

*hertfordshire rural forum*

*Rural Hertfordshire*

*An Agenda for Action*

*2000-2005*

**September 2000**

## **Introduction**

The Hertfordshire Rural Forum (HRF) is a large informal grouping of organisations from the public, private and voluntary sectors which share a common interest in the wellbeing and future of the county's rural communities and environment.

## **Purpose of this document**

The document has been produced by the Hertfordshire Rural Forum to fulfil the following purposes:

- as a replacement to the **Strategy for Hertfordshire's Countryside** produced by the Hertfordshire Countryside Forum (the forerunner of the Rural Forum);
- to act as a **prospectus** for the Forum – setting out clearly its aims, priorities, structure and membership;
- to set out the Forum's **rural agenda** to be addressed over the 5 year period from 2000-2005 – this agenda comprises 9 key **Rural Strands** (see below) which have been identified through various meetings and consultations organised by the Forum and endorsed by a wide range of organisations and groups.

## **The Hertfordshire Rural Forum**

The Hertfordshire Countryside Forum was established in 1989 by Hertfordshire County Council to contribute to the work of its Countryside Sub-Committee. After a decade of activity, the Forum went through a process of review in 1999 in order to redefine its structure, priorities and membership. Out of that review the following emerged:

- **A new name:** in order to better communicate the breadth of the Forum's interests it was renamed the **Hertfordshire Rural Forum** – to underline the fact that the Forum is as equally concerned with economic and social issues as it is with environmental matters.
- **New structure:** the Forum established a new **Steering Group**, comprising the Chairman, Forum secretary, convenors of the sub-groups, officers from the main rural District Councils, and representatives of both key local organisations, such as the Community Development Agency, and the regional agencies, particularly the Countryside Agency, Farming and Rural Conservation Agency, the regional Government Office and the Regional Development Agency.

As part of this new Structure, several of the long-established Task Groups were wound up but the most successful were retained. In future, any sub-groups of the Forum will be time-limited and focused on the achievement of specific goals.

- **Wider membership:** As part of the review, the Forum has expanded its network of contacts, and now advertises its activities and seeks the involvement of such bodies as the health authorities, primary care group, community health councils, citizens advice bureaux and councils for voluntary services. However, much still needs to be done to increase the involvement of the private sector in the work of the Forum.
- **Involvement of the local authorities:** The Rural Forum continues to receive the full support of the County Council. Its membership continues to include elected members and officers from each of the ten district and borough councils in Hertfordshire and also representatives from the Herts Association of Local Councils.

## **Role of the Forum**

The Forum is a non-statutory body and relies upon the voluntary involvement of all those who contribute to its activities. So although the Forum does not have any powers to make other organisations take action in rural areas, it does have many strengths and, through its innovative programme of activities, is establishing itself as a significant voice on rural issues in Hertfordshire.

The main roles of the Forum are as follows:

- **Rural proofing:** it is important that many of the plans and strategies (both statutory and non-statutory) produced in Hertfordshire should have a rural dimension or, at least, be tested for their impact on rural communities and environment. The Forum can provide opportunities for what is referred to as 'rural proofing' and in 1999 undertook such an exercise for the *Health Improvement Programme* produced by the East & North Herts Health Authority.
- **Linking rural Hertfordshire with the East of England Region:** There is a need to highlight, particularly with Regional agencies and national government, the fact that Hertfordshire does have rural issues. The Herts Rural Forum can help to achieve this through the involvement of the regional agencies in its work and by developing a reputation across the region as an innovative and dynamic network.
- **Building the capacity** of local organisations and local groups to understand new initiatives in rural policy and thereby make them better placed to respond effectively to such changes.
- **Promoting innovation**, by helping to disseminate new ideas and project proposals through seminars, workshop and the internet.
- **Linking organisations and groups** across Herts concerned with rural issues. Hertfordshire's rural areas are spread unevenly across the county and the Forum can do much to bring together local or district based groups at a county level to discuss rural issues and form new partnerships.

## **A Rural Agenda**

Rather than produce a detailed strategy containing extensive action plans, the Steering Group of the Rural Forum has agreed to adopt, through this document, a more flexible approach. The core to this is the establishment of a broad agenda highlighting the issues and problems, which reflect the distinctive nature of rural Hertfordshire within the context of the East of England Region.

This agenda has been established through an extensive consultation programme and is expressed in the nine '**Rural Strands**' set out below. These strands were identified through a facilitated session at the Forum's annual conference in 1999 entitled 'The Future of Rural Hertfordshire' and consulted on more widely early in 2000.

These issues are expressed as '**Rural Strands**' - strands which cut across the three main themes of economy, community and environment. By adopting the 'strands approach' the Forum will bring together people and organisations from a variety of backgrounds and interests, and create opportunities for joint working which do not otherwise exist. Seminars run by the Forum could, for example, bring together those with an interest in economic development, biodiversity, health and community safety to consider an issue from a variety of angles yet still find common ground and shared interests.

**Urban / Rural Links:** Another underlying theme which needs to be borne in mind whenever addressing the Rural Strands is the influence of both the county's towns and London. The proximity of urban areas is an essential aspect of rural life in Hertfordshire and brings many pressures to bear on the environment. It also makes rural Hertfordshire distinct from most other areas of the East of England.

<b>Rural Strands</b>	<b>Sustainable and competitive economy</b>	<b>Sustainable rural communities</b>	<b>Sustainable rural environment</b>	<b>Potential role for the Forum</b>
<b>Housing</b>	<b>Key issues:</b> This is a major rural issue in Herts: increasing demand; increase in households; increase in elderly households; lack of affordable housing; inflexible housing policies.			Encourage housing needs surveys and promote best practice. Involve the Housing Associations and District Housing Officers.
<b>Transport / traffic</b>	<b>Key issues:</b> Need for sustainable transport; environmental degradation, road capacity management; need for better info on public transport; need for safer routes; need to reduce car use; make services more accessible.			Input into Local Transport Plan, promote consensus between groups; sharing experiences and promoting 'joined-up' thinking.
<b>Rural economy</b>	<b>Key issues:</b> Need for diversification in the agricultural economy; separation between farmers and consumers; tension between agricultural use of land and development; EU distortion of farming; decrease in farm incomes; change of use of farm buildings; wealth creation.			Promote research; balancing the views of single issue groups; providing expertise; bringing planners together.

Rural 'Strands'	Sustainable and competitive economy	Sustainable rural communities	Sustainable rural environment	Potential role for Forum
<b>Social exclusion</b>	<b>Key issues:</b> Social isolation; lack of consultation on, and access to, services for youth and elderly in particular; increasing poverty; unequal access to IT; added cost of services in rural areas.			Links with Herts Anti-Poverty Partnership; encourage multi-agency approach; get involved in regional debate; look holistically at a range of interconnecting issues.
<b>Biodiversity / landscape</b>	<b>Key issues:</b> Decrease in biodiversity; impact of agriculture; loss of grassland, hedges & trees; increased 'equestrianisation' at edge of towns; decrease in 'heritage' sites; fewer 'custodians' of the countryside; increase in environmental action/activity.			Consider wider related issues; stimulate local markets which affect biodiversity; promote training; involve land managers; lobby on priority issues; prompt survey work.
<b>Access to services</b>	<b>Key issues:</b> Equal access to health facilities/services; decline of village shops; problems of access to: leisure, schools, childcare, business, church; more homeworking, potential for IT; making services more mobile.			Share good practice; demonstrate areas for action; communicate on issues and lobby; collect information; co-operate with stakeholders

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<b>Community identity &amp; involvement</b>	<p><b>Key issues:</b> Communities have less capacity &amp; willingness to solve own problems; decline in community identity; more fear of crime and more actual crime; ageing population; conflict between representative democracy &amp; participative democracy;</p>			<p>Encourage empowerment; feed Herts issues into Region; encourage business development in villages; promote lifelong learning; consider economic/ social issues as well as environmental.</p>
<b>Needs of young people</b>	<p><b>Key issues:</b> Problems of access to services and advice; recreational opportunities; are existing methods of consultation with young people effective or appropriate; increased use of drugs.</p>			<p>Yet to be defined.</p>
<b>Recreational pressures</b>	<p><b>Key issues:</b> This Strand was identified at the <i>Future of Rural Herts</i> conference but not explored in depth. However, the likely key issues include: increased visitor pressure on rural attractions and communities; impact of visitor pressure on rural environment, particularly around towns.</p>			<p>Yet to be defined.</p>



### **Partnership working**

The Rural Forum is entirely dependent on the support and active participation of its membership. At present there is no formal criteria for becoming a member of the Forum and it should be seen, therefore, as a flexible and inclusive network which can broker new partnerships and stimulate joint-working.

During the five year lifespan of this document, the Forum will focus on expanding its network in the following particular area:

- retailers, shops and the larger superstores interested in providing a service to rural areas;
- providers of access to information technology;
- small enterprises involved in economic diversification.

### **For more information, and to discuss how you can contribute to the activities of the Forum, contact:**

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