

The Rural Access Partnership

What is it?

The Rural Access Partnership is a strategic partnership group with a remit to provide a co-ordinated strategic direction to improving access to services in Herefordshire. This will involve identifying and managing strategic links between access to services initiatives across partnership groups/organisations/sectors and carrying out *joint services strategic planning and commissioning** to coordinate service delivery and enable the integration of service delivery where appropriate.

The Rural Access Partnership will develop new solutions to providing services in rural areas and build on and coordinate existing access to services initiatives to ensure rural communities are able to access the services they need.

Why was it set up?

Improved access to services is a key local issue in Herefordshire; it is identified in three of the four themes of the Community Strategy for Herefordshire. There are a number of initiatives ongoing across Herefordshire Partnership that relate to and contribute to improving access to services, but they have been progressing independently without a co-ordinated strategic direction.

The Rural Access Partnership was set up through the Herefordshire Partnership Chief Executive Group to bring together the various access to services initiatives into one new coordinated and strategic approach. This will reduce the risk of duplication of activity and resources, and provide clear leadership in this arena.

How does it differ from the Herefordshire Access to Services Partnership?

The main difference between the Rural Access Partnership (RAP) and Herefordshire Access to Services Partnership (HASP) is that the RAP is a more strategic group which brings together the various access to services initiatives ongoing across Herefordshire Partnership (including HASP), while HASP is more of an operational group with a specific Delivery plan and responsibilities.

HASP was established through a contract between Herefordshire Council and Advantage West Midlands and it supports and develops projects aimed at improving access to services through grant funding. HASP has a specific Delivery plan and responsibilities, Advantage West Midlands expect a certain number of outputs to be achieved through the funding they provide HASP (HASP has funding to 2008/09).

* **Joint services strategic planning and commissioning:** This process involves working together to assess the needs of rural communities in Herefordshire, reaching a collective and agreed understanding of need, identifying available resources, planning how to use the resources, and coordinating service delivery to respond to identified needs. This may mean developing new services, creative use of existing services/resources, pooling budgets, working together in new ways, de-commissioning existing services to make way for new ones that are fit for purpose, etc. The benefits of this approach include: avoiding duplication of services; ensuring value for money and efficiency; developing co-ordinated services; sharing best practice; sharing expertise; and sharing intelligence about needs.

While HASP has received very positive feedback from Advantage West Midlands on how well it has developed projects and delivered outputs, the group has struggled get buy-in from key partners and has not had the standing to influence the wider partnership arena.

While the option of broadening the remit of HASP to take on a more strategic role was considered, it is clear that taking on additional responsibilities (such as the Herefordshire In Touch Forward Strategy and the multi use facilities work) would have a serious impact on the group's capacity to deliver its Delivery plan. In addition to this, while the membership of the HASP steering group is fit for purpose, it is not broad or senior enough to give the co-ordinated strategic direction to access to services and rural issues that is needed. Therefore, it was agreed that it would be more appropriate to set up an overarching strategic group with a membership that reflects this role (i.e. the Rural Access Partnership) and allow HASP to continue in its more operational role as one of the RAP's working groups. RAP's direct reporting line to the Chief Executive Group will ensure that it has the strategic influence that HASP has been unable to exercise.

To ensure that RAP and HASP do not duplicate activity, the chair of HASP will be a member of RAP.

Where does it fit within the Herefordshire Partnership structure?

The Rural Access Partnership will have a direct reporting line to the Herefordshire Partnership Chief Executive Group (the key decision making body of Herefordshire Partnership). This will ensure that the Rural Access Partnership has the standing to influence policy and the way services are provided in rural Herefordshire. The Rural Access Partnership will act as the Chief Executive Group's advisory and specialist group for access to services and rural issues/policies/projects etc. The Rural Access Partnership will be expected to report to the Chief Executive Group regularly.

What access to services initiatives will the Rural Access Partnership take a strategic lead on?

Multi Use Facilities Framework – Consultants have written a report on a Strategic Investment Framework for Multi Use Facilities in Herefordshire. Multi Use Facilities are a key aspect of providing access to services and there are some excellent opportunities for their development in Herefordshire through Rural Regeneration Zone funding. The report draws together a number of strategic conclusions and makes recommendations for taking forward the development of multi use facilities in Herefordshire. The report highlights the need to have clear leadership and management arrangements in place and suggests that the Rural Access Partnership should provide:

- Overall strategic guidance and direction for the programme
- Approval for recommendations for communities to be supported in developing their project proposals
- Agreement for indicative funding levels for projects
- Approval for projects to go forward for funding applications
- Strong communication links to Herefordshire Partnership, in particular to the Chief Executives Group

Herefordshire Access to Services Partnership (HASP) – HASP was established through a contract between Herefordshire Council and Advantage West Midlands (funding to 2008/09). This group superseded the Herefordshire Rural Transport Partnership, but it has a wider remit, developing broader solutions to improving access to services than solely transport based. HASP supports and develops projects aimed at improving access to services through grant funding. HASP has a specific Delivery plan and responsibilities, Advantage West Midlands expect a certain number of outputs to be achieved through the funding they provide HASP (HASP has funding to 2008/09).

Herefordshire In Touch (HIT) Programme – The HIT Programme was a multi-sector initiative with the aim to develop ICT for the benefit of Herefordshire. The programme was led by the HIT Programme Board but this disbanded when the programme ended in March 2007. There are however a number of initiatives remaining that need to be seen through, and the Rural Access Partnership has the responsibility to take the strategic lead on these (effectively taking over from the HIT Programme Board). The HIT Programme Forward Strategy outlines the actions and next steps that need to be carried out, including considering the future role of CAPs and E-Gateway as part of approaches to service delivery and community access to information.

- CAPs are Community Access Points that provide subsidised broadband access, learning opportunities and online advice to individuals and groups in rural parts of Herefordshire (21 CAPs have opened across Herefordshire). The CAPs will require ongoing support to ensure that they are sustained beyond the funding period. The HIT Programme Forward Strategy recommends greater integration between CAPs and multi use facilities. It also recommends greater interaction between stakeholders including Herefordshire Council and the voluntary and community sector to ensure that best practice and lessons learnt are not lost, and to help shape the direction of community facilities as a vehicle for ICT and online activity for the hard to reach and identified target groups.
- The E-Gateway project was a venture between partners to source an e-Gateway technology platform for the delivery of information and e-services to Herefordshire citizens. The E-Gateway provides a standard way of delivering information and services online, utilising the power of the web to deliver content for people to look at quickly and cost effectively including youth services, business applications, eGovernment and connections to the voluntary and community sector. It increases access to services and opportunities for local people, particularly in isolated rural areas, improving the competitiveness of the local economy. The NHS, Visit Herefordshire, and Herefordshire schools are hosted by the eGateway with Herefordshire Council, Herefordshire Partnership and Herefordshire benefiting from content management services. More recent sites include the <http://www.welcometoherefordshire.com/> migrant workers website and <http://www.myherefordshire.com/> which is the county portal bringing together communities, information and services from organisations across Herefordshire. The E-Gateway project requires buy-in from major strategic partners to ensure that its potential as a legacy is realised. Engagement and investment from partners will be required to generate a critical mass of content that is both relevant and of interest to the local community.

The HIT Programme Forward Strategy also highlights the need for a strategic ICT influencing function for Herefordshire to identify and address gaps between HIT legacies and future strategic need, to commission and deliver research to assess future ICT needs to maximise the opportunities facing Herefordshire, and to map parallel ICT activities and projects in Herefordshire in order to maximise and sustain value from existing investments. Taking the strategic lead on the implementation of the HIT Programme Forward Strategy is clearly a major role for the Rural Access Partnership and may require a dedicated sub-group to support this role, a workshop with HIT Programme stakeholders may be a useful step forward to map out the issues and next steps.

Herefordshire Thinks Rural and the Rural Excellence Mentoring Scheme – The Herefordshire Thinks Rural report (which makes recommendations on how to identify and meet the needs of communities in rural Herefordshire and achieve a more systematic and effective consideration of the rural context when designing and delivering services) was completed in 2005 and was progressed via the Rural Mentoring Scheme which reported to a small Steering Group consisting of the Leader of the Council and the Director of the Council's Adult and Community Services directorate. The Mentoring Scheme ended in March 2007, but a number of actions remain, particularly around a strategic approach to providing services in a rural area and geographic mapping. The report identifies the need to gather and map quantitative and qualitative geographical evidence to assess differential needs within County, and to build a geographical dimension into data collection about delivery accessibility, impact and outcomes of services across the County. The Rural Mentoring Scheme identified the Rural Access Partnership as a key component to achieving this. The scheme also concluded that the Rural Access Partnership could: plan a response to future rural challenges and set out the steps to implementing it; and encourage innovation, creativity and collaboration in meeting the needs of rural communities.

Cross Border – the Cross border memorandum of understanding between Central Wales and the West Midlands has been signed. Work on cross-border issues with Wales is currently underway, and there is a specific rural/service provision aspect. Cross border difficulties also exist between county boundaries. There is a need to confirm a structure to take this forward in Herefordshire.