

The Rural Environment of the West Midlands

The West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum (WMRAF) has a number of priorities for the rural areas of the region. The protection and enhancement of the local environment is essential to ensure a healthy and prosperous rural West Midlands.

Why is the environment important in the rural West Midlands?

The West Midlands has a diverse range of environmental assets e.g. Peak District National Park, 5 AONBs, Community Forests, Scheduled Monuments, SACs, SSSIs etc. As well as statutorily protected sites there are many other environmental assets, tourist locations, locally distinctive features, cultural attractions and historic sites.

The environment is an important aspect of sustainable development to be considered in association with community and economic issues. It is important to take a long term view of environmental management and to consider the global impact of local actions.

Green infrastructure is defined in the West Midlands Green Infrastructure Prospectus as “The network of green spaces and natural elements that connect our cities, towns and villages. It is open spaces, waterways, gardens, woodlands, green corridors, wildlife habitats, street trees, natural heritage and open countryside”. It provides an essential framework for developing sustainable economies and protecting and enhancing biodiversity.

The predicted changes in the climate due to global warming and an increase in the frequency of extreme climatic events could have a profound impact on the environment of the West Midlands, with knock on effects to the local economy and biodiversity.

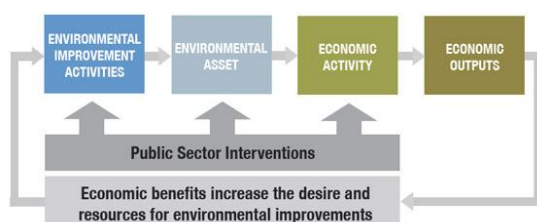
What are the issues?

- The Government’s commitment to Localism and the Big Society will put more emphasis on the need for local communities to engage with and take ownership of their local environment. In doing so, local authorities and local communities will need to have a common understanding of what it means to be a sustainable rural community.
- Within these groups there needs to be a common understanding of natural and ecosystem services to ensure that the environment is put at the heart of local decision-making.
- Decision-makers such as local authorities and local communities will need access to adequately interpreted, timely and relevant information on the environmental context, value, assets and issues in their area. As the abolition of the Regional Spatial Strategy is proposed, there will be an increased need to work across administrative boundaries.
- The current trend is towards a loss of natural assets and this needs to be halted to conserve biodiversity. In many areas there has been a failure to meet Biodiversity Action Plan targets.
- The environment needs to be considered on a landscape scale to achieve more and better connectivity between habitats. Information is needed on quality, condition, connectivity and accessibility of green infrastructure. There is a need to recognise the wider multiple benefits of green infrastructure.
- With a reduction in available funding for projects and the disposal of assets by local authorities now seeming inevitable, there is a need to prioritise activities to safeguard the most important environmental assets, both designated and undesignated, and including heritage at risk, historic farmsteads and landscape character.
- There is currently a lack of risk management and continuity planning among rural SMEs and local communities for climate change impacts such as flooding, drought or heat waves.
- Within rural areas in particular there is a dependency on the use of private cars to access work and leisure opportunities. This contributes to carbon emissions, which, it is predicted, will affect global climate change.

What needs to be done?

1. Understand the changes to government and work with them. Work to ensure best and most efficient use of reduced funds.
2. Champion the entire environment, including historic and cultural as well as natural. Provide information, advice, tools and checklists (or signposts to these) for local authorities and local communities. Good examples include www.magic.gov.uk and 'What's in your back yard?' on the Environment Agency website.
3. Make the relationship between protecting and enhancing the local environment and overarching sustainable development goals more explicit. Promote a shared understanding of a sustainable rural community between local authorities and local communities. Enable local communities to determine the local natural and historic environment assets that they value, and provide information (or signposts) to enable communities to manage their local environment.
4. Advocate landscape-scale working that can deliver multiple benefits across the rural agenda, incorporate the values of natural systems and safeguard the assets that we will all need in the future. Promote and work to enable better connectivity between landscapes, and cross-boundary working.
5. Promote a shared understanding of the term 'ecosystem services' among local authorities and local communities. Use the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Goals and Conceptual Framework to analyse the interactions between people and ecosystems and take an integrated approach to the management of the local environment.
6. Disseminate best practice from case studies in the region utilising the Rural Environmental Economy Supply Chain (see below), including those included in Advantage West Midlands' 'Natural Assets Case Studies 2008'.
7. Threats and opportunities relating to the environment need to be thoroughly evidenced, analysed, assessed and debated in order to arrive at imaginative policies.
8. Promote the protection, enhancement and development of green infrastructure at a sub-regional, local and site-based level by - setting out a strategic approach; establishing clear policy; embedding green infrastructure into areas of significant growth; encouraging sub-regional green infrastructure and local greenspace strategies; gathering robust environmental data; promoting the need for accessible greenspace in rural areas; and identifying and securing funding.
9. Ensure full consideration is given to the management of the rural-urban fringe to restrict encroachment of development into the countryside. Positive management of Green Belts is needed as is flexibility to accommodate a move to a low carbon economy, such as renewables (for example, woodfuel supply depots, wind turbines).
10. Ensure that the environment is integrated with land management practices by promoting the take-up of Environmental Stewardship schemes and the Campaign for the Farmed Environment. Explore the potential in the uplands for carbon sequestration and flood control.
11. Seek to enhance local distinctiveness across the West Midlands, including encouraging the sustainable use of local traditional building materials in developments, and promoting local food by signposting to relevant information and sharing best practice.

Figure 1: Rural Environmental Economy Supply Chain



RuralScapes

This project is working with farmers, food producers and tourism operators for the environmental and economic benefit of the high quality landscape in North West Shropshire. It is a non-profit organisation.

The Woolhope Dome Project

This project was set up in 2003 with the aim of enhancing biodiversity on a landscape scale. One of nine pilot Biodiversity Enhancement Areas (BEAs) in the West Midlands, it covers 5000 hectares in South East Herefordshire. It is led by Herefordshire Nature Trust in partnership with Natural England, the Wye Valley AONB and the Forestry Commission.

Further information

West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum

www.ruralnetworkwm.org.uk

Developing the Rural Environmental Economy of the West Midlands – Summary 2006 [Read more](#)

West Midlands Biodiversity Partnership

<http://www.wmbp.org>

Natural Assets Case Studies 2008 [Read more](#)