

## **DRAFT RURAL FRAMEWORK FOR OXFORDSHIRE**

### **Introduction**

1. The development of a rural framework and evidence base for Oxfordshire is a commitment in the Stronger Communities block of the Local Area Agreement. This report introduces the draft rural framework for Oxfordshire which has been developed by a working group of the Oxfordshire Rural Forum over the past year, and recommends how this work should be taken forward.

### **Background and context**

#### **Changes to rural policy and funding programmes**

2. A number of strategic changes have taken place in recent years which affect the funding and delivery of services in rural areas. As a result of changes to government-funded rural programmes following the Haskins Review in 2003, and the Defra Rural Strategy in 2004, responsibility for many rural funding programmes has been transferred to regional bodies. In response to these changes, the South East Rural Partnership was formed, and developed the South East Rural Delivery Framework 2006 – 2009, setting out priorities for the region. Oxfordshire is one of the sub-regional rural partnerships which forms part of the delivery model for the South East Rural Delivery Framework.
3. New funding streams include for example SEEDA's Access to Services Programme, and the European funded Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE), which require joint partnership bids.

#### **Issues facing rural Oxfordshire**

4. The Economic Development Strategy for Oxfordshire 2006-2016 highlights the challenges in providing services and maintaining communities in rural Oxfordshire, and recommends a rural strategy for Oxfordshire to ensure that the needs of rural communities are recognised. Many of the social, economic and environmental pressures affecting rural Oxfordshire affect urban areas as well. However, the impact of these pressures can be felt very differently in rural areas. In drafting this rural framework the aim was to identify the ways in which rural areas were affected differently from other (urban) areas. For example:
  - With a lower density of population, access to services is likely to be more of an issue in rural areas; reduced access to services in a particular rural area may affect only a small minority of people, and therefore require a more specific and flexible response appropriate to the needs of this vulnerable group.
  - some of the effects of predicted climate change will be markedly different in rural areas, where changes in crop production are likely to have a major and lasting impact on the appearance of the countryside and on biodiversity.

Factors such as these need special attention from service providers.

### **The aims of the rural framework**

5. The aims in developing the rural framework and evidence base for Oxfordshire have therefore been to:
  - Identify specific needs and circumstances of communities in rural Oxfordshire
  - Help improve service delivery in rural Oxfordshire
  - Help to improve access to sources of funding for rural areas by providing clear and accessible rural evidence.
  - Increase the capacity of Oxfordshire to respond to changes affecting those living in rural areas and to articulate these concerns in the South East and nationally.

It should be noted that it was deliberately decided not to produce a shared rural strategy: the framework will provide a shared evidence base that member organisations will then use to develop their own strategies as appropriate.

### **How the framework and evidence base were developed**

6. The working group, (see working group membership list in annex) identified the themes for 10 research theme papers which were produced between September 2006 and March 2007. A summary of evidence, *Understanding Rural Oxfordshire*, was also produced. Six workshops were held to review the evidence with a wide range of organisations, culminating in March 2007 with a workshop for councillors and for the Oxfordshire Rural Forum. The theme papers and workshop reports will be published on the Oxfordshire Data Observatory website. The feedback from the workshops has been used alongside the evidence from the theme papers to develop the challenges in the draft rural framework.
7. As set out in the agreed project plan, the outcome of this process has been to produce:
  - an agreed framework for Oxfordshire which identifies high level priorities and provides the strategic context based on evidence, within which actions for the county, district and other partners can be developed;
  - a map of existing and emerging strategies, and identification of agencies involved in rural delivery that need to be involved.

### **Rural Framework challenges**

8. The draft rural framework sets out six key challenges for rural Oxfordshire, with Access to Services as the highest priority. Under each challenge, current activity and good practice are summarised, along with options for possible responses by rural forum member organisations. The Rural

Forum will publish a summary of these challenges and promote them to the relevant rural delivery organisations.

- 1. Access to services and facilities**

Increased centralisation of services particularly affects rural areas because it leads to reductions in local services and facilities and longer journeys to the remaining service locations. With a higher and increasing proportion of older people living in rural areas and few alternatives for more vulnerable groups, including young and older people without access to car transport, there are specifically rural issues of access to facilities such as health, education, employment and leisure. Market towns offer a significant opportunity to address this problem, but need support to do so.
- 2. Affordable Housing**

While all of the county suffers from a lack of affordable housing, in rural areas the problem of price is compounded by the shortage of any available affordable houses in some rural areas. This can result in polarised communities, and the inability of certain groups, especially young people, to find housing in them.
- 3. Countryside and environment**

A challenge for rural Oxfordshire is to maintain a high quality countryside and environment as an economic asset for the whole county that supports tourism and business development, while also responding to pressure for new development and infrastructure.
- 4. Climate change and resource use**

The impact of climate change will be different in rural and urban areas. Agriculture in particular is likely to be affected by an increase in production of fuel for renewable energy such as wood fuel and biofuel, by changes in what crops can be grown and by increased fuel costs. Existing access problems will be accentuated by increased fuel costs that will affect the cost of providing services and the degree to which people travel long distances to work.
- 5. Economy and Enterprise**

Business density in rural areas is lower than in other parts of the South East, and average earnings for people working in Oxfordshire's rural districts are relatively low. There are opportunities to support home working, which is an important feature of Oxfordshire's economy, and from promotion of a strong tourism strategy.
- 6. Vulnerable people**

There are pockets of deprivation scattered across generally prosperous rural areas, which can make it more difficult to identify and support vulnerable groups in rural areas than in urban areas. A particular pressure for service providers

in rural areas is to respond to the significant increase predicted in the number of people over 85 living in rural areas over the next 20 years.

### **Taking forward the work of the rural framework**

9. The process of developing a rural evidence base and framework has initiated a useful dialogue between a range of organisations, local authorities and individuals across Oxfordshire, which has already helped to raise the profile of rural issues and to clarify what are specifically rural issues that are need targeted responses and what are not specifically rural issues and which therefore need to be addressed through mainstream service provision. Material from the evidence base and the workshop discussions is being incorporated into the Sustainable Community Strategy for Oxfordshire which is being developed through 2007 and early 2008. In particular the workshop discussions have highlighted some key themes and conclusions which have emerged across across all the topic areas. These include:
- the important role of the voluntary sector in supporting rural communities especially where provision of local services is sparse or where services have already been lost.
  - the need for a stronger local community planning process and framework for parish and market town plans to enable local communities – both in villages and in market towns, to articulate their concerns and to make an active contribution to planning for their future.

### **Next steps**

10. The next stage in taking forward the draft rural framework will need to be to:
- a) promote, develop and monitor progress of the six rural challenges with partner organisations.
  - b) lead the development of joint funding bids to support new initiatives.
  - c) develop a target or targets for the Oxfordshire Local Area Agreement being developed during 2007/2008 to support the role of volunteering and/or local or community plans to strengthen community life in rural areas.
  - d) engage with planning authorities and strategic partnerships to raise rural issues of concern emerging from local community plans, and the need for rural proofing of plans and policies.
  - e) identify further work needed to support development of the rural evidence base.

### **The role of the Oxfordshire Rural Forum**

11. Developing the rural framework and evidence base has been the first task of the Oxfordshire Rural Forum, launched in November 2006. The work to

develop the rural framework and evidence base has been led by Oxfordshire County Council and financially supported by the Oxfordshire County Council and the rural District Councils. Oxfordshire Rural Community Council (ORCC) has started to provide the secretariat for the work of the Rural Forum, but this has been supported largely from within existing ORCC resources and by leveraging in external money, and has stretched ORCC's capacity. Rural Forum members believe that a strong and dynamic rural forum, led and supported by ORCC, is needed:

- to take forward the rural framework challenges and recommendations at a strategic level,
- to provide leadership, and to promote and debate rural issues across Oxfordshire and the South East
  
- enable local community action that addresses rural priority issues

However, in order to take on this role, ORCC needs the capacity and financial support to provide the secretariat and leadership for the Forum. For this reason the Rural Forum Steering Group supports the following recommendations to the Public Service Board.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **12. The Public Service Board is RECOMMENDED to:**

- a) endorse the draft Rural Framework for Oxfordshire as a first step in setting out and presenting evidence for the challenges that need to be addressed in rural Oxfordshire
- b) support the proposal that Oxfordshire Rural Forum's role should be to champion and further develop the recommendations in the Rural Framework, and that the ORCC should have the necessary funding and support to provide leadership and the secretariat for the Oxfordshire Rural Forum.
- c) request the Oxfordshire Rural Forum Steering Group to develop a business plan setting out the costs and requirements for ORCC to provide a secretariat and leadership for the Oxfordshire Rural Forum, and submit this as soon as possible to the Public Service Board and/or other funding bodies.

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