



Inquiry into the future of England's uplands communities

Main messages from West Midlands regional hearing, 18th & 19th February 2009, Ludlow, Shropshire

This report summarises the main messages arising from the CRC's first regional hearing in Ludlow, Shropshire on the 18th and 19th February 2009. It is intended to give a flavour of the breadth of issues and topics arising over the course of the two days, rather than provide a fully comprehensive record of all the views expressed. A full verbatim transcript of the formal inquiry hearings is available on request from the CRC Upland Inquiry team (see below).

The views and experiences recorded in this report are those raised by participants in the inquiry session. They are reported without comments and they are not necessarily shared by the CRC. The report will be used, together with reports from the five other regional hearings and other research by the CRC as part of this inquiry, to identify and to understand how upland communities function and develop and promote realistic policy recommendations to support the sustainable future. The inquiry will report its recommendations in the Autumn 2009.

For further details about the CRC's uplands inquiry, please contact the uplands inquiry team at: uplandsinquiry@ruralcommunities.gov.uk.

We are very grateful to individuals and representatives of the following organisations who kindly gave up their time to meet the inquiry panel and share their views and experiences:

Advantage West Midlands

Balfours

Business Link West Midlands

Country, Land and Business Association – West Midlands

CPRE – West Midlands representatives

English Heritage – West Midlands Region

Herefordshire Association of Local Councils

Herefordshire County Council

Herefordshire Partnership

Hope's of Longtown

Ludlow Food Centre

Myndtown Farm

NFU - West Midlands

Plowden Hall

Shropshire Association of Local Councils

Shropshire Community Council

Shropshire Federation of Small Businesses

Shropshire Hills AONB

Skillbuilders CIC

South Shropshire District Council

West Midlands Regional Assembly

Young Farmer

Main Inquiry Messages

For simplicity and easy reference, these have been grouped into the following 6 themes:

1. Communities
2. Economies
3. Public Goods and Benefits
4. Farming
5. Policy and Practices
6. Solutions

1. Communities

Technology: Broadband access, mobile phone coverage and digital TV coverage were highlighted as key issues in the uplands of Herefordshire and Shropshire. Access to fast broadband is important for all people in the community as well as small business owners. The further away from the exchange the worse the service is. There needs to be alternative technology in these areas because where broadband is available people make good use of it.

Mobile phone coverage can be poor in the upland areas. Mobile phones are becoming more important with the closure of phone boxes in villages. They are also vital for running a mobile business.

Some people may be affected by the switchover from analogue to digital TV in the next couple of years because they do not receive digital coverage. TV coverage is important for those who are isolated and for practical reasons e.g. weather reports but no provision has been made for these people.

Access to services: Upland communities have poor access to services. Schools are being closed and 'per child' spend is alleged to be less in rural areas compared to urban. Shop and pub closures have meant people increasingly have to travel to market towns for these services. Service provision needs to be better co-ordinated and be available as an outreach service in rural villages. Market towns in the uplands play an important role for communication and retail and these towns need to be strengthened.

Social capital: People in the uplands are often independent and self sufficient but they do suffer from neglect and isolation and can feel forgotten. Rural disadvantage is often overlooked in favour of urban disadvantage. Some people in the community can lack a social life especially young people and children.

A "Rural Champion" could be created to enthuse the people. Talent in the communities could be used to encourage business start up e.g. business people who retired to the area could help local entrepreneurs.

Vital Villages schemes are important to encourage parish councils to use their powers. Parish councils should look at wider issues such as climate change and peak oil and documents produced need to consider big issues and future changes.

Communities should be given money to make their own decisions and find ways of making a living and supporting enterprise. Rural enablers would provide the balance between bottom up and top down approaches.

Affordable housing: Affordable housing will help people to stay in their local area. People in the uplands are often paid low wages and live in poor accommodation. Private rental accommodation is often expensive and there is less social housing.

Advantage West Midlands are promoting Live/Work Hubs. More housing provision is needed and Community Land Trusts have been promoted as one way to provide more affordable housing.

The upland areas should have mixed generations and mixed housing to support everyone. Locals shouldn't be priced out in their own community and there needs to be better housing policies and structures.

Community-led planning: Local communities are very vocal about the preservation of their local area. Multi-use facilities could play a key role in the upland communities as long as they were of a high quality and accessible to all. School buildings could be used as a multi-use facility e.g. local chiropractor could hold a session in the school after school hours.

Parish councils need to be enthused and encouraged to use the power of wellbeing for their local communities. Also councillors could be educated. Farmers play a key role in parish councils and the wider community.

Parish plans play an important role for upland communities and in sparse areas there could be a clustering of parish plans. If facilitation of steering group was available robust action plans can be carried out. Money from the local community could be used to carry out these plans.

Education: Young people in upland areas are less likely to have no qualifications but more likely not to have university degrees. There seems to be a lack of progression of young people to Higher Education (HE) in the uplands possibly caused by low aspirations. A HE facility or university in Shropshire and/or Herefordshire could keep young people in the area.

A "University Challenge" programme is trying to plug the gaps in HE provision. Both Herefordshire & Shropshire councils are developing proposals for HE institutions. There are however outreach services for Further Education (FE).

There aren't many schemes to encourage young people's enterprise skills and lack of broadband is also a problem for young people's education. There needs to be a better engagement with the skills agenda.

Cross border activities: The upland communities in Herefordshire and Shropshire have strong links with Wales. There are many cross border activities e.g. English travelling to Wales for free prescription and Welsh travelling to Hereford and Shrewsbury to use the hospitals. A cross border agreement has been put in place e.g. police etc.

Migration: The uplands have a net in-migration of older, retired people and a migration of young people out of the area. Young people tend to leave for university, better prospects of jobs and more affordable housing. There needs to be more opportunities for young people.

Incomers to the uplands are actively involved in the market towns. Incomers also bring new business ideas and self employment and support voluntary activities. They can bring vibrancy to a small village. Incomers will also spend money in the local shops. Net migration data in upland areas is available at district level.

2. Economies

Potential: The upland areas have unmet economic potential but technology needs to be in place (e.g. reliable broadband access) to progress. There are a high number of self starters in the uplands and schemes to help home based businesses and homeworkers. Market towns have high levels of self containment but it also makes them vulnerable to shocks. There are high levels of micro and female owned businesses in rural areas.

The uplands could develop a unique identity e.g. border country and there should be better marketing of the region.

The value of local produce can be increased if the abattoir in Bishop's Castle was re-opened (there is a current campaign to raise funds). This will benefit local farmers who currently travel miles to slaughter their animals and local butchers are keen to sell local produce.

Recession: Some businesses in the uplands are suffering during the recession. The Ludlow Food Centre has suffered a drop in sales. Customers are spending less although the tourist trade has remained steady.

Investment: Investment is needed in rural broadband and the Post Office network and the direct services they provide in the uplands. Advantage West Midlands (AWM) should invest in risk capital of these areas and make it a commercial venture where AWM take the risk.

Planning: Small businesses are finding it difficult to expand especially when they want to employ more people. Any form of “dirty” business is often ruled out by the planning authorities and incomers to the community. Planning restrictions can hinder enterprise and they need to be relaxed to allow development and progression without affecting the tourism.

Cross border: There is a difference between AWM and the Welsh Development Agency funding. Welsh Development Agency has given money to new businesses over the border in upland Wales which has attracted businesses including small factories. Suggested that the West Midlands can learn a lot about festivals and events from the Welsh.

Tourism: Tourism is seen as key to the economy of the uplands. Many businesses depend on the tourists spending their money in upland communities.

Employment: Employment has a significant upland dimension for example, tourism and agriculture. People will commute to major towns for work. People are now moving from cities like London and Birmingham to these areas because new technology (where available) allows them to work easily from home.

Homeworking data is available at ward level but nothing specific on upland and lowland activity. Enterprise HQ has been set up in Shrewsbury for home based businesses to use their facilities for meetings etc. There might be data on upland businesses using the hub?

3. Public goods and benefits

Partnership working: The Shropshire Hills AONB partnership has strong local representation with a range of interests. They are working with local landowners in a formal and informal setting to ensure there is less conflict and gaps. They have representation from Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group to add value and with Land, Life & Livelihoods project to improve links with farmers and the wider community.

Environment: Shropshire Hills AONB are tasked with preserving the environment but they do take into account the need for sustainable development in the communities. CPRE also acknowledge there is a need for affordable housing in the upland areas. Flood alleviation and land management is not always compatible with farming.

Renewable energy: There isn't so much peat in the Welsh border uplands for carbon storage. Wind energy would be viable and biomass and wood fuel should be consider and there is already a local producer of biomass for renewable energy. There seems to be reluctance at national and regional level to accept renewable energy developments such as wind and biomass in the uplands.

Historic environment: The historic settlements and environment in the uplands are distinctive and contained. Government agencies need to be engaged so they recognise different economic interests in the historic areas. Historic farm buildings need protection and there is a shortage of skills to maintain these buildings.

4. Farming

Environment vs Farming: Food production is being increased in the current economic climate but there aren't any subsidies available and therefore incentives for farmers to re-stock. It was suggested that there needs to be an agri-environmental scheme which pays on deliverables. Stewardship schemes do provide employment in the area but farmers want to work the land to produce food.

The question is "what do the Government want – farming or environment?" If there is a move towards environment schemes this will lead to de-stocking and possibly more bracken on the hills. The Government need to do more to encourage farmers to provide environmental services e.g. offering tax relief as an incentive. The agencies need to talk face to face with the farmers especially when introducing new schemes e.g. Uplands Entry Level Scheme (UELS).

Agri-environmental schemes do provide employment. AWM provided case studies of a farm contractor who is providing environmental management services e.g. moving sheep. Agri-environmental schemes need agencies to talk to farmers more especially if the new UELS schemes leaves some farmers out.

The general public take the uplands for granted and there needs to be better relations between farmers and the public.

Diversification: Landowners are generally supportive of their tenant farmers diversifying. A land owner at the hearing explained how he had a mix of cottages, some for holiday lets, and others rented out to locals, emphasising that motives are not always purely profit-driven.

Tradition: Upland farms have a tradition of being small and family run. However, large numbers of family farms have disappeared. In some cases, farmers have taken over other farms and expanded into larger "ranch style" farms. Other's are more dependent on their spouse's income to support and expand the business. Farms have been sold and converted but reaching further economic potential can be difficult. Animal diseases such as TB affect farming often making it less profitable. Consequently, people may be discouraged from going into farming as a career because of the unforeseen risks. Upland farms are not realistically sustainable at present and businesses shouldn't be developed where they are mostly dependent on grants.

Labour: More labour is needed on farms especially livestock farms. Some farms currently have one person and more people are needed to manage a large number of livestock and for Health and Safety reasons. Farmers also suffer from loneliness on the farm alone all day.

Succession is also a concern with fewer young people taking over the farms. Some young farmers who decide to take on the family farms have difficulty managing finance and grants etc for the farm. There is also an issue where they live, because a second family home can only be built on the farm if there is evidence it can support two generations.

Farmer's retiring/leaving the industry can lead to a loss of knowledge of land management. This is a particular concern as upland farms have an ageing population.

Transport: The cost of farmers transport has increased with the increase of tax on 4x4 vehicles. However farmers need these vehicles for work. Haulage companies are also being to struggle with the increase in fuel costs.

Concerns expressed include:

- Defra are paying farmers not to farm;
- Planners appear to resist new development;
- AWM seem to favour market towns and urban areas;
- AONB focuses on education only;
- National Trust has a mainly urban membership;
- Natural England are "micro-managing" some aspects of farming.

5. Policy and practices

Interventions: Businesses and communities are robust in the uplands but they do need interventions from government agencies to progress. There should be a bottom-up approach to interventions; listening to the local community.

West Midlands Rural Renaissance is addressing key issues in the upland areas. Rural Regeneration Zone in the West Midlands is a key delivery vehicle in Herefordshire & Shropshire. It is independent and offers different solutions but doesn't have an upland focus and doesn't treat the uplands as being different from other rural areas. A "European Rural Champion" should be introduced.

Grants & funding: There can be tensions within the community when large grants are seen to go to the "usual suspects". Local funding could be devolved but the community need to work collaboratively.

Redundant building grants on farms can encourage business start up. The uplands could be missing opportunities of mainstream funding. Accessing different streams of funding can be difficult if you have limited networks in the uplands.

Policies: There is a lack of joined up thinking especially where others have different briefs e.g. wildlife, farming and biodiversity. There needs to be clearer policy messages to farmers and hard to reach group. The different policies and delivery mechanisms and administrative borders get in the way.

Policies need to encourage economic re-use and not market housing. Councils should encourage affordable housing.

The LEADER programme promotes community cohesion and is based on the legacy of farmers helping each other. It could also be slightly altered for sparse/upland areas. However other sources of funding are needed. There is a desire for an innovative approach to funding and flexibility within EU measure-led programme. Also the community should be asked to develop a strategy.

Market Town programmes: Market Town programmes are local partnerships which make strategic decisions but the focus is mainly on the town. The programmes learn from best practice and evidence based investment.

6. Solutions

Communities: Each community needs a good local parish plan. Councils need to recognise service provision is harder and more expensive in uplands but people still need services and shouldn't be disadvantaged. Policies need to recognise social capital and sparsity and learn from rural. Identify why people come to the area and provide information for local businesses. Outreach services e.g. REG scheme should be common in the uplands. "Translation services" should be made available to farmers to help local farmers with form filling making grants and funding more accessible to people. Over regulation is possibly driving others away and other organisations e.g. NFU and CLA could provide help

Economies: There needs to be long term thinking about the upland economies rather than knee-jerk reactions. Micro and small businesses are important in the area. Social enterprise should be supported. Encouraging community buy-in e.g. community pubs and the emerging Transition Towns movement. A level playing field is needed for all businesses in the area e.g. the same high speed broadband throughout the region. There needs to be fair planning in rural areas and development control which balances diversification and business progression and protecting the natural environment. Regional Development Agencies could still do more to support the uplands. Businesses should be trusted especially concerning match funding.

Policies & practices: There needs to be rural proofing across all government departments and also upland and border proofing in the region.