

SOLIHULL'S COUNTRYSIDE



2000 - 2005

SOLIHULL'S COUNTRYSIDE

FOREWORD

The countryside is a vital part of the special character of Solihull, as reflected in the Borough's motto "Urbs in Rure". It provides an attractive setting for surrounding urban areas, contributing to the quality of life locally. The character and quality of the countryside help to attract businesses to the Borough, and its rural areas offer a range of recreational opportunities for residents and visitors.

Like the rest of the Borough, the countryside faces considerable pressures for development. Its designation as Green Belt has prevented much inappropriate development, although some development of national importance or to meet local needs has taken place. I recognise that protection of the Green Belt, and especially the Meriden Gap, that area of the Green Belt between Solihull and Coventry, is particularly important.

Changes to farming, which has traditionally been responsible for managing the countryside, present a major challenge for the future. I believe that this Strategy, which contributes to the aims of Local Agenda 21 in Solihull, will help to ensure that the countryside remains an asset for the Borough for years to come.

Councillor Les Kyles
Chairman Planning Committee

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SUMMARY

Aim

To control and guide future change in Solihull's countryside in order to protect and enhance its character, whilst assisting the management of a diverse and prosperous rural economy, thereby contributing to the overall quality of life within the Borough.

The Measures

The strategy will cover the following areas:

- Safeguarding of the countryside for its own sake and as part of the Green Belt, and enhancement of local distinctiveness;
- Sustainable management of the countryside and the changes to the rural economy;
- Conservation and enhancement of the character of the countryside and the natural and historic environment;
- Improved access to the countryside and opportunities for leisure and recreation;
- Promotion of responsible use and awareness of the value of the countryside as a finite resource

Purpose

The purpose of the strategy is:

- To ensure recognition of the distinctive character of Solihull's countryside and its important strategic role;
- To provide a framework to ensure that future economic, social and environmental change respects the quality of the countryside;
- To increase awareness of the importance of the countryside resource and encourage partnerships which contribute to the quality of its stewardship.

The Benefits

The strategy will deliver the following benefits for Solihull's countryside:

- Positive proposals for the management and enhancement of the countryside;
- Protection of the countryside from inappropriate developments;
- Improved opportunities for people to enjoy the countryside;
- A framework for sustaining the future health of the rural economy.

2. INTRODUCTION

This strategy is concerned with Solihull's countryside, its present qualities and the changes and challenges it faces.

Two thirds of the Borough is countryside which plays an important role in shaping its image and character. Not only does it provide an attractive setting to many of Solihull's towns and villages, but its accessibility is important in enhancing the quality of life enjoyed by the Borough's residents.

Solihull's countryside also has an important role in a wider strategic planning sense. Its designation as Green Belt restricts the outward expansion of the West Midlands Conurbation and prevents its merging with the City of Coventry. The "Meriden Gap", that area of the Borough between the eastern edge of Birmingham and Solihull, and the western outskirts of Coventry, is of particular significance. It is vital to the attractiveness and competitiveness of the West Midlands that the character and openness of this relatively narrow band of countryside is maintained.

The need for a Countryside Strategy

The quality and attractiveness of the countryside has often been taken for granted. Because its character has been shaped by the farming industry, it is often assumed that the same industry will continue to protect this character in the future.

But the countryside is now a place of accelerating change. Agriculture is no longer the pastoral activity it once was, but has become more intensive and industrial in nature. Farmers are looking to new forms of enterprise to sustain their businesses. At the same time, people have become more mobile, seeking better access to the countryside with growing demands for its use for sport and recreation. In Solihull, urban development and influences have continued to affect surrounding areas of Green Belt.

Although the character of the countryside has taken many generations to shape and develop, it can quickly be damaged through insensitive development and change.

Whilst the Green Belt designation provides protection against unacceptable development, it cannot ensure effective long-term management of the countryside. What is required, therefore, is a different approach where change is anticipated and guided, not just through the control of development, but also by more positive programmes and partnerships involving all those with a stake in the Solihull countryside ie:

- The Council;
- Landowners and farmers;
- Parish Councils and other bodies representing the residents of the countryside;
- Voluntary groups;
- Environmental groups.

The preparation of this strategy meets the commitment by the Council explained in Proposal ENV2/1 of the Solihull Unitary Development Plan (UDP).

A common sense of purpose and direction is needed to provide an appropriate balance between the various economic, social and environmental interests and aspirations of different groups. It is the purpose of this Strategy, therefore, to set out the Council's initial view on how this balance should be best achieved.

Format and Links

The Strategy sets out an appraisal of Solihull's countryside in terms of its landscape character and the changes which it faces. Key issues for land use planning are identified to assist the process of policy choice.

The Council recognises that there are important countryside issues which are beyond the scope of this strategy. These issues are referred to where relevant, but the strategy concentrates on land use planning in the countryside. For convenience, the strategy is divided into 8 main strands and identifies local objectives based on 8 countryside zones.

It is one of the key recommendations of the strategy that these matters should be dealt with through the establishment of a Countryside Management Project.

The final Strategy will not constitute part of the UDP, but is intended to provide supplementary planning guidance for countryside matters. It will contribute to the UDP Review, when the current policies relating to the countryside will be re-examined.

This Strategy is one of a series of land use planning strategies referred to in the Council's Environment Strategy for Solihull. It has links with a number of other Council strategies, notably Nature Conservation, Canals, Cycling and Walking.

The countryside does not end at the boundaries of Solihull. It is part of the wider Warwickshire countryside characterised by Arden landscape. Warwickshire County Council is preparing a Countryside Recreation Strategy which will have close links with this strategy. Many people in Birmingham and Coventry visit and enjoy Solihull's countryside, so the objectives of this strategy will have wider benefits.

Local Agenda 21

The Council has published a Local Agenda 21 (LA21) plan for Solihull which aims to achieve sustainable development locally. It has been prepared in partnership with the community in Solihull. This Strategy will make an important contribution to the aims of LA21 by guiding change in accordance with sustainable development principles. It should ensure that the quality of the countryside endures for the enjoyment and use of future generations. The strategy includes a number of initiatives, which have been developed through the LA21 process.

VISION

Our Vision for Solihull's countryside in 2050 can best be appreciated by taking a walk along one of the Greenways out of Solihull town centre towards Meriden. The formal park quickly gives way to woodland which screens recent housing development and the by-pass. The path by the River Blythe is busy with anglers waiting for trout to bite and school children studying the wildlife attracted by the waterside meadows.

The gently rolling landscape is enclosed by hedgerows and groups of trees, some of ancient origin, others part of the newly restored Forest of Arden. A steady stream of cyclists and walkers pass us, some laden with fruit and vegetables from one of the local organic farmshops.

The Greenway joins the Grand Union canal, part of the National Cycle Network, near the Old Mill pub and cycle centre, and follows the Shadowbrook link, a community route between Solihull and Hampton in Arden. Although traffic on the M42 is audible, the motorway is concealed by timber plantations used to heat local schools and provide power for local people. The link, a Quiet Lane used mainly by cyclists and horse riders, passes Hampton Manor, an hotel in restored parkland, whose grounds are open to the public.

The village beyond it has benefited from the removal of through traffic and careful attention to design and development, a community priority. A group of school children are visiting Patrick's Farm, used by the Council as an educational centre.

From Hampton it is only ten minutes by Metro to Solihull town centre, but our journey continues east to the heart of the New Arden Forest, an area of old quarries, where visitors can roam freely and experience a range of recreational activities provided by the lakes and the forest. Dial-a-bus provides a frequent link to the Metro and the city beyond.

The Greenway skirts sandstone outcrops of interest to geologists and joins the Heart of England Way, a long distance bridleway, but our route takes us via Meriden Information Village, clustered around old farm buildings, to the Centre of England visitor centre and welcome refreshments. The ancient cross is one of a long list of historical and archaeological features connected by the Solihull Heritage Way. The village has developed into an IT centre since the Meriden Link, a rapid transit between Birmingham and Coventry opened ten years ago.

Our journey completed, we catch the link and metro back to the centre of Solihull.

3. CONTEXT AND ISSUES

THE SOLIHULL COUNTRYSIDE

Character

Solihull's countryside has many strengths. It is an attractive area where the quality of the landscape has generally been retained with a strong rural character, as a result of management by farmers and landowners. This provides a major contrast with the urban areas which adjoin it.

The appearance of this landscape is generally one of rolling countryside with irregular fields defined by thick hedgerows, some wooded areas, a network of narrow lanes and a dispersed settlement pattern. The countryside is part of the wider Arden landscape assessed through a joint project by Warwickshire County Council and the Countryside Commission (CC). The landscape assessment identifies seven distinct local landscape types, of which Arden Parklands, Arden Pastures, Ancient Arden, and Arden River Valleys are evident in Solihull. A management strategy and landscape guidelines for each of the local landscapes is included in the Warwickshire Landscapes Guidelines for Arden published in 1993.

Arden landscape is one of 181 regional areas identified by the CC in its countryside character approach.

Solihull's countryside generally consists of good to moderate quality agricultural land (mostly grade 3) capable of supporting a healthy mixed farming economy. Whilst the intensification of farming methods has led to some removal of hedgerows and the creation of larger fields, the overall character of the landscape has not been severely damaged. Moreover, Green Belt policy has been effective in limiting development.

The countryside contains a rich mixture of species - rich grasslands, woodlands, wetlands, open water and some remnant heath, not least the River Blythe which, as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), is of national significance. Because development has been limited, there are many archaeological and historic buildings and remains. About half of Solihull's 364 listed buildings and ancient monuments such as Meriden Cross and Packhorse Bridge are in the countryside and in rural settlements. There are a variety of opportunities for people to enjoy this countryside through the existing network of footpaths, towpaths and bridle ways.

If the countryside benefits from many natural assets, its greatest weakness derives from man-made influences in the form of its closeness to major urban areas and the impacts and pressures that result from this. These are often referred to as 'urban fringe' characteristics.

One particular feature is the relative narrowness of the gaps between major settlements such that the "psychological break" between the urban and rural area is often very fragile. This is further weakened by the level of background noise that is apparent in many areas, particularly from traffic and aircraft and by the impact of light spillage at night from urban areas and influences.

Change

The pace of change within the countryside is accelerating. However, it is not change itself which should be of concern - there has always been change in the English countryside - but rather, the direction in which this is leading. The Warwickshire, Coventry and Solihull Habitat Biodiversity Audit (HBA) is one means of monitoring change in the countryside in the future.

Urban Development

Since the early 1970s, there have been a number of significant housing and economic developments affecting Solihull's countryside. This has led both to a consolidation of development on the western edge of the Meriden Gap and a rounding off of the larger free standing settlements. This process of urban extension is set to continue through the current proposals within the Unitary Development Plan, including two major developments within Hockley Heath Parish in the form of the Dickens Heath new village and the Blythe Valley Business Park.

Roads and Traffic

The 1970s and 80s have also seen a significant growth in traffic and road building with the greatest impact on Solihull's countryside from the M42 cutting a swathe through the Borough. However, the general growth of traffic has also had a wider impact. Road improvements have tended to change the character of rural roads. Increased traffic volumes and speeds have affected rural settlements, and increased noise and light have resulted in greater intrusion across the countryside.

Changes in Agriculture

As with most farming areas, Solihull has experienced alterations to its pattern of agricultural production where the general trend over recent decades has been one of increased intensification in farming methods. In some cases, this has led to a loss of hedgerows and other valuable habitats with the increasing use of chemicals also affecting wildlife.

Evidence from the Agricultural Census provided by MAFF demonstrates the more recent changes which have occurred since 1984;

- the emergence of 6% of Solihull's countryside in the form of "set aside" land;
- a reduction of 27% in full-time farmers;
- significant changes in the nature of farm production (e.g. a reduction in the area of cereal production by 33% with new types of crops emerging).

These changes reflect the general pattern of restructuring and diversification of agriculture and have led to different demands for buildings and infrastructure. Where buildings have become redundant, new uses are often sought, particularly the conversion of barns for residential purposes or economic activities.

Landscape

In recent years, both alder and ash trees have been afflicted by fungal diseases, resulting in the loss of many mature trees. This follows the ravages of Dutch Elm disease. Sensitive management of diseased trees can help to encourage re-growth.

Changes in agriculture have led to the loss of many hedgerows, although Solihull has not been affected as severely as some parts of Arden. New types of crops, such as oil seed rape and linseed oil have altered the appearance of the landscape.

Leisure and Recreation

With increasing personal mobility, there have been greater demands on Solihull's countryside for informal activities such as walking and horse-riding and also for more formal sporting uses. These developments have not had major detrimental impact on the countryside but have tended to draw more people into the countryside by car. This can have a local impact where parked cars clutter the highway and verges are damaged. Where formal parking provision is provided, this has not always been sympathetically designed.

Noise

One of the most significant changes to Solihull's countryside over recent decades is the increasing impact of noise. Not only is traffic noise only too obvious across a wide area, particularly close to the Motorway, but increased air traffic is evident around the flight paths of Birmingham International Airport. Whilst aircraft will become quieter in the future, the overall level of air traffic is predicted to increase.

Minerals and Waste

Parts of Solihull's countryside contain sand and gravel deposits with the principle area of extraction over recent decades focused to the south-west of Meriden. In some cases, permission has been given for tipping in resultant voids. Overall, these operations have a significant impact on local areas at the heart of the Meriden Gap.

AN APPRAISAL OF SOLIHULL'S COUNTRYSIDE

The Solihull countryside is clearly different from more remote rural areas due to the presence of urban influences. It is almost inevitable, therefore, that it will continue to become increasingly "suburban" in function. The great danger, however, is that through a gradual process of incremental change it will also become "suburban" in character. Avoiding this must be one of the central challenges of this Strategy.

Solihull's countryside varies in character partly due to differences in the underlying landscape and partly due to the nature and extent of urban influences.

To assist the development of this Strategy, the countryside has been divided into a number of broad zones reflecting these distinctions. These zones are identified on the map on page x.

Zone 1 - Hockley Heath Parish

This zone still retains many of the unique features of Arden Pastureland, typically a small scale enclosed landscape, and contains a wide variety of natural habitats. At the same time, it is an area where "urban fringe" features are already apparent, including recreational and other mixed uses. It is also subject to significant change as a result of development proposals within the Unitary Development Plan.

Zone 2 - The Western Fringe

Much of this zone encompasses existing major development at the Airport, the National Exhibition Centre and the Birmingham Business Park. It is therefore strongly dominated by commercial and urban influences. The countryside, nevertheless, provides an attractive setting for adjacent commercial and residential areas and contains important wildlife sites.

Zone 3 - The Motorway Corridor

The corridor bisects the Borough passing through important Green Belt "gaps" separating the main urban area from the settlements of Knowle, Dorridge and Hampton-in-Arden. Whilst dominated by the Motorway, the corridor is also important for nature conservation, particularly as for much of its length it encompasses the River Blythe and its valley.

Zone 4 - The Setting of Knowle and Dorridge

Although the villages have become urbanised by the scale of infill developments, much of their original character has survived. This is partly due to the relative closeness of the countryside to the village centres which provide an attractive setting for both settlements. At the same time, previous developments have been well contained with limited impact on the surrounding countryside or the Meriden Gap.

Zone 5 - The Rural Heartland

This zone contains the most rural parts of Solihull furthest away from overt urban influences and acts as a link with Arden landscapes of the wider Warwickshire countryside. It is the openness of this area, the preservation of its Arden landscapes and rural quality, and the limited urban influences that play a key role in maintaining the Meriden Gap between the Birmingham Conurbation and Coventry. It also provides the setting for many of the villages and hamlets of the Borough with important historical associations, such as Berkswell, Hampton-in-Arden, Meriden and Temple Balsall. The Blythe Valley is a major feature within the zone and there are pressures for sand and gravel extraction.

Zone 6 - The Setting of Balsall Common

Balsall Common is a large settlement in the heart of the Meriden Gap which has developed as a commuter base over recent years. Because of its size and elongated shape, it has an influence over a wide area of countryside and exhibits some urban fringe characteristics around its edge. Housing proposals within the Unitary Development Plan will extend development to the north of the settlement's centre.

Zone 7 - The Northern Uplands

This zone is part of an extensive elongated plateau with large areas of mixed woodlands of considerable ecological value. Whilst much of the area is rural and contained in character, in other parts there are extensive long distance views over Coventry and the more distant Birmingham Conurbation.

Zone 8 - The Coventry Fringe

The character of the countryside in this zone is strongly influenced by its closeness to the urban edge of Coventry. Not only are urban developments visible across the area but there are also a number of "urban fringe" features. At the same time, the landscape tends to be more open and large-scale compared to the adjacent Rural Heartland partly due to the removal of hedgerows.

POLICY BACKGROUND

Agricultural production

Since the war, government policy has encouraged food production and the use of intensive farming methods. This process gathered pace with the UK's entry into the European Community. The Common Agricultural Policy has provided security for farmers, and cheap plentiful food, but has resulted in overproduction and environmental concerns. Since the 1980s, various schemes have been introduced to reduce production and government agencies have encouraged diversification into alternative crops and non-agricultural uses, and the re-use of buildings.. The farmer's role in managing and conserving the countryside has been recognised with measures to enhance the environment. Reform of the Common Agricultural Policy has the potential to give greater emphasis to the sustainable management of the land.

Guiding development

Solihull's countryside has been protected from the unrestricted expansion of Birmingham and Coventry since the early 1960s. Originally designed to guide new development into appropriate locations, the purpose of Green Belts was widened to protect the countryside surrounding built-up areas in 1988. The majority of Solihull's Green Belt was approved in the 1970s, although Hockley Heath Parish and the Marston Green area were only confirmed with the adoption of the UDP in 1997. Green Belt policy is set out in government guidance and the UDP.

Protection and enjoyment

The importance of the countryside as an amenity and for recreation has been recognised since the designation of National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. From the 1960s, public bodies have been expected to consider the natural beauty and amenity of the wider countryside in their activities. The Countryside Agency, the government agency responsible for the protection and enjoyment of the countryside, was established in 1968 (as the Countryside Commission). It has championed the provision of recreational facilities, such as Country Parks, and improvements to the amenity and the accessibility of the countryside. Comprehensive advice on a range of countryside topics is included in its Countryside Planning File.

Sustainable development

Government policy relating to the countryside is set out in a series of Planning Policy Guidance Notes since the late 1980s. The current version on the countryside takes account of sustainable development, following the Agenda 21 agreement at the Rio Earth Summit. More comprehensive guidance was offered in the 1995 Rural White Paper, and the good practice guide on policy for rural diversification which followed it. The advice recognises that change needs to be accommodated to meet the needs of people who live and work in the countryside as well as conserving the character and enhancing the quality of the environment. Community initiatives have been supported through the LA21 process in Solihull and with grants from Rural Action for the Environment.

Living and working

Economic development has been a long-standing government objective for the countryside, reflected in the early establishment of the former Rural Development Commission. Change has accelerated in recent decades with the agricultural economy becoming more volatile, the decline in employment and an increase in rural population. The Countryside Agency has targeted remoter rural areas for assistance, recognising that the impact of post-war change is less acute in countryside close to urban areas.

Regional Planning Guidance for the West Midlands issued in 1998 provides advice on rural regeneration. Although most relevant for remoter areas, it aims to maintain a healthy rural economy integrating necessary development with the protection of the countryside.

Concerns about climate change are encouraging the government to give greater emphasis to the use of renewable sources of energy and the planting of woodlands. The production of short rotation coppice and other energy crops is likely to increase in the future.

Character and quality

In 1993, Warwickshire County Council and the former Countryside Commission produced Landscape Guidelines for Arden following an assessment of the County's landscape character. The guidelines identified the local Arden landscape types, including those within Solihull, and zones where enhancement was desirable. Following this, a draft strategy for the restoration of the Forest of Arden was published for consultation purposes, which is being used by the Council to guide planting schemes.

The Landscapes Guidelines recognise the importance of hedgerows as a characteristic feature of Arden. Recent regulations allow the protection of important hedgerows with historic or ecological significance. The Countryside Agency and English Nature have produced a map showing the character of England based on landscape, wildlife and natural features. English Nature has identified the development of a green network of wildlife corridors as a key theme in the Midlands Plateau, in which Solihull lies. The Habitat Biodiversity Audit provides information about important landscape features and natural habitats in Solihull.

The Countryside Agency's guidance on Planning for Countryside Quality sets out its views of sustainable development in the countryside and recommends changes to the planning system. Countryside quality depends on an understanding of both its landscape character and the condition of the local countryside and the features within it. The Forestry Commission has recently published a new Forestry Strategy for England to promote the planting of new woodland for environmental and recreation reasons, as well as for timber.

Solihull's strategy

The Solihull Unitary Development Plan provides the land use planning framework for the Borough, covering the economy, quality of life and the environment. The UDP includes policies and proposals protecting the countryside from inappropriate development, whilst recognising its potential for recreation, and the pressures for farm diversification. This Strategy will promote additional countryside policies for inclusion in the UDP during the review.

The Council has published an Environment Strategy in response to the Local Agenda 21 Plan for Solihull, encompassing wider aspects of the environment. The Environment Strategy identifies the pressure for new development and expansion as a key issue for Solihull. The

Countryside Strategy will help to guide the types of development appropriate to the countryside and its sensitive location and design.

ISSUES

The appraisal of Solihull's countryside and the review of policy highlight a range of key issues which need to be addressed in developing this Strategy.

Issue 1 - The strategic role of Solihull's countryside

How to ensure that its open and rural character is retained, not only in its own right, but also as an integral part of the West Midlands Green Belt with links to the wider Warwickshire countryside. This particularly applies to the need to maintain the integrity of the Meriden Gap.

Issue 2 - The economic viability of Solihull's countryside

How to maintain a healthy farming environment, whilst ensuring that economic change within the countryside, such as farm diversification, is sustainable and does not undermine the quality and character of the natural environment.

Issue 3 - The conservation and enhancement of Solihull's countryside

How to encourage the sustainable management of the natural resources of the countryside, retaining it as a wildlife reservoir, whether through the protection of vulnerable areas such as river corridors, or the creation of new landscapes and habitats.

Issue 4 - Realising the recreational and educational potential of Solihull's countryside

How to realise the recreational and educational potential and allow greater opportunities for people to enjoy and learn about the countryside without damaging its character and qualities.

Issue 5 - Addressing the impact and maximising the benefits of further new developments

How to minimise and mitigate against the impact of and maximise the benefits from new development resulting from existing proposals within the UDP, developments in communications systems or other future developments.

The Council recognises that these are not the only issues of importance to Solihull's countryside. The provision of affordable housing, maintaining and expanding local services such as shops, pubs and schools, and improving public transport are all likely to be of high priority to rural residents. These are not primarily land use issues, however, and whilst planning policies may have influence, must be addressed elsewhere. This highlights a further issue.

Issue 6 - Integration of land use and other policies affecting Solihull's countryside.

How to ensure that the policies and initiatives in this Strategy are co-ordinated with other policies relating to housing, local services and public transport, so that policy implementation is effective.

4. THE STRATEGY

Introduction

The Strategy for Solihull's countryside has been divided into 8 key strands which address the issues identified in the previous section. Each strand includes an objective, an explanation of the components which make up the topic, and an indication of what the Council intends to do to implement the Strategy.

The Strategy also includes local objectives for each of the 8 zones introduced in the appraisal of the countryside. The local objectives indicate which of the Strategy strands will be of most significance for each zone, taking account of local characteristics. Using local objectives will help to protect the individual character and quality of each zone, contributing to local distinctiveness.

MAINTAIN OPEN AND RURAL CHARACTER

The Council will maintain the open and rural character of the countryside in its own right, and as part of the West Midlands Green Belt.

The Meriden Gap

Solihull's countryside is designated as Green Belt, forming part of the West Midlands Green Belt. Green Belt policy, which is contained in the UDP, aims to prevent urban sprawl by keeping the land open permanently. The countryside between Birmingham and Coventry, known as the Meriden Gap, is of particular importance in preventing the 2 cities from merging. A major challenge involves developing the potential of the positive use of the Green Belt, to enhance its protection, whilst recognising the pressures for development.

Suburbanisation

Most of the countryside's residents rely on the nearby urban areas for jobs and services, such as shopping and leisure. The challenge for the Council is to prevent these functional links from harming the rural character of the countryside. Suburbanisation of the countryside can occur in many ways, such as poorly sited or designed buildings, road development or features, increased traffic, noise and light pollution. Poorly designed or unnecessary signs can be detrimental to the environment.

Zones of distinctiveness

The Council has identified 8 distinct zones within Solihull's countryside which vary in character because of landscape differences and the nature of urban influences. Local objectives for each of these 8 zones have been developed to protect their different characteristics.

What the Council will do

- Continue to protect and maintain the Green Belt in Solihull, particularly the strategically important Meriden Gap, through UDP policies
- Explore the potential for raising the profile of the Green Belt in Hockley Heath Parish with neighbouring authorities
- Prepare a Countryside Design Summary for Solihull to promote good design in the countryside
- Consider the potential for environmental assessment of highway schemes and signing in the countryside
- Propose a new UDP policy to encourage the control of light pollution in the countryside
- Promote the use of local objectives for Solihull's countryside to enhance local distinctiveness

MANAGEMENT AND DIVERSIFICATION

The Council will encourage the sensitive and sustainable management of the countryside and guide farm diversification to uses which protect its character and openness.

Agriculture

Management of Solihull's countryside lies primarily in the hands of farmers and landowners and is a by-product of the type of farming practised. This in turn has shaped the rural landscape with which we are familiar today. Since the last war, farmers have responded to the government imperative to produce more food by using intensive farming methods, which have led to the removal of many characteristic Arden features, such as hedgerows and ponds. It is now recognised that continued intensification is both unnecessary and damaging to the environment.

The European Commission's (EC) Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has started to encourage agri-environment schemes, and the UK government has responded with incentives for organic farming and stewardship of the land. Although their impact has been limited to date, the EC's Agenda 2000 proposals for reform of CAP, which links environmental and rural development measures, are likely to increase the importance of such schemes in the future.

The introduction of genetically modified crops is likely to become an issue in the future. There are concerns about genes from such crops infiltrating the natural environment. The Council will encourage farmers considering growing genetically modified organisms to seek advice from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group.

Best and most versatile farmland

Significant parts of Solihull's Western Fringe, Motorway Corridor and Rural Heartland are classified as best and most versatile agricultural land. The Council will protect these areas from non-agricultural uses as advised in PPG7. Poorer quality farmland, of less significance for agriculture may be more vulnerable to non-agricultural uses.

Agricultural diversification

Many farmers are struggling to survive and seek to diversify beyond farming to supplement their incomes. Government advice indicates that the Council should assess the economic and social needs for diversification. Because Solihull's countryside lies close to major urban areas, there is less need for diversification to provide local employment. Regional Planning Guidance indicates that diversification can help to secure the stewardship of urban fringe countryside.

It is vital that new uses should not harm the character of the countryside, its nature conservation value, or its Green Belt function. Diversification schemes which are small-scale, do not attract excessive numbers of visitors and complement conservation and enhancement policies are most likely to be acceptable. The government is seeking to encourage renewable forms of energy and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Short rotation coppice and other energy crops are likely to become more attractive and will help to maintain and enhance the character of the countryside. Uses associated with the restoration of the Forest of Arden and informal outdoor recreation would be particularly beneficial.

What the Council will do

- Encourage the sensitive management of characteristic Arden features, traditional farm landscapes and key habitats.
 - Encourage farmers and landowners to use the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group for advice on archaeology, landscape matters, recreation and nature conservation.
 - Promote the use of the Organic Aid and Countryside Stewardship schemes by farmers and landowners.
 - Explore the potential for a regular farmers market in Solihull.
 - Prepare habitat management guidelines for farmers and landowners.
 - Propose a new UDP policy relating to the siting of intensive livestock buildings close to housing.
 - Continue to protect the best and most versatile agricultural land through UDP policies.
 - Promote small-scale sensitive farm diversification schemes, such as informal outdoor recreation proposals.
 - Explore the barriers to new woodland planting with farmers and landowners and seek to address the problems.
 - Encourage farmers and landowners to take up incentives for new woodland planting and the management of existing habitats, and to contribute to the restoration of the Forest of Arden.
 - Consider expanding the Forest of Arden planting initiative to include replacement of hedgerows.
 - Encourage short rotation coppice and other energy crops as an alternative to traditional farm produce.
 - Use the Strategy to develop an improved dialogue with farmers and landowners.
- Ensure that conservation needs are incorporated into highway verge maintenance.

CONSERVATION AND ENHANCEMENT

The Council will conserve and enhance the natural environment of the countryside and its historic and archaeological assets.

Arden landscape

Solihull's countryside is part of Arden landscape as defined by the Countryside Commission in its Countryside Character approach. Warwickshire County Council and the Commission have published landscapes guidelines for Arden, "an historic region of former wood pasture and heath, characterised by a dispersed settlement pattern, ancient woodlands and mature hedgerow oaks". In 1995, a draft consultation strategy for the restoration of the Forest of Arden was launched. The Council is using the guidelines, which identify Enhancement Zones, and the draft strategy to shape its local countryside objectives and landscape enhancement schemes, and has prepared a Woodland Strategy for Solihull.

Hedgerows are a special feature of Arden, which have been better preserved in parts of Solihull, such as Hockley Heath Parish, than elsewhere. Initiatives such as the Habitat Biodiversity Audit and Warwickshire Wildlife Trust/Council for the Protection of Rural England's hedgerow survey will help to monitor and protect these characteristic Arden features in the future.

Nature conservation

Earlier this year, the Council published its strategy Nature Conservation in Solihull which includes the countryside. The countryside is an important natural reservoir, containing nationally significant sites, such as the River Blythe SSSI. The majority of Solihull's SINC's lie in the countryside. A key theme for nature conservation in Solihull is the linking of existing wildlife sites and corridors to form a green network throughout the countryside connecting it with sites in surrounding urban areas. The Habitat Biodiversity Audit demonstrates that the importance of the countryside for nature conservation has been significantly underestimated.

Historic environment

Solihull's countryside contains many historic and archaeological sites, ranging from early prehistoric occupation and burial sites to defences of the second world war. Many of Solihull's listed buildings are located in the countryside or in rural settlements. All are recorded in detail on the Sites and Monuments Record. Awareness of the significance of sites is growing, with an increasing number, such as Eastcote Hall moat and Temple Balsall Preceptory being recognised as nationally important.

The historic environment is particularly important as a finite and non-renewable resource which is fragile and cannot be recreated. Sites generally survive better in rural rather than urban areas, so Solihull's countryside resource is of significance for the wider conurbation.

There are few sites of industrial heritage in the countryside, but the 2 canals in Solihull are part of the historic landscape, incorporating features which British Waterways has recorded on its heritage database. The heritage value of Solihull's canals is recognised in the Solihull Canals Strategy.

What the Council will do

- Continue to protect the characteristic features of Arden landscape through the UDP and Development Control.
- Use the Warwickshire Landscapes Guidelines for the Arden to shape its management strategy for the countryside.
- Develop the existing partnership with Warwickshire County Council and Coventry Council to restore the Forest of Arden.
- Establish a Countryside Management project to develop this Strategy.
- Promote the extension of the Woodland Fringe planting initiative on the edge of the urban area and around the rural settlements and the use of woodland incentives such as the Farm Woodland Premium Scheme by farmers and landowners.
- Promote the planting of woodlands by local businesses.
- Develop the Woodland Strategy for Solihull.
- Encourage local communities to survey local hedgerows and the adoption of the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust guidelines for access to agricultural land by surveyors.
- Use the revised Hedgerow Regulations to protect these characteristic features of Arden landscape.
- Identify and protect wildlife sites and corridors using the Habitat Biodiversity Audit information, the Nature Conservation and Woodland Strategies and the UDP.
- Create and enhance Local Nature Reserves and Country Parks.
- Conserve and enhance the natural environment of the River Blythe Corridor, in partnership with the Environment Agency, English Nature, Farmers and Landowners.
- Explore the potential of using the Environmental Capital approach developed by the Countryside Commission, English Nature, English Heritage and the Environment Agency to manage key assets in the countryside.
- Continue to support the development, enhancement and accessibility of the Sites and Monuments Record.
- Undertake a survey of archaeological sites in the countryside and identify sites and buildings which merit greater protection.
- Formulate a new UDP policy to protect and enhance important archaeological sites during the Review.
- Encourage the development of management plans for historic sites in the countryside.
- Provide information and interpretation about nationally or regionally important historic and archaeological sites in the countryside.
- Investigate the potential of integrating ecological and archaeological databases to enable greater protection of important sites.

REALISE THE POTENTIAL FOR RECREATION

The Council will encourage greater use of the countryside for informal outdoor recreation and for formal recreational facilities, providing such activities do not harm the natural qualities, character and openness of the countryside.

Access to the countryside

Solihull's countryside offers great potential for informal outdoor recreation because of its location close to the Birmingham conurbation and Coventry. The Council is working towards the Countryside Commission's target to ensure that all public footpaths and bridleways in the Borough are open and unobstructed by 2000. In addition, the Council is promoting the use of footpaths by publishing 2 booklets of walks, and developing longer walks, such as the Solihull Way, the Trans-Solihull Link, an east-west footpath across the Borough, and the first stage of the Blythe Valley Walkway. The Heart of England Way, a regional long-distance footpath which passes through the Borough, and the North Worcestershire Path, which ends just outside the Borough provide wider links to Warwickshire and beyond. A series of leisure cycle rides starting in Solihull have also been developed as part of the Cycling Strategy for Solihull.

Exercise offers significant health benefits, encouraging the Countryside Commission and the British Heart Foundation to join forces to promote walking. Links between the urban area and the countryside, such as the Cole Valley, are vital to provide easy access to the footpath network and other recreational facilities. The Council will develop a network of Greenways connecting people to the countryside, for use by pedestrians, cyclists and riders. British Waterways has launched the Lapworth Loop initiative, which will provide a circular cycle route utilising the towpaths of the 2 canals in Solihull.

Recreational facilities

Golf courses, fishing lakes and playing fields are just some of the formal recreational facilities located in Solihull's countryside. These uses have a greater impact on the countryside as they attract more visitors and often require ancillary buildings. The Council will encourage new and expanded recreational facilities providing such activities do not harm the character and openness of the countryside.

British Waterways has established a partnership to manage the Earlswood Lakes area located outside the Borough, but which attracts many visitors from Solihull. The Council will work with British Waterways and neighbouring authorities to manage issues such as car parking, and to develop links from the Stratford-on-Avon canal and Solihull town centre.

Countryside parks

The Council has designated land adjoining the River Blythe as a Countryside Park in the UDP, as part of the Blythe Valley Business Park development. The Park is intended to provide a mix of recreational opportunities and will be linked to surrounding urban areas by the Blythe Valley Walkway.

The restoration of old sand and gravel workings in the Rural Heartlands presents an opportunity for a significant new recreational facility. A substantial area of land could be opened up to the public, with a variety of habitats and recreational uses provided. The area could be linked to existing and proposed facilities, such as the Heart of England Way, the Blythe Valley Walkway and the Kenilworth to Berkswell Greenway, and make a major contribution to the restoration of the Forest of Arden.

What the Council will do

- Ensure that all footpaths and bridleways are maintained and signed.
 - Review the network of public footpaths and bridleways
 - Encourage farmers and landowners to take up incentives in return for providing access to their land
 - Promote the use of the public footpath network by publishing leaflets detailing walks
 - Develop the Blythe Valley Walkway and the Trans-Solihull Link
 - Ensure that the Heart of England Way is maintained and signed to a standard appropriate to its status as a regional long-distance footpath
 - Continue to work with volunteer groups to maintain the public footpath network
 - Provide quality, lightly-trafficked routes which are cycle and rider friendly for easy access to the countryside.
 - Promote cycling as a leisure activity by publishing leaflets detailing rides to the countryside, tourist and heritage destinations, and recreational facilities
 - Support British Waterways Lapworth Loop initiative to improve access for cyclists to canal towpaths
 - Support the Countryside Agency's Greenways initiative by working with adjoining authorities to identify suitable routes and with landowners to develop and maintain them
 - Encourage new and expanded recreational facilities in the countryside which protect its character and openness
 - Support British Waterways Earlswood Lakes initiative to manage the impact of visitors
 - Ensure that the Blythe Valley Countryside Park is delivered in accordance with UDP policies and proposals and enhance links to surrounding urban areas
 - Create and enhance Local Nature Reserves and Country Parks
 - Explore the potential for a major new outdoor recreational facility on old mineral workings through the Meriden Sands initiative
- Promote the benefits of new woodland planting to farmers and landowners as part of the restoration of the Forest of Arden

MAINTAIN LOCAL DISTINCTIVENESS

The Council will maintain existing settlements as attractive and distinct places within the countryside and ensure that any new development is sympathetic to its local character.

Existing Settlements

Solihull's countryside contains many existing settlements ranging from small hamlets with a handful of buildings to the large settlements of Balsall Common and Knowle and Dorridge. Larger settlements have had to accommodate significant new housing development in the last 30 years. Much modern development has been uniform, paying little attention to the particular characteristics of individual settlements which makes them distinct from other places. Smaller settlements have retained much of their local distinctiveness, because the scale of new development has been less.

The Countryside Commission has developed 2 techniques for promoting good design in rural areas which are supported by government guidance in PPG7. The Council will prepare a Countryside Design Summary for Solihull's countryside which will supplement UDP policies and encourage a more locally-based approach to design and planning. The residents of Hampton-in-Arden have embarked on a Village Design Statement for their village which will offer guidelines for new development and change. The Council supports this local initiative and will encourage other local communities to prepare their own statements.

Local Services

Many of the smaller settlements have lost shops and local businesses in recent years. In others, remaining businesses are struggling to survive. The loss of local shops and jobs means people have to travel much longer distances for employment and shopping. At the same time as the need to travel has increased, rural public transport has declined, limiting people's ability to access jobs and services without a car.

Rural settlements are increasingly perceived by urban residents as attractive places to live. House prices have risen to reflect this demand, making it more difficult for local people to find housing locally. The Council has undertaken a Housing Needs Survey and made provision for affordable housing in rural settlements on new housing sites identified in the UDP. Provision of extra housing may help existing businesses to survive and encourage the expansion or replacement of public transport services and a more sustainable lifestyle.

New Development

Although new development is severely restricted in the countryside, many of Solihull's existing settlements have been excluded from the Green Belt. Green Belt policy includes exceptions which are detailed in Policy GB2 of the UDP. The Council will expect new development to be sympathetic to the character of the countryside and to protect the openness and purposes of the Green Belt. Where new development is permitted in the countryside, the Council will expect any damage to the rural character to be compensated by conservation and enhancement measures in the locality, for example, the Countryside Park at Blythe Valley Business Park.

Modern farming practices have resulted in many traditional farm buildings becoming redundant. Many barns and outbuildings in Solihull have been converted to new uses, usually residential, and the Council has produced guidelines to ensure that the character of buildings is

retained. The government promotes conversion for commercial uses to encourage farm diversification and a positive impact on the local economy.

Some larger commercial uses are located in the countryside and can have difficulty if faced with the need to expand. The expansion of existing businesses is not an exception to normal Green Belt policy. The Council will not normally permit businesses to expand beyond their existing sites and would expect any proposals for development within the site to be justified by very special circumstances.

Minerals and waste

Sand and gravel deposits south-west of Meriden are being worked and extraction is likely to be extended in the future, notwithstanding efforts to reduce aggregate use and encourage recycling of materials. The UDP requires the submission of an Environmental Impact Assessment for substantial mineral proposals. Restoration after use will be a key issue, with land no longer required to be retained for agriculture and more waste being incinerated. The Council will consider this and other issues through the Meriden Sands initiative.

What the Council will do

- Prepare a Countryside Design Summary for Solihull to promote good design in the countryside.
- Promote the preparation of Village Design Statements by local rural communities in Solihull.
- Help to support existing shops in rural communities by looking at mixed uses flexibly.
- Encourage the provision of improved public transport services for settlements in the countryside in partnership with CENTRO.
- Continue to make provision for affordable housing in existing settlements in development briefs for new housing sites.
- Continue to protect the countryside and the Green Belt from inappropriate development.
- Seek opportunities to protect and enhance characteristic features of the countryside associated with new development proposals.
- Use the guidelines for conversion of existing buildings in the countryside to secure good design.
- Support proposals for the conversion of buildings to commercial uses where they promote farm diversification or contribute to the local economy and protect the character and openness of the countryside.
- Require very special justification for the expansion of existing businesses in the countryside in accordance with Green Belt policy.
- Undertake a survey of agricultural workers' dwellings with occupancy conditions.
- Consider the long-term restoration of old mineral workings through the Meriden Sands initiative.

PROMOTION AND EDUCATION

The Council will encourage people to care for and enjoy the countryside in a responsible way by raising public awareness and understanding of countryside issues.

Promotion

People must be aware of the opportunities and activities which Solihull's countryside offers, if they are to be able to take advantage of them. Publicising little known footpaths or facilities will help to relieve pressure on more popular locations and may reduce travel and pollution effects by provision closer to the point of demand. The Council has published booklets and leaflets advertising walks and cycle rides in the countryside. There is scope too for better signposting and waymarking of footpaths, and for promoting greater use of local open space in rural settlements, as a gateway into the countryside.

If farmers and landowners are to be encouraged to open up their land to visitors, it is essential that people should treat the countryside in a responsible way. Information about countryside opportunities needs to include advice for visitors, such as following the country code. A Countryside Management project will be able to lobby for improvements to the footpath network, increase the information available and raise awareness of issues in Solihull's countryside.

Tourism

Solihull is an important destination for business visitors. The Council will explore with the Solihull Tourism and Visitor Group the potential to promote the countryside and activities within it to visitors. A further opportunity may arise from the growing status of the Heart of England Way and the potential for services for walkers along its route. Solihull's canals offer a potential resource, both in themselves for boaters, walkers and cyclists, and as links to other facilities, such as Earlswood Lakes.

Education

The Council, through its Environmental Education programme, encourages schools to look at countryside issues in their curricula. Groups of children can visit woodlands and other habitats in Solihull's countryside. Children are given the opportunity to learn about the sustainable use of woodlands through activities such as coppicing, and about loss of habitat, through the provision of replacement ponds for example. The Council intends to explore ways of expanding its involvement in environmental education in the future.

The Council promotes the sustainable management of woodlands and the incentives available for farmers and landowners for new planting. The environmental activities of other groups and agencies, such as the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust and the Solihull Conservation Volunteers will be publicised.

What the Council will do

- Raise awareness of the benefits of the countryside by publishing and promoting information about the opportunities and activities available.
- Publish leaflets and booklets on walks and cycle rides in the countryside.
- Ensure that public footpaths are adequately signposted from roads and waymarked.
- Provide information encouraging users of the countryside to respect the land and other activities which exist.
- Use events, such as Environment Week to promote the countryside and related issues.
- Support the Countryside Commission's Paths 21 initiative to improve the public footpath network in Solihull.
- Raise awareness of countryside issues in Solihull through the Strategy and a Countryside Management project.
- Explore the potential for promoting the countryside as a destination for business visitors with the Solihull Tourism and Visitor Group.
- Encourage farmers and landowners along the Heart of England Way to make provision for the needs of longer-distance walkers.
- Encourage schools to include rural issues and make greater use of the countryside in their curricula.
- Expand its involvement in environmental education.
- Promote the sustainable management of woodlands by private landowners.
- Publicise the incentives available to farmers and landowners for new woodland planting, habitat management and other environmental initiatives.
- Promote and support the services offered by groups such as the Warwickshire Wildlife Trust and Solihull Conservation Volunteers.

PARTNERSHIPS AND THE COMMUNITY

The Council recognises that many people contribute to the quality of the countryside and will develop new and existing partnerships and involve the community through the Local Agenda 21 process.

Existing partnerships

The Council is involved in many partnerships aimed at improving the countryside. The Forest of Arden restoration involves neighbouring local authorities in Warwickshire and Coventry, the Countryside and Forestry Commissions, farming, land owning and community organisations, and recreation and tourism interests. Other partnerships relate to recreation and nature conservation and include government agencies, specialist organisations, local groups and campaigning groups such as the Council for the Protection of Rural England.

Farmers and landowners

Management of Solihull's countryside depends primarily on farmers and landowners and the incentives and policies adopted by the government. The Council intends to improve dialogue with local farming and land owning interests in order to further the aims of this Strategy.

Business

The Council has established partnerships with a number of major businesses and organisations representing their interests. These partnerships offer an opportunity to promote the enhancement of the countryside in the interests of the Borough. The Council will encourage businesses to consider planting woodlands and manage habitats in the countryside in order to offset their greenhouse gas emissions.

Engaging the community

The Council is exploring new ways of involving the community in all of its activities in response to the government's Best Value initiative. A Local Agenda 21 Plan for Solihull has been published with the involvement of local groups and individuals. A group looking at the Natural and Rural Environment is active in Solihull and will be involved in developing and implementing this Strategy.

What the Council will do

- Develop the existing partnership with Warwickshire County and Coventry City Councils to restore the Forest of Arden
- Play an active role in and develop other partnerships involved in the countryside
- Use the Strategy to develop an improved dialogue with farmers and landowners
- Encourage farmers and landowners to use government incentives and seek specialist advice from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group to enhance the countryside
- Conserve and enhance the natural environment of the River Blythe corridor, in partnership with the Environment Agency, English Nature, Farmers and Landowners
- Promote the planting of woodlands by local businesses

- Encourage and support the involvement of the community in countryside issues through the Local Agenda 21 process

RESOURCES

The Council will provide resources and support towards the initiatives in this Strategy and the annual action plans and seek support from a variety of sources and partners.

Council funding

The Council will continue to provide funding and staff resources for countryside initiatives and is committed to implementing this Strategy. Funding will be made available from the environmental enhancement budget for Forest of Arden planting schemes, conservation work and improvements to the footpath network and canals, for example. However, existing budgets are inadequate, so the Council will seek to maximise the benefits from its resources by developing partnerships and encouraging funding from alternative sources.

Other sources

There are a wide variety of potential sources of funding for countryside initiatives. European Commission funding is being used to improve canal towpaths in Solihull, and British Waterways is exploring the potential of National Lottery and Landfill Tax funding for the Lapworth Loop initiative. The Council uses grants from the Countryside and Forestry Commissions to improve footpaths and undertake Forest of Arden planting schemes. As the priorities of other organisations change, the Council will need to be flexible in its approach to secure funding.

Local communities can obtain grants for local projects from the Warwickshire Rural Community Council and the Birmingham Airport Community Trust.

Where major developments are permitted, the Council may be able to secure funding for countryside initiatives from planning obligations.

What the Council will do

- Allocate funding and staff annually towards countryside initiatives
- Commit funding and seek support from other organisations for a Countryside Management project in Solihull
- Maximise opportunities for grant-aiding from government agencies and other sources
- Encourage and support community initiatives through the Local Agenda 21 process
- Encourage farmers and landowners to adopt a positive attitude to countryside management
- Explore the potential for the funding of countryside initiatives by developers when considering significant planning applications in or close to the countryside

LOCAL OBJECTIVES

The Council will apply appropriate local objectives to the zones introduced in the countryside appraisal, so as to protect local character and distinctiveness.

1. Hockley Heath Parish

The Parish has a small scale enclosed landscape typical of Arden Pastures, but is subject to urban fringe features and uses, and significant change resulting from UDP proposals. It has considerable recreational potential.

Objectives

- Minimise the impact of new developments on the edge of the countryside
- Maintain the openness and rural character of the gaps between development
- Encourage the retention of farming practices which preserve the characteristic features of the Arden landscape
- Realise the potential of the Stratford-on-Avon canal / Earlswood Lakes area for recreation

2. The Western Fringe

This zone is dominated by major commercial and urban influences, such as the Airport and NEC, which have plans for expansion. It contains a small but significant area of countryside and woodland fringe, although the northern part suffers from poor accessibility to the countryside.

Objectives

- Protect the open countryside from further development
- Strengthen and enhance the urban edges by woodland fringe planting
- Increase opportunities for access to the countryside

3. The Motorway Corridor

The influence of the motorway and associated uses dominates this zone, which also includes important natural features, such as the River Blythe SSSI, attractive open countryside and many recreational facilities.

Objectives

- Encourage further planting along the motorway corridor to screen view from surrounding settlements and facilities
- Resist new developments in the gaps between settlements
- Protect and enhance important ecological features, including the River Blythe corridor
- Enhance recreational activities appropriate to the area

4. The setting of Knowle and Dorridge

The closeness of the countryside to the village centres enhances the attractiveness of both settlements, whilst the Knowle/Solihull and Meriden Gaps are important because of their narrowness. The zone suffers from poor accessibility to the countryside.

Objectives

- Resist outward expansion of settlements into the countryside

- Increase opportunities for access to the countryside
- Strengthen and enhance urban edge by woodland planting

5. The Rural Heartland

This zone has an open rural character linking it with the wider Warwickshire countryside, which provides an attractive setting for historically important villages and hamlets. Sand and gravel workings and deposits have a significant impact, as do important natural features, such as the River Blythe SSSI.

Objectives

- Protection of rural character from development
- Enhance the effect of wooded enclosure
- Increase opportunities for access within the countryside
- Determine a long term strategy for the use of old mineral workings
- Locate any developments which are likely to attract significant numbers close to public transport and major roads
- Protect and enhance important ecological features, including the River Blythe corridor

6. The Setting of Balsall Common

Balsall Common has a major influence on its surrounding countryside, partly due to the significant change resulting from UDP proposals, and partly from urban fringe features and uses.

Objectives

- Resist outward expansion of urban area into the countryside
- Minimise the impact of new developments on the edge of the countryside
- Increase opportunities for access to the countryside
- Strengthen and enhance urban edge by woodland fringe planting

7. The Northern Upland

This zone has large areas of mixed woodland of ecological value with extensive views of surrounding urban areas, and from surrounding areas. It has a remoteness relative to surrounding areas with a good network of footpaths, bridleways and quiet lanes.

Objectives

- Maintain rural character and remoteness
- Protect and enhance important ecological features
- Enhance opportunities for access to the countryside
- Develop links with adjoining authorities to ensure consistent policies

8. The Coventry Fringe

This zone is dominated by the influence of the urban edge of Coventry, with urban fringe features and uses and has suffered from the loss of hedgerows.

Objectives

- Maintain clearly defined urban edge
- Strengthen and enhance urban edge by woodland fringe planting

- Increase opportunities for access to the countryside
- Expand recreational opportunities
- Encourage restoration of landscape by replacement hedgerow planting

5. THE WAY FORWARD

Action Plan

This Strategy provides the overall framework for Solihull's countryside, but does not give full details of each project. These details will be included in an Action Plan, which will identify a responsible officer and Committee for each project and targets for completion. The Action Plan will be updated annually, including a review of the Council's statutory obligations, external pressures and any new opportunities.

Implementation

The agreed actions will be implemented through a Countryside Management Project, which will co-ordinate Council activities in the countryside. The Project will be responsible for developing and updating Action Plans and for ensuring their implementation through the Council's business planning process. The Project will also integrate land use planning and management indicators with other Council and external activities relating to housing, local services and transport. Progress will be monitored through the annual updating of the Action Plan.

This Strategy will be used as Supplementary Planning Guidance, and will assist the review of policies in the UDP which affect the countryside. It will be reviewed every 5 years.