

The Devon Rural Network

"A strong voice for rural Devon"

"Our vision is for a prosperous and vibrant rural Devon in a sustainability managed environment securing a good quality of life for all, and fully valuing the diversity and distinctiveness of the county."

1. The Devon Rural Network is needed:

- **Because rural issues are distinct**

People who live in rural areas have some issues in common with those living in urban areas, such as poverty and affordable housing. Other issues, such as difficulty in accessing basic services and the necessity to act as custodians of the outstanding landscape, are distinctively rural and of special importance to a county like Devon. For the purposes of the Rural Strategy and the Network 'rural area' can be taken to mean either rural at district level (the whole of Devon excluding Plymouth, Exeter, and Torbay), or rural at ward level (the same area but also excluding settlements with a population which exceeds 10,000), as most appropriate to the context.

Rural Devon is self-evidently fragmented. Consequently, any 'one-size solution' to problems will not fit all. There are, however, a range of actions highlighted within the Rural Strategy for Devon, where "a strong voice for rural Devon" will be vital.

- **To make the needs of rural Devon known**

Devon is known locally, nationally and internationally for its unique landscape and rurality. The County has an important role to play in the development and delivery of strategies that contribute towards local, regional and national sustainability in the countryside.

In a recent consultation exercise conducted by the Devon Strategic Partnership, there was overwhelming support for the development of a Rural Strategy and the formation of Devon Rural Network to be "a strong voice for rural Devon"

This positive response is set in the context of the wider community not feeling in control, perceiving "power" to lie elsewhere, as witnessed by the global economy, Europe and a centralised UK Government with a metropolitan bias.

- **In order to develop a framework for partnership working**

For the most part delivery of the vision for rural Devon set out in the Rural Strategy will take place at the local level, in districts, neighbourhoods, villages and parishes. Cross-sector consultation however, has supported the need for a range of activities to take place at a countywide and regional level. As a consequence of this degree of complexity, many consultees felt that a robust subsidiarity framework needed to be forged between partners, in order that the Rural Strategy could be implemented properly. As one consultee said "why wouldn't we want to work together on such an important issue".

- **Because rural issues do not respect boundaries and are complex.**

Rural issues highlighted in the Strategy such as Government policies, market forces and social trends impact on both rural and urban communities all over Devon and therefore there is a need for a high degree of co-operation across all agencies and sectors.

Set against this background is the fact that there are such a bewildering number of policies and programmes already aimed at tackling rural issues.

2. The challenges facing Rural Devon

In its publication "The State of the Countryside 2020" the Countryside Agency identified a number of key trends and challenges which face rural Britain, and which may affect our ability to deliver the vision. The challenges identified below are directly applicable to rural Devon and further issues are identified in the Rural Strategy.

- **Who will live in the countryside?**
 - Household numbers will increase substantially, and many will be located in rural England, giving rise to more dispersed development.
 - Rural households will remain largely middle-class. There will be an elderly age profile. It will start to become more ethnically diverse.
 - The exodus of the younger people from the countryside will continue.
 - There will continue to be inward migration of older age groups and second home owners.
- **How will rural people earn their living?**
 - **The Commuter countryside** will continue to expand as more commuters travel long distances on improved transport networks and more work from home for part of their time. Advances in, and access to information technology (for example the availability of broadband) are key determinants of the economy of the commuter countryside.
 - **Market and Coastal Towns** and their hinterlands will continue to attract investment by businesses. Tourism will grow bringing jobs and money, and country towns will become service centres for their increasing populations.
 - **The Visited Countryside** will continue to attract tourism which will grow bringing employment and revenue. Green tourism and action orientated tourism will help to diversify the holiday industry.
 - **The Farmed countryside** will diversify as farming becomes one among many uses of rural land. Global economic change and new technologies will provide new opportunities for some but not all farmers, and the present exodus from farming seems likely to continue, particularly from the smaller holdings. A twin-track pattern of agriculture may emerge: on the one hand, highly capitalised, highly mechanised, highly specialised, large-scale farms, often orientated to world markets; on the other hand, smaller scale, high value-added farms, focused on local and niche markets.
- **What will be the quality of life in the countryside?**
 - **Environment:** there are mixed prospects for the physical environment. Many farms will become more sustainable, but not all. Traffic congestion will worsen, and measures to deal with it will be fraught with difficulty.
 - **Autonomy:** Increasing globalisation and national Government's centralisation means that power is likely to remain concentrated in the hands of small groups and particular interests.
 - **Relationships:** in the countryside will be greatly influenced by the interplay between factors promoting community cohesion and those causing social fragmentation. These issues will be addressed through the Rural Network, particularly in relation to social exclusion, and crime.

- **Meaning:** Farming as the most significant stakeholder, and therefore most important viewpoint in the countryside is fast giving way to a mosaic of different visions: "traditionalists", "idealists", "pragmatists" and "visitors" will all attach different meanings to the countryside and ideas on how it should be managed. Yet it is still farmers who are expected to be the custodians of the land and therefore all these meanings need to be practically integrated. The pragmatic view, that "what works is best" seems likely to prevail, with mixed consequences for sustainability.

There is, however, a strong sense of pride in Devon and because there are many strong and cohesive communities in the county, the above challenges can be faced with some confidence.

The Challenges and the Vision

"Our Vision is for a prosperous and vibrant rural Devon in a sustainably managed environment securing a good quality of life for all and fully valuing the diversity and distinctiveness of the County."

The global economy is a reality, however, its effects can be tempered by promoting community cohesion and by supporting methods to address widespread, deeply held environmental concerns. Encouragement should be given to environmental, social and economic sustainability becoming widely held and powerful ideals that have a significant influence on housing development, service provision, community needs and economic development. This is a scenario that all organisations in Devon say they want to achieve but which calls for a high level of skill and collaboration, in particular a joined-up approach, to which the Devon Rural Network will significantly contribute. The expense involved in such an approach, if undertaken properly, will prove costly, and a high level of Government intervention in terms of financial assistance, will be required.

The vision (above) set out by the Rural Strategy has tried to take this into account and has already been accepted by a wide range of stakeholders in the County:

Approaches that promote economic, social and environmental considerations either singly or in pairs will not deliver the agreed vision. Only a holistic approach that seeks to offer solutions to environmental, social and economic issues as a "balanced ticket" will deliver the agreed vision.

3. The Devon Rural Network will add value to the work of others

The following areas have been identified as being the remit of the Devon Rural Network:

- **Strategic**
 - To promote the vision for rural Devon
 - To own, review and monitor the Rural Strategy (the strategy is viewed as an organic, working document).
 - To produce, at intervals, a "State of Rural Devon" report which also forecasts future trends (first edition to be produced in 2004).
 - Ensure that public bodies and local authorities are "rural-proofing" their policies and programmes.

- **Organisational**
 - To encourage co-ordination where it adds value but not to be a gatekeeper or obstacle.
 - To contribute to improved communications.

- **Educational**
 - Promote learning about “what works” through exchange of experience and identification of best practice

- **A Voice**
 - There is a lack of a "voice" for rural Devon at regional, national and European level for the plethora of partnerships, organisations, communities and individuals that wish to be heard.
 - Specifically the Devon Rural Network will "lobby" concerning:
 - European and National Policy post 2006
 - The "Rural Premium".
 - Common Agricultural Policy
 - Sustainable Farming and Food
 - The Index of Multiple Deprivation
 - Rural service provision.
 - The food retail industry

The voice will need to be delivered from an inclusive approach

- **Coherence**
 - To bring coherence into economic, social, and environmental regeneration planning and into local, regional, and national funding streams so as to:
 - To ensure synergy in all economic, social and environmental planning across the area;
 - To bring flexibility to national and regional; funding streams so as to achieve better value for money at the delivery (rural) end.

- **Economic Issues and delivery of some programmes**
 - To lead in regard to specific initiatives were a countywide approach can reap most gains for local people:
 - Sustainable Food and Farming including research and innovation.
 - The implementation of the Sustainable Farming and Food Strategy
 - Access to Services, specifically Broadband and Transport
 - Rural Trails and Tourism
 - The Network could have a role as a “brokering table” for strategic initiatives. This, however, should not be at the expense of support for local projects and local brokering.

- **Social Issues**

The Devon Strategic Partnership Task Group on Social Inclusion has identified access to services in rural areas and community cohesion as key issues which require strategic direction. The Devon Rural Network is well placed to contribute to activities designed to reduce social exclusion and encourage diversity and cohesion. This would include research and innovation. The Network will also be well placed to share ideas, promote best practice and to promote cohesion. Most activities will, however be undertaken at a local level and the Network will not be the most appropriate body to lead on these.

- **Environmental issues**
 - Environment Devon, the Environmental Partnership in the county, wishes to align itself with the Devon Rural Network in order to promote biodiversity and sustainable development
- **Urban (non rural centres)**
 - In all activities the Rural Network will have regard for the close social, environmental and economic links with Devon's few urban centres.

In attending to all the above matters the Network will adopt an approach which ensures that there is a balance between environmental, social and economic considerations.

4. The organisation of the Network

- **Relationship of the Devon Rural Network to the Devon Strategic Partnership**
The Devon Strategic Partnership (DSP) is the enabling body which facilitated the establishment of the Devon Rural Network. As such the Network will be accountable to the DSP and will be represented at the Forum and on the Steering Group.
- **The Network**

Purpose

 - To contribute to refining and developing the Devon Rural Strategy.
 - To develop and implement the Action Plan
 - To develop a subsidiarity framework.
 - To share information and best practice.
 - To enable joint working.
 - To forecast future trends and establish priorities

Membership

There will be open membership to include: public, private and voluntary sector organisations and partnerships.

Operation

 - Half day gatherings twice a year.
 - Annual conference and special events
 - E-mail, written newsletter, website
- **The Steering Group**

Purpose

 - To develop and implement the Action Plan for the Strategy
 - Manage performance
 - Take part in lobbying activity
 - Take operational decisions as necessary

Membership

Members will add value to the 5 aims of the Rural Strategy:

 - Achieve a prosperous and economically vibrant Devon
 - Promote sustainable management of the environment
 - Bring about a good quality of life for all

- Maximise the value of Devon’s diversity and distinctiveness
- Lead and co-ordinate partnership working and engagement

Group to be no larger than 25 people and comprise representatives of organisations/sectors rather than individuals

The Membership comprises nominations/volunteers from:

- Local Authorities
- Economic Sector, including one nomination from each local economic partnership
- Environment Sector
- Social, Cultural and Academic Sectors
- Community Organisations
- Regional Bodies
- Co-options as determined by the Steering Group as necessary.

Operation

- 6 meetings per year
- Elected chair
- Secretarial and administrative support. In the first instance to be funded by the County Council.

- **Executive and Secretariat**

Chair

- Will be the public face of the partnership and “Devon Rural Advocate” and will be elected by the Steering Group .
- Responsible for leadership and partnership development

Secretariat

- The Network could benefit from an independent secretariat, the location and financing of which would require discussion. In the first instance Devon County Council could assist with this.

Activities

- Informing - e.g. raising awareness, increasing understanding and promoting best practice.
- Monitoring - “Rural Proofing”, performance management, evaluation.
- Supporting - the management group, the network and the chairperson
- Administering - any programmes associated with the Network.

Programme management

- From time to time the Network may convene working groups to take forward particular initiatives.

Working groups

- It is likely that the Network’s preferred way of working will be through time limited working groups

Communication

The DRN will be supported by excellent communications both in electronic and written form and will aim to provide clarity in all its dealings and conduct its business in an open, inclusive and facilitative manner.

HOW WE WILL WORK TOGETHER

Organisations participating in the Devon Rural Network will:

- Work together effectively and efficiently to deliver our aims whilst at the same time respecting the views of all network members.
- Encourage action at the lowest level possible.
- Work in a way that is inclusive and that promotes equality of opportunity and involvement from all sectors.
- Use the Network to focus on strategic issues that need to be delivered or co-ordinated at a Devon-wide level and to promote the Devon "cause" at regional, national and European levels.
- Use more local partnerships to focus on local issues and community priorities which can best be delivered locally.
- Not compete amongst ourselves or duplicate effort and make the best use of public money.
- Communicate and consult effectively and honestly using wherever possible, the same structures and processes.
- Work together to ensure that the partnerships needed to deliver the Devon Rural Strategy and its action plan are in place, developed and supported.
- Scrutinise the Networks activities through objective monitoring and evaluation of its work.