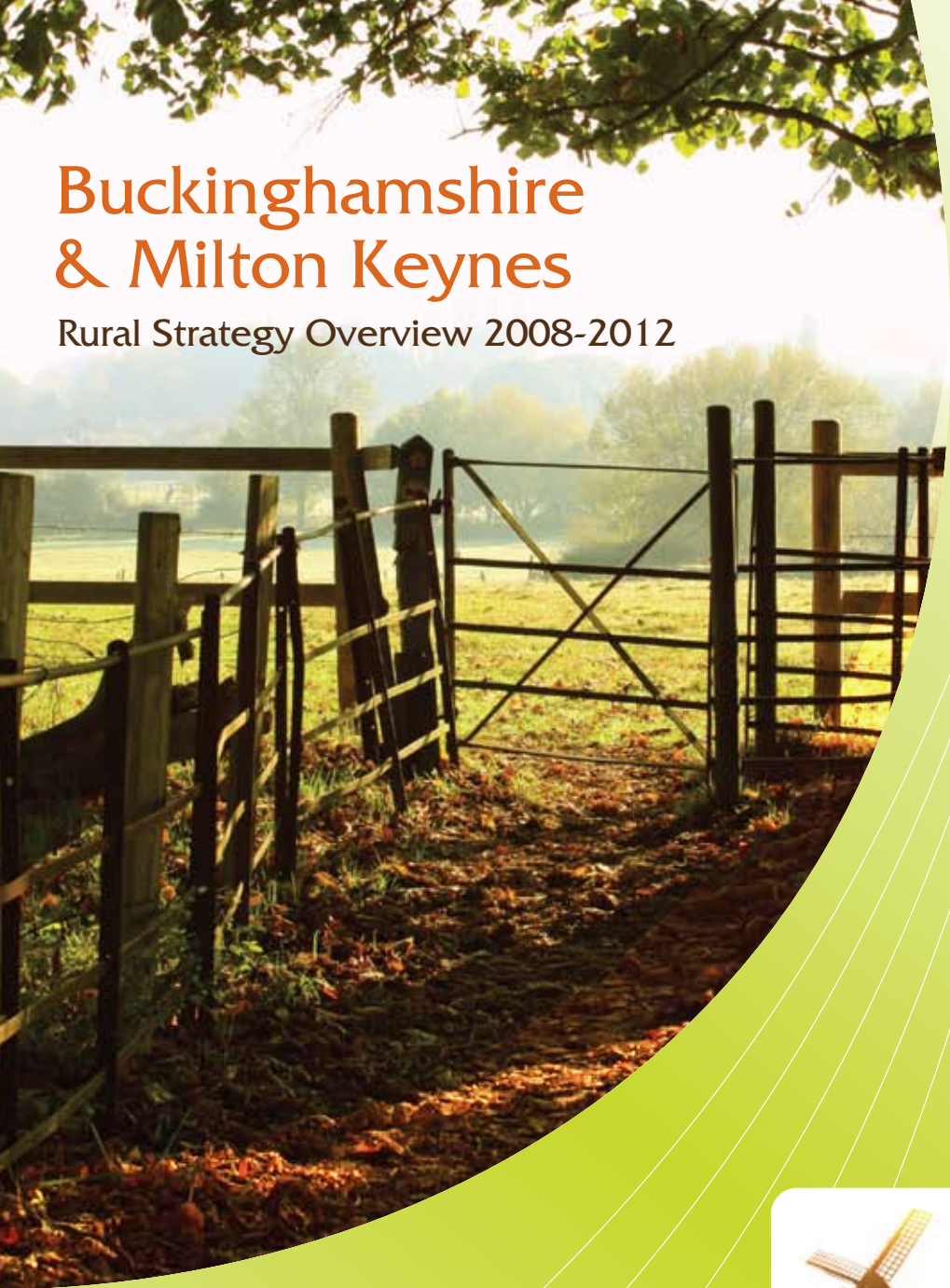


Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes

Rural Strategy Overview 2008-2012



Executive Summary

The Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Rural Strategy is a coherent countywide rural policy framework for the period 2008-2012, complete with a target-driven Action Plan. Based on a thoroughly researched evidence base, the Strategy provides a detailed overview of the state of rural affairs in the county, whilst clearly and concisely identifying the most pertinent issues for future attention. With its Action Plan, the Strategy will be a powerful tool, acting as a focus for positive action, enabling others to challenge and contribute to the delivery of its priorities. Rural communities are changing, and the Strategy is the core driver in managing this transition.

The Rural Strategy reflects the needs and aspirations of people who live and work in rural Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. Over 100 people and organisations contributed to this strategy - through public meetings, stakeholder workshops and written feedback.

This document is only the first step, but it is vital in ensuring organisations and local communities, working in partnership, act to secure a sustainable future for our rural communities.

The state of rural Buckinghamshire today

The Strategy identifies six Priority Themes agreed by all as the most important areas for action. Alongside these are several 'key considerations' – issues that have been identified as areas of need and opportunity, which relate directly to all of the Priority Themes. The six Priority Themes are:

- 1. Access to Services and Facilities**
- 2. Transport**
- 3. Rural Housing**
- 4. Countryside and Environment**
- 5. Economy and Enterprise**
- 6. Community Self-confidence**

Access to Services and Facilities

Rural areas of Buckinghamshire still offer many of the aspects associated with an idyllic life in the countryside. Yet the continuing rationalisation and centralisation of local services, many of which have acted as the focus for community activity, places this under threat. Within this theme, a number of key issues are identified:

- Post Office provision remains satisfactory, yet the imminent closure programme will reduce service provision to local communities

- Rural communities continue to face the loss of local services such as banks, job centres pubs and village stores
- Access to hospital and GP services, as well as NHS dental facilities, is a significant challenge for rural residents
- Access to primary schools in rural areas remains good, but not for secondary schools exacerbating accessibility concerns
- Energy choices in rural areas are limited through lack of access to mains gas supplies
- Broadband connectivity, performance and coverage remains patchy in rural areas

Transport

At first glance, Buckinghamshire is a well-connected county, situated at the heart of the South East motorway infrastructure and linked to a number of major airports. However, this is not true for rural communities and transport has been identified as the single most important rural concern:

- The road system is operating close to capacity; private car ownership is high, whilst public transport access is poor

- Use of demand-response transport, taxis and walking is low due to a lack of public sector investment
- Rural areas suffer from poor road maintenance and safety concerns related to speeding and excessive HGV use
- Increases in air travel has heightened awareness of noise and air pollution as well as revised flight path proposals
- The need to encourage community led transport solutions remains a high priority

Rural Housing

Buckinghamshire is a popular place to live with an excellent location in the South East. The range of housing available in rural areas is wide, moving from one-person flats to large mansions and there is a generally well-maintained social housing stock.

However, enormous pressures and concerns surrounding rural housing remain, recently highlighted by the 'credit crunch' and its effect on the property market. These include:

- High house prices are frequently unaffordable to those with local connections
- Planning regulations which seek to retain and protect rural landscapes unnecessarily restrict appropriate housing stock expansion
- Good quality rental properties, particularly social housing, are in short supply
- Fuel poverty is a prevalent issue due to poor insulation of older properties and a lack of affordable fuel supplies
- Availability of accommodation suitable for an ageing population along with associated support services is a key concern for the future
- Growth Area developments will need to respect housing contribution to character and 'sense of place'

Countryside and Environment

Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes is blessed with a wonderful natural environment, which acts as a benefit to all, positively improving health and well-being and also acting as community and economic asset. Yet, an increasing number of challenges threaten the sustainability of our rural communities,

in a county where the rural-urban fringe is becoming more apparent.

These include:

- CO2 emissions remain a real concern, particularly with the reliance on private cars
- Increasing numbers of visitors damage the natural environment through associated congestion and land degradation
- The MKSM Growth Area offers a unique opportunity to shape new communities but needs to be appropriately managed
- The tension between conservation and flexibility of land-use planning remains unresolved
- Traditional rural industries such as agriculture, continue to decline, and rural retail provision remains threatened
- The large number of rural commuters threaten the sustainability of local economies
- Whilst agricultural diversification has proved successful, general business/industry diversification opportunities remain under-utilised
- The MKSM Growth Area offers potential new employment opportunities which will require flexible planning policies to realise
- Local food continues to provide an excellent opportunity to increase economic activity and contribute to environmental sustainability

Economy and Enterprise

The rural economy in Buckinghamshire is significant and is the focus for much of rural life. The emergence of new opportunities and increases in diversification of former land-based operations has seen a greater sense of optimism return to the countryside. The continued success of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) too is good news for rural areas. Yet, ever-increasing demand for food and fuels on a global scale has had a major effect on prices at a national level; this will likely continue to present challenges and opportunities for the rural economy and agriculture in particular. Priority issues include:

Community Self-confidence

Community life in rural Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes embodies many of the elements that make the countryside a favourable place to live; high skill and educational attainment levels, low crime and relative prosperity. These factors contribute to an overall sense of community that is strong in confidence with a sense of belonging – yet rural community well-being is increasingly susceptible to change.

- High levels of economic out-migration tests community cohesion as towns and villages are perceived as dormitory settlements

- Certain levels of crime and anti-social behaviour are prominent issues, particularly to vulnerable groups such as the young and elderly
- The agricultural community continues to perceive a lack of support when faced with issues such as fly-tipping and illegal occupation
- Worrying levels of masked deprivation are apparent that existing research fails to recognise
- Voluntary sector support continues to be tested through increased local authority service devolution, often with insufficient funding/infrastructure
- Transport continues to act as a barrier to social inclusion in rural areas, particularly for the young and elderly
- The role of Parish and District Councils remains vital in securing greater community empowerment

By assessing these issues and recognising existing work that is being undertaken in our rural communities, the Strategy identifies the most pertinent 'opportunities for action', which are included in a targeted Action Plan.

In addition, the 'key considerations' that have been agreed affecting all Priority Themes are:

- **Environmental Sustainability** – an over-arching issue requiring sustainable practices and processes to be built into all relevant targeted actions
- **Young and Elderly People** – the key age groups that are often most at risk to rural disadvantage within all areas
- **Milton Keynes and South Midlands (MKSM) Growth Area** – a challenge to maintaining rural life, but also the unique opportunity to tackle and alleviate rural inequality and disadvantage
- **Technology** – enabling effective use of technology is essential for tackling many of the issues in the Priority Themes
- **Health and Well Being** – a key component of community vitality which needs to be the outcome for targeted actions

A New Rural Action Plan

An Action Plan has been developed for the Rural Strategy, and is a key element in ensuring practical change is achieved. The Action Plan sets out the actions and outputs that can be implemented to meet the challenges set out in the Rural Strategy itself. The Action Plan is a working document - the projects it suggests will be worked up in more detail, and revised and updated over time to reflect new priorities and developments.

Some features of the Action Plan are:

Defining the future role of Buckinghamshire Rural Affairs Group (BRAG)

The Action Plan is a key driver for the future work of BRAG, helping it to focus on the most pressing issues and better demonstrate the attributes of rural life in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes.

Monitoring and review – an evolutionary document

The Strategy will be reviewed and monitored frequently. By ensuring the Rural Strategy and Action Plan are up-to-date, and agreed actions are in place, the relevance of the Rural Strategy is

maintained and its value, therefore, to the rural agenda is assured.

An independent exercise

BRAG will play a pivotal role, acting as an independent body able to assess the relevance of the Rural Strategy, as well as to monitor the Action Plan and report back on the effectiveness of its targeted actions through its established Issue Groups.

Effective ‘rural proofing’

The Rural Strategy enables BRAG to hold statutory agencies and service deliverers to account in ensuring that the needs of rural areas are properly considered.

Alignment to local governance

By linking the Action Plan to the most relevant national and local Local Area Agreement indicators, BRAG is able to attribute and measure the ‘rural element’, further reinforcing the rural contribution to vitality and prosperity.

Action Plan*

Priority Theme 1: Access to Services and Facilities

Priority Theme Opportunity for Action

1. Maintain and improve the sustainability of community services including Post Offices, shops, pubs etc
2. Establish 'community anchors' in all rural communities
3. Develop new outreach facilities including key community services
4. Encourage the transfer of surplus public sector facilities to rural communities
5. Improve medical, GP and primary care service provision

Priority Theme 2: Transport

Priority Theme Opportunity for Action

1. Seek wherever possible to reduce reliance on the private motorcar
2. Address inadequacy of public transport provision
3. Improve safety on rural roads and village lanes
4. Address car parking needs in rural towns and villages
5. Tackling hospital transport provision

*Excerpt only. Full Action Plan is within main Strategy document. Please see contact details on inside back cover to obtain a copy.

Priority Theme 3: Rural Housing

Priority Theme Opportunity for Action

1. Improve provision of affordable housing in rural towns and villages
2. Address issues of fuel poverty and raise quality of existing rural housing stock
3. Improve housing stock variety to support community diversity
4. Ensure Growth Agenda developments are appropriate in character, scale and quality

Priority Theme 4: Countryside & Environment

1. Address the need for future developments to remain sustainable and sensitive rural character
2. Ensure appropriate management and conservation of natural environment
3. Ensure an over-arching response to Climate Change
4. Promote sustainable access and enjoyment of the countryside

Priority Theme 5: Economy and Enterprise

Priority Theme Opportunity for Action

- 1.** Ensure continued support in economic development in rural towns and villages
- 2.** Increase the role of Social Enterprise in rural community service and provision
- 3.** Support the role of tourism in rural areas and its associated economic opportunities
- 4.** Address rural educational inequality and rural skill retention and development
- 5.** Encourage further development of agriculture, forestry and local food production as key rural industries

Priority Theme 6: Community Self-Confidence

Priority Theme Opportunity for Action

- 1.** Address the ongoing threats to community cohesion in rural towns and villages
- 2.** Understand the nature of rural deprivation levels, particularly that which is concealed by traditional measurements
- 3.** Support increased community empowerment through Town and Parish Council role and autonomy
- 4.** Address ongoing issues of rural crime and anti-social behaviour
- 5.** Ensure the ongoing evolution of BRAG

More information

The Rural Strategy has been produced in partnership with a wide variety of rural organisations, stakeholders and individuals. Buckinghamshire County Council, Bucks Community Action and Milton Keynes Council have acted as the key partners and coordinated the development process to completion.

For more information on BRAG or to obtain a hard copy of the Rural Strategy and Action Plan, please contact:

Buckinghamshire County Council:

Chris Rawson on 01296 382743 or email
brag@buckscc.gov.uk

Buckinghamshire Community Action:

Michael Hunt on 01296 421036 or email
michael@bucks-comm-action.org.uk

Milton Keynes Council:

Jan Phillips on 01908 2522377 or email
Jan.Phillips@Milton-Keynes.gov.uk

The Strategy and Action Plan are also available as PDF attachments on the following websites:

www.buckscc.gov.uk

www.bucks-comm-action.org.uk

www.milton-keynes.gov.uk



BRAG

Buckinghamshire Rural Action Group
in partnership with Milton Keynes

