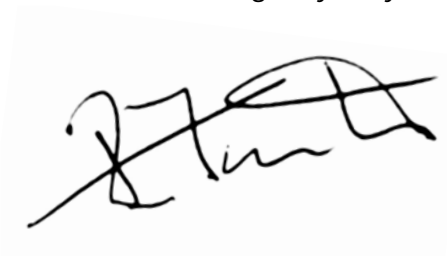
To this end, I instigated a full review of the Forum.

My thanks must go to all those who replied to questionnaires, and to those who gave us their time for face to face interviews. I must also thank all those who worked in sub groups to make the review a success.

Out of the review came our new website which was launched recently and looks much more exciting and user friendly than previously. The newsletter should allow better two-way communication. The new structure, should be able to ride the many changes in the political structure, which are happening at the present time. The Forum must be more pro-active and forward looking or it will become irrelevant to those we wish to influence.

However hard we work to improve the systems, please remember that this is your Forum and it will only work with your full support and input.

I started by thanking Nick but I must, publicly, thank a number of others who have supported me in my first year, without whose unstinting endeavours little would have been achieved. Alison Mclean and David Collier my vice chairs, Rebecca Mackay and David Howatson, in the Government Office, all of whom have kept the wheels rolling, under difficult circumstances, and finally, to all of the members of the Forum for their help and understanding in my first year.”



Bob Forster

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# Reviewing and strengthening our Forum



The West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum has been in existence since 2002 operating in the current format since 2005. It provides direction, leadership and co-ordination in respect of the rural agenda; being a conduit for rural views and presenting the West Midlands' perspective on the national, regional and sub-regional rural agenda.

## Preparing for a new decade

Bob Forster began his tenure as Chair by throwing down the challenge of reviewing and refreshing the WMRAF to ensure that it was fit for purpose for the new decade, for imminent changes in regional governance structures and community priorities.

Following a members' survey, and meetings with many regional representatives, the WMRAF has updated and refreshed its vision, values, purpose and terms of reference for all WMRAF roles, (both individuals and various groups).

The WMRAF will now consist of representatives from six sectors of the rural West Midlands' region:

- Countryside, Environment and Recreation
- Rural Economy and Employment
- Rural Communities and Services including the Voluntary Sector
- Central Government Bodies
- Regional Bodies
- Sub-regional partnerships

The Forum will continue to represent the rural region's needs and aspirations, both in the revised regional governance structures, and nationally through the ear of the Rural Minister. A set of communication mechanisms and pathways have been identified and are under development so that anyone can contribute to and receive information and knowledge on rural areas and rural communities.

## Our vision

To achieve thriving and sustainable rural communities that contribute fully to the prosperity and well-being of the region.

## Our purpose

To speak up for rural people and places. We will ensure that the needs and aspirations of West Midlands' rural communities are taken into account in local, regional and national decision-making.

### We do this by:

- Acting as a sounding board for rural practitioners and delivery agencies
- Reflecting the needs and aspirations of rural people
- Providing direction, leadership and co-ordination in respect of the regional agenda
- Embracing the challenge and expertise to ensure effective 'rural proofing'

## Our values

- To demonstrate openness and accountability in all our dealings with each other and with the constituencies that we represent
- To build trust by expressing ourselves honestly and by following through on our commitments to the Forum and to each other
- To seek ownership of challenges and arrive at solutions by working together
- To use the collective resources that we have in ways that will achieve value for money and promote 'one planet' living

We will achieve our vision by agreeing and signing up to, a clear set of governance protocols; by reviewing these on a biennial basis; and by reviewing our progress through our own reporting arrangements and through our Annual Report, to our wider constituency of the rural communities of the West Midlands

For further details, please visit For further details, please visit

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

or contact [rebecca.mackay@gowm.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:rebecca.mackay@gowm.gsi.gov.uk)

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## Evidence is a key tool for our Forum

The West Midlands has a strong Rural Evidence Base available to partners at Advantage West Midlands. New studies have been added over the year including the economic baseline for the region's forestry sector and the evaluation of the Market Towns programme.



Evidence is the key tool that the Rural Affairs Forum uses to influence regional policy and delivery. Good evidence also supports partners in rural proofing their activities, providing understanding of the rural circumstance.

### Our region

**80%** of the region is classified as rural

**33%** of the region's population work in rural areas

**70%** of the region's land, just under one million hectares of land is in agricultural production

**14.5%** of rural employment is in manufacturing

**Earnings** in the workplace vary significantly. Often in more remote districts, they are up to £6,000 lower than the England average. There is large disparity between work-placed earning and resident earnings, up to £7,000 in rural districts with good access to urban centres.

**Enterprise** culture is strong in rural areas and demonstrated by higher levels of self-employment.

The Rural Evidence Base can be accessed through:

[www.advantagewm.co.uk/what-we-do/improving-places/rural-evidence-base.aspx](http://www.advantagewm.co.uk/what-we-do/improving-places/rural-evidence-base.aspx)

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## Massive increase in European funding potential for rural areas

Rural bids submitted for 2009 under European transnational funding programmes have shown a massive increase, helped by the EU Connects team and their Rural Bidding Champion, employed from January 09.

**Almost four times the number of applications, achieving eight times the value in grants – a total of 11.3 million euros.**



Increasing awareness is an important first step, and the Forum has produced a leaflet with EU Connects to promote funding opportunities.

European transnational funding streams require partners from other EU member states to be included in bids submitted, in order to exchange best practice on local and regional issues. To facilitate this, West Midlands in Europe and EU Connects organised a Rural Project Market Place in Brussels.

Designed to encourage West Midlands' rural organisations to join projects being developed elsewhere in Europe, it also gave them the opportunity to pitch their own projects and find partners. Over 40 rural project ideas were disseminated throughout the event.

Members of WMRAF have a role to identify strategic, innovative ideas, which could be the turned into future EU funding bids.

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## Rural Development Programme for England

The Programme (for 2007-13) is concerned with the region's rural communities, economy and environment, with the £55m allocation of funds focussed on the five thematic areas of Livestock, Food and Drink, Tourism, Environmental Technologies and Community Infrastructure, Cohesion and Development. Delivery is via four channels: small capital grants schemes, larger capital grants, enabling and support projects and the Leader approach.



The Forum has been involved in discussions about the criteria for awarding grants, the infrastructure for deciding applications, communications with stakeholders, and spending priorities. David Collier is on the regional RDPE Partners' Group.

David has had regular meetings through the year with the county Rural Hubs and Country Land and Business Association to review delivery progress and focus on particular components of the Programme.

David said: "After a slow start, RDPE work in the region gathered pace during 2009, and I was delighted to see initiatives such as the excellent LandSkills programme, with £4.5m of RDPE funding for training, skills and knowledge transfer activities, getting off the ground. It is crucial that we use the funding to make lasting improvements – a vital test of delivery is whether we are still seeing the benefits in ten years' time".

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## Progress on broadband

Broadband is a major issue for rural areas, and one frequently raised within our Forum

AWM and partners are currently funding Ecotec and the Community Broadband Network to undertake the West Midlands Rural Broadband Infrastructure Study, which is likely to be completed by March and will inform long term plans for policy and investment.



In the shorter-term, AWM hopes to invest £1/2million, in partnership with pilot Local Authorities, to establish a local distribution network in pilot locations in South Shropshire, North Herefordshire and West Worcestershire, identifying a private sector partner to hook it into large capacity bandwidth. If successful, the pilot will be expanded on a wholly commercial basis to other rural areas.

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## Rural Regeneration Zone supporting the region's recovery



Advantage West Midlands' Rural Regeneration Zone continues to play a vital role in helping Herefordshire, Shropshire and parts of west Worcestershire to emerge from the global economic downturn.

Its unique ability to bring together the public, private and voluntary sectors has enabled it to deliver a host of strategic investment programmes, like the flagship National College for the Blind and Hereford Learning Village, and support opportunities, including Nexus, Redundant Building Grants, Multi-Use Facilities, Re-think and the UK-leading Enterprise Centre Network – now boasting sites in Hereford, Leominster, Ludlow and Shrewsbury.

**This support has helped to create and safeguard in excess of 250 jobs, assisted 340 businesses and brought in more than £7.2m of private sector investment in the last year alone.**

While the focus has had to change to ensure the Zone supports the area out of recession, its long-term aim is to develop thriving rural economies, boost skills, embrace environmental technologies and increase access to essential services.

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## Comprehensive strategy delivered for border region

The Strategic Forum for Central Wales and the West Midlands continues to foster cross-border dialogue and co-operation based on the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed in March 2007. In addition to a full Strategic Forum meeting held in April 2009, the thematic groups, and the core officer's group, have also continued to meet.

**Of particular significance has been the work of the Health and Social Care group, which has had considerable success in addressing some of the needs and funding of healthcare provision in the cross border areas.**

Work has also been undertaken to foster closer relationships between the food and tourism sectors on both sides of the border, though much remains to be done.

The Offa's Dyke Country Partnership was formed and research undertaken with communities and businesses, into the needs and opportunities for regeneration along the border region. As a result, a comprehensive strategy has been produced for the area and the MOU represents one of the principle mechanisms for implementing this.



Funding has also been obtained for a cross-border officer who will work within the Welsh Assembly Government to add further resource to this important area of work.

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## Substantial input on rural proofing

Rural Proofing has required a substantial input from our specialist working groups over the last year and has been a key component for influencing the draft Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) Phase Two and Phase Three Revision processes. This has also included providing expert witnesses at the RSS Phase Two Examination in Public in June.

The Spatial Strategy is the top half of statutory planning process providing guidance at a local level in terms of sustainability, urban and rural renaissance, communities for the future, prosperity for all, quality of the environment, transport and accessibility together with implementation and monitoring.

WMRAF Members have assessed whether the various policies of the RSS are likely to have a different impact in rural areas from that elsewhere, and where necessary, what adjustments or compensations might be made to reflect rural needs and circumstances.



We believe that we have had some success to date but there is more to do, as rural proofing is an ongoing process applying to both the development and delivery stages of policy, programmes and initiatives.

We look forward to assisting with the rural proofing of the forthcoming Strategy for the West Midlands.

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## More Information

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

Contact Rebecca Mackay, Secretariat  
[rebecca.mackay@gowm.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:rebecca.mackay@gowm.gsi.gov.uk)  
0121 352 5371

# West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum Membership List 2009

Sector	Member	Organisation
Chair	Bob Forster	
Secretariat	Rebecca Mackay	Sustainability & Rural Affairs Team, Government Office for the West Midlands
Core Financial Support	Dave Marr	Sustainability and Rural Affairs, GOWM, Defra
	Olwen Dutton	West Midlands Leaders Board (WMLB) & West Midlands Regional Assembly (WMRA)
Countryside, Environment and Recreation	Paul Meakin	Environment Agency
	Steve Holliday	West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership & Sustainability West Midlands
	James Steele	West Midlands Regional Sustainability Forum
	Tim Johnston	English Heritage
	Kate Warburton	National Trust
Rural Economy and Employment	David Collier (Vice Chair)	National Farmers Union
	Caroline Bedell	Country Land and Business Association
	To Be Advised	Learning and Skills Council
	Gary Woodman	Confederation of West Midlands Chambers of Commerce
	David Ledbury	Business Link West Midlands
	Sean Glennon	Transport & General Workers Union
	Henry Lucas - Warwickshire	Rural Hubs Chair representing Network of Rural Hubs in the 5 West Midlands Shire Counties
Rural Communities & Services (including Voluntary Sector)	Rev'd Peter Dakin	Chaplaincy for Agricultural and Rural Life
	Richard Quallington	West Midlands Network of Rural Community Councils
	Rowena Clayton	Department of Health, West Midlands Public Health Group
	Hannah Moule	National Federation of Young Farmers & Youth Issues
	Andrew Tyley	Association of Colleges
	Prof Brian Revell	Higher Education
	Sharon Palmer	Regional Action West Midlands
	Bruce Undy	Regional Transport Strategy Forum
	Alison Mclean (Vice Chair)	
Central Government Bodies	Bill Heslegrave	Forestry Commission
	Rob Williams	Natural England
	Amanda Peck	Commission for Rural Communities
Local Government	Roger Evans	West Midland Association of Parish & Town Councils
	Steven Fox	West Midlands Leaders Board (WMLB)
	Cllr Beris Williams	West Midlands Local Government Association
Regional Bodies (not listed elsewhere)	Mark Pearce	Advantage West Midlands
	Roger Philips	Advantage West Midlands Rural Board Member
	Rose Poulter	Advantage West Midlands
	Richard Gabb	Herefordshire Council
	Cllr Richard Hobbs	Representing: West Mercia, Warwickshire & Staffordshire Police
Sub-Regional Partnerships	Chris Bucknell	Herefordshire Partnership
	Jake Berriman	Shropshire Partnership
	Chris Welch	Staffordshire Rural Partnership
	Glyn West	Worcestershire County Council
	Mandy Walker	Coventry, Solihull & Warwickshire Partnership
	Caroline Oakes	Telford and Wrekin Council
Former Chair	The Rev'd Nick Read OBE	N/A

## Contact details

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