

## 2 CHARACTERISTICS AND KEY ISSUES

### 2.1 Introduction

- 2.1.1 It is important to identify what is special about Herefordshire, and to draw out the key issues which policies should address. This is in order that a basis can be established for the local interpretation of national planning policy guidance and the Regional Spatial Strategy. This chapter sketches a profile of the County - noting the main historical processes that have shaped it and identifying the key social and environmental characteristics which make Herefordshire distinctive from other Counties, and which need to be reflected in policies.
- 2.1.2 Following the profile, key issues for the Plan are identified. Some have emerged from the historical profile and some arise from contemporary events. Other issues, as yet unanticipated, will arise within the Plan period. Taken together the key issues have assisted in tuning the Plan to the special circumstances of Herefordshire. They are frequently referred to and elaborated upon in the commentary and reasoned justification to the subsequent policy chapters.

### 2.2 Herefordshire's characteristics and qualities

- 2.2.1 An assessment of Herefordshire needs to cover:

- land form and natural resources
- historical roles and regional orientation
- population changes, social characteristics, settlement patterns
- patterns of economic activity
- land use, ownership, management
- environmental character and quality.

- 2.2.2 Further statistical information on these aspects can be found in the 'Herefordshire Economic Assessment 2005-2007', published jointly with the Learning and Skills Council, the Chamber of Commerce and Business Link, and in the 'State of Herefordshire Report' produced by the Herefordshire Partnership as part of the process of monitoring the Herefordshire Community Strategy.

#### *Land form and natural resources*

- 2.2.3 Herefordshire's physical form and landscape has been shaped, like anywhere else, by the geology, the resultant soil types and the vegetation they support. The 'footprint' of the County essentially comprises a combination of high hill ranges round much of the perimeter, pierced by the principal rivers, together with the lower-lying plains in the centre. The main river crossing points have provided a natural focus for the development of settlements. Within that basic pattern, an exceptionally diverse landscape and rich biodiversity have evolved.
- 2.2.4 The high fertility of the soils, particularly on lower lying land, has made food growing the County's primary activity right up to the present day. Timber production has also featured strongly, especially on the higher ground, and mineral working has made extensive use of gravel and hard rock reserves.

#### *Historical roles and regional orientation*

- 2.2.5 Herefordshire had relatively limited strategic communications until the industrial revolution. Before the medieval period, there were ancient trackways and a serviceable set of Roman roads (followed by many present-day main roads). Even in Roman and Norman times, the Wye was navigable for barging of heavy materials at least as far upstream as Bredwardine, as was the Lugg up to Marden. As weirs were introduced from medieval times, the Wye became a poorer thoroughfare until major navigation works were carried out from the mid 17th century.

The pre-industrial communications network was strongest in the east and centre of the County, with the Welsh border being less accessible. Hereford served as a military port and border sentry post on the Celtic frontier with Mercia. This Marches identity and a north-south orientation were also reflected in the ancient Offa's Dyke, the chain of border castles and other historic features. Such identity remains stronger in many ways than the modern regional idea of Herefordshire being part of the West Midlands. Overlaid on this history are the ecclesiastical and administrative roles associated with a cathedral city and its hinterland, complemented by a quality of almost monastic retreat along the border with Wales. Herefordshire's associations are strongest with its neighbours, Worcestershire and Shropshire in the West Midlands region, with Gloucestershire in the South West region, and with Wales. This is evident in the main transport axes.

- 2.2.6 The industrial era has had a relatively limited impact on the County, with few major manufacturing enterprises developing and many businesses still being associated with primary activities such as farming and minerals. Early industries consisted of mainly small-scale rural enterprises associated with land management. The Wye remained an important inland waterway until well into the 20th Century, allowing the import of raw materials not available in the County and the export of local resources and products. It was supplemented briefly by the Herefordshire and Gloucestershire Canal from the late 18th Century.
- 2.2.7 The absence of coal (except in the Dean fringe) disadvantaged Herefordshire during the early industrial revolution and encouraged the development of tramroads as supply routes from South Wales. The later railways reinforced Hereford's central role in the County, creating a network radiating in most directions. The City's commercial and administrative importance grew accordingly, making it a gateway and service centre for a sub-region extending well beyond the County boundary – a role that continues today. Subsequent road developments have largely replicated the rail network, with the exception of the M50 motorway which cuts across the radial grain in the south-east corner, to link South Wales with the Midlands.

*Population changes, social characteristics and settlement patterns*

- 2.2.8 Herefordshire's population is 177,800 (2004 mid year estimate) – relatively low for a large County. Herefordshire has one of the five lowest county population densities in England. The population distribution is again classic in form. Hereford, with about 54,850 people, sits at the centre. The satellite market towns are spaced out with a still almost mediaeval regularity. The only gap in the pattern is at Ewyas Harold which, though in the right place, never developed beyond village size. Together the market towns contain a population of around 36,800.
- 2.2.9 The remaining population live in nucleated villages or smaller settlements, farms and other isolated properties that are characteristic of much of Herefordshire. Recent trends in population movement have seen a considerable exodus from urban areas, both inside and beyond the County, mostly to recognisable villages within the immediate catchment of the main towns. Although the trend to the depopulation of the remoter rural areas experienced for much of the post-war period has now been reversed, there is still a net out-migration of young adults from the County in search of wider opportunities for employment and higher education. Herefordshire has also become a popular destination for the retired, for holiday homes and second homes and, in some areas, for out-of-County commuting.
- 2.2.10 Herefordshire's population has an older age profile than that for England and Wales, with more retired people and fewer persons of working age. Between 1991 and 2004 the population increased by 17,400 or 11%, entirely due to net inward migration into the County mainly from other parts of the West Midlands and the South East. This rate of growth was faster than that experienced by the rest of England and Wales.
- 2.2.11 Although Herefordshire is ranked 192<sup>nd</sup> out of 354 local authorities by the ODPM's 2004 Index of Multiple Deprivation, there are areas of poverty and deprivation within the County. Concentrations of the most deprived areas are shown to be within Hereford (South Wye) and Leominster. Conversely, the least deprived wards are concentrated to the east of the County, directly north and west of Hereford and around Ross-on-Wye.

### *Patterns of economic activity*

- 2.2.12 The narrow economic base inherited from pre-industrial times largely persists. Dependency on food production and processing, rural resource management, administrative services and tourism is still evident and a potential source of economic vulnerability, especially in the remoter rural areas. Hereford and the market towns have diversified to some extent into specialised manufacturing and service sectors.
- 2.2.13 This historical lack of industrial diversification and development reflects poor access both to the main markets and also from sources of raw or partly-processed materials. This situation has not significantly changed and as a consequence, the attraction of significant numbers of footloose or new industries is unlikely to be a major component of economic development in the County. Adjacent areas have better infrastructure and often receive higher grant assistance through regeneration and European budgets. In the service sector, the County is not noted for the presence of headquarters or regional offices of well-known firms.
- 2.2.14 The rural economy is of particular concern in Herefordshire, with agriculture and associated activity as the traditional staple sector. Linked businesses such as farm equipment sales and servicing, chemicals and fertilisers, transport, and land-based advisory services are all vulnerable to agricultural decline, as are rural communities generally. The impact of BSE and latterly the foot and mouth outbreak has exacerbated the situation and the current national crisis is keenly felt in the County, although its impacts vary from area to area. Foot and mouth has served to emphasise the inter-dependencies with such sectors as rural tourism. Marginal hill farming is crucial to the County's peripheral landscapes but especially susceptible to market upheavals and subsidy removal. Diversification – particularly into tourism – may provide marginal improvements but will not prevent structural decline.
- 2.2.15 The expected reform of the Common Agricultural Policy is likely to shift the emphasis towards agri-environment schemes and the promotion of less intensive farming. Herefordshire will need to be geared up to respond and is probably well placed. The organic and sustainable agriculture movement is already long-established and the remaining small-scale farm landscape lends itself to this approach. The more labour-intensive methods could also provide an engine for rural employment and regeneration.
- 2.2.16 The vulnerability of the Herefordshire economy is reflected in various indicators. Average wages are consistently around the lowest of any county in the region; the average annualised earnings in Herefordshire are around £6,600 lower than the national figure. In addition, employees in the County work longer hours than their regional or national counterparts. Outside agriculture, more employment is in declining sectors and less in growth sectors than the national economy. Lone self employment features strongly in the Herefordshire economy, partly reflecting the prevalence of small-scale farming. The business size profile is characterised by a few large employers, mainly in the vulnerable food processing sector, very few medium sized enterprises and a great number of small firms. There are also workforce issues to consider, both in terms of quantity and quality: Herefordshire's rate of unemployment is consistently below that of the West Midlands and Great Britain, whilst GCSE results gained at schools and colleges in the County continue to be amongst the highest in the country and remain above regional averages.
- 2.2.17 Reflecting these indicators and many others, Herefordshire is covered by a range of European, national and regional funding programmes aimed at addressing a range of economic and social issues in specific areas:
- Objective 2
  - Sure Start
  - Rural Regeneration Zone
  - European Regional Development Fund (new programmes from 2007-13)
  - European Social Fund (new programmes from 2007-13)
  - European Rural Development Programme (new programmes from 2007-13)

- National Lottery
- Market Town Initiative
- Redundant Buildings Grant.

*Land use, ownership and management*

- 2.2.18 The County's overall land use patterns have changed little, with settlements occupying a relatively small proportion of the land surface. As in most towns, the significant changes have been on the fringe, with farmland switched to housing and industrial/commercial development. Outside the settlements, agriculture and woodland naturally predominate.
- 2.2.19 The pattern of rural land holding is mixed, with some historic estates and extensive ownership by business institutions, but still many small and medium 'family' farms and a notable incidence of small-holdings remaining from an era previous to the rise of agri-business. A greater proportion of agricultural land in the County is owner occupied and a lower proportion rented than in England as a whole. Farm management is largely in private hands but often tied to government intervention, with an increasing emphasis on balancing commodity production with environmental management.

*Environmental character and quality*

- 2.2.20 The patterns of human occupation, activity and land management described above are most strongly reflected in the diverse landscape character and rich biodiversity of the County. The County Landscape Character Assessment, developed in tandem with the Plan, has catalogued this diversity and demonstrated the need for policy to be well differentiated if locally-distinctive features are to be not only safeguarded but also perpetuated and where appropriate enhanced.
- 2.2.21 There is no unifying character or vernacular style to the County's landscape and buildings. More typical are relatively small areas with common features. Areas with common character are not always grouped in one locality, but may be found in different parts of the County. Large tracts of the landscape are of high quality. The Wye Valley and Malvern Hills have national AONB designation, whilst the western border with the Brecon Beacons National Park is of the highest quality but lacks any national designation. Above all, the historic pedigree of the landscape is clear. Many ancient local landscapes have survived remarkably intact, but are under continuous pressure. The remoter areas have a continuity and tranquillity which is becoming increasingly scarce in England.

*What remains distinctive about Herefordshire?*

- 2.2.22 Despite the pressures of modern life, much of the traditional physical character of Herefordshire remains, particularly away from the larger towns and their nearby satellite villages. The economic structure is still strongly rooted in land-based activity, but the social structure underlying it is changing inevitably. Much of the older rural society has disappeared as traditional agricultural employment has declined and land holdings have been amalgamated and passed into fewer ownerships. Hereford has progressively diversified its skill base away from the predominantly land-oriented disciplines, although the local employment opportunities cannot always use these skills.
- 2.2.23 Many villages close to towns have become largely dormitory settlements, sometimes absorbing new development which is unsympathetic to their character and previous function. Unlike in other areas of the UK, town and country are still separate but they now have modern, complex, and interdependent roles at variance with the old producer-market relationship. The physical fabric of the market towns and surrounding countryside has largely survived, perhaps in spite of the social changes, although some areas of arable farmland and intensive food production have created industrial farming landscapes.
- 2.2.24 The greatest pressures for modernisation have been felt most keenly in Hereford, where tensions arise between protecting the historic fabric and accommodating the commercial,

service and transport developments needed to support its role as a sub-regional shopping, service and administrative centre. Issues arise now as to whether or not the City has the physical capacity to expand significantly without incurring major penalties such as severe traffic congestion.

#### *Scope for conservation and innovation*

2.2.25 The period up to 2011 is expected to see social and technological change accelerating in directions which cannot be anticipated. The Plan aims to protect what is considered best from the past, while seeking to accommodate innovation within a framework of sustainable development. It must identify the forces at work and the constraints on, and opportunities for, beneficial change. These are some of the reasons for compiling a list of the key issues at this point in the Plan.

## **2.3 Key issues**

### *2.3.1 Strategic development issues*

- The requirement to accommodate Herefordshire's share of the regional allocation of new dwellings, and its distributional implications.
- The variable capacity of the main settlements and countryside to absorb new development, based on a wide range of sustainability criteria.
- The availability of sites which meet these criteria, once account has been taken of sites already committed, allocated in plans, or expected to arise outside the allocation process ('windfalls').
- The geographical variations in the pressures for and constraints upon development in different parts of the County.
- The need to promote greater balance between provision of homes, jobs and community services and facilities.
- The need for the right type and scale of development to meet local needs in those rural areas not selected for strategic allocations of development.
- The need to identify brownfield sites and bring forward, for appropriate new uses and development, those which meet sustainability and other planning criteria, and can be developed economically.

### *2.3.2 Housing issues*

- The provision of affordable housing to meet identified needs in both urban and rural areas.
- The provision of a range of housing types to meet the County's housing needs, including those of younger and older people.
- The limited scope for changing distribution patterns for new housing, given the high level of existing commitments, and the high rate of rural windfall development in the recent past.
- The importance of meeting local needs in rural areas (including the use of rural exceptions policies), to prevent further loss of the indigenous members of the local communities.
- The significant proportion of the housing stock taken by in-migrants, retirement, second homes and holiday homes.
- The potential roles of density variations, mixed use, multiple occupation, conversions, homes-over-shops, and other housing management measures in reducing new land-take and increasing re-use of existing buildings and sites.
- The need to match housing provision to employment provision.
- The potentially increasing role of temporary or semi-permanent homes in accommodating people with low-incomes, e.g. in caravan sites, Traveller sites, New Age settlements, etc.

### 2.3.3 *Economic activity issues*

- The need to identify sites for the development of new enterprises and creation of new employment opportunities, and to provide for the expansion of existing businesses.
- The need to match economic development opportunities to housing development, in order to minimise unnecessary journeys to work or reduce their length.
- The need to identify key locations for major new or incoming businesses which are well serviced and accessible by all modes of transport; and the continued suitability or otherwise of existing major industrial sites for modern needs.
- The need to address in both planning and economic development initiatives issues of labour availability and quality, recognising the above average educational achievements being attained through the County's schools and colleges.
- The poor state of the agricultural sector and the likely impact of reforms to the Common Agricultural Policy.
- The high dependence on sectors such as agriculture and food processing, and tourism.
- The need for more flexible approaches in rural areas to the promotion of smaller-scale businesses based on indigenous resources (farmland, woodland, water, heritage etc.) which meet sustainability criteria.
- The national renaissance of rail freight and the availability of opportunities to protect and promote rail access to businesses in the County.
- The impact of changes in retail patterns on traditional town centres and village shops.

### 2.3.4 *Accessibility and transport issues*

- The remoteness of the County in regional terms, and the relative remoteness of many rural areas in relation to the nearest towns.
- The need for greater integration of different modes of transport if desirable modal shifts are to be achieved, and more transport-efficient land use patterns.
- The importance of reducing the need to travel, and hence reducing traffic volumes and their environmental impacts.
- The transport focus on Hereford, mainly as a destination but also for through traffic, with resultant pressure on a few key transport arteries.
- The concentration of road traffic congestion on and approaching the Wye crossings in Hereford, into which most north-south movement is funnelled.
- The nature of the rail network, with existing and potential capacity problems for the levels of traffic anticipated over the plan period.
- The need to further develop safe cycling and walking networks, especially in the towns, to enhance the contribution of these modes to integrated transport provision.
- How to secure better access to facilities and services for all groups within the County, regardless of income, age, physical ability and gender.

### 2.3.5 *Environmental protection, enhancement and conservation issues*

- The need to ensure environmental sustainability criteria are built into all policies, that the environmental impacts of policies are monitored, and that where possible corrective action is instituted where adverse impacts are identified.
- Poor air quality related to key road traffic hubs in the larger towns, particularly around Hereford city centre, and to emissions from some industries.
- The generally high quality of surface and ground water resources and their sensitivity to pollution.
- The generally high quality of much of the County's food-producing land, albeit with localised problems of soil erosion and pollution, and the sensitivity of the more marginal farmland to changes in the agricultural market and farming subsidies.

- Dependence on conventional energy sources, too little energy generated from renewable sources, and low energy efficiency partly resulting from the dispersed nature of development in the County.
- The importance of tranquillity to the attractiveness of the countryside and the need to prevent its deterioration due to increased noise and other disturbance.
- Pressures on landscape character and quality, wildlife, and the historic man-made environment in rural areas.
- The need to maintain, enhance and increase semi-natural habitat, particularly grassland and woodland through site protection and appropriate and sensitive management.
- Development pressures on the historic fabric of Hereford, the market towns and villages.
- The urgent need to identify, record and, where possible, conserve the County's archaeological assets before development occurs.
- Incomplete knowledge of the County's diverse wildlife resources and their vulnerability.
- The need to manage floodplain use to allow only appropriate development, to optimise the natural benefits of flooding, and to limit abstraction from watercourses to levels compatible with landscape and biodiversity interests.

#### 2.3.6 *Recreation, leisure and tourism issues*

- Determining which types of tourism are appropriate to the County generally and to each locality, and avoiding tourism development which compromises the indigenous qualities of the County, especially its scenery, wildlife, historic assets and rural tranquillity.
- How to enable further sustainable tourism development to help support the local economy, especially in rural areas where other sectors are in decline.
- The need to manage pressures arising from intensive visitor activity in the most scenic parts of the County.
- How to cater for the sports and leisure needs of the County's population in ways which provide convenient and safe access for all.
- The scope for further promotion of the County's informal recreation resources to improve quality of life for residents and attractiveness for visitors alike.
- Balancing the wishes and needs of recreation users against those of residents and land managers, and against the sensitivity/robustness of the environment.
- How to manage proposed new access rights to open countryside.

#### 2.3.7 *Minerals and waste issues*

- The need to meet the County's contribution to regional allocations for mineral production while encouraging reduced consumption and the use of alternative products.
- The currently exclusive movement of minerals and waste by road.
- The low remaining landfill capacity for waste disposal and the resultant pressure for greater recycling capacity and waste export to other areas.

#### 2.3.8 *Community services issues*

- The erosion of local services and facilities in rural areas and their increasing concentration in the towns.
- The potential impact of utility infrastructure such as pylons, wind turbines, and telecommunications equipment on the environment.