

Welsh-English Border Strategic Regeneration Programme

Executive Summary

Objectives

Resources for Change (R4C) were commissioned by the Offa's Dyke Country Partnership to develop a Sustainable Regeneration Strategy for the Welsh-English Borders. The basis for the study was a hypothesis from the Partnership that there are common opportunities and challenges facing communities along the England-Wales border, which make sense to tackle together. The Partnership was keen to investigate the opportunities to develop a more sustainable rural economy, based on the high quality natural and cultural assets of the area.

The Partnership recognised a need to generate additional income to the English/Welsh border businesses and communities whilst minimising the environmental impact. The rich natural environment was seen as underpinning both the quality of life and economy of the area.

This study was commissioned to identify how this could be achieved and was funded by Welsh Assembly Government, Advantage West Midlands and Natural England. The objective of the study was:

“To assess the opportunities to develop a more sustainable rural economy based on the high quality natural and cultural assets of Offa's Dyke and the surrounding landscape.”

Three reports provide the detail of the study findings. The 'Strategic Delivery Plan' presents the key findings of our research and explains how they were developed to support the programme delivery plan. Supporting detail is given in the 'Summary of Consultation Findings' and the 'Methodology' reports. (See www.r4c.org.uk to access a copy).

Methodology

The Strategic Delivery Plan was developed from analysis of a comprehensive consultation on how sustainable economic regeneration could be achieved in the borders. The following groups were consulted as part of the process:

- Telephone interviews with 27 project partners.
- Telephone interviews with 15 other key stakeholders.
- Meetings or follow-up calls with 69 representatives of the Authorities on each side of the border: Gloucestershire, Monmouthshire, Brecon Beacons National Park, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Powys, Wrexham, Flintshire/Denbighshire, Cheshire West & Chester.
- Stakeholder workshops at the Strategic Forum of the Cross Border Memorandum of Understanding on 2nd April 2009.
- 190 responses to our on-line questionnaire.

The programme concept was further developed by review with partners and at three workshops targeted at community groups and businesses along the border.

Key Consultation Findings

The consultation responses formed the basis for development of the Strategic Programme. The key findings were as follows:

- **Aspirations.** The main aspirations for the programme were to improve cross-border working, to develop tourism, to enable communities to thrive and to make the most of natural resources.
- **Geography.** There was no consensus about the geographical extent of the border. The border was perceived to be invisible for the people living in the area, with people moving across the border to access services, work and facilities. However, a “fuzzy border”, a strip ranging from 12 to 20 miles either side of the border, is perceived. It was also clear that the term Offa’s Dyke was not necessarily a useful way of describing the border area.
- **Assets.** The economic assets of the area were seen as closely linked to its natural assets: tourism relying on the beauty and tranquillity of its landscapes and local food built on agriculture. A shared “border mentality” of independence, self-sufficiency and respect for the environment was also seen as a key asset and something that should be taken into account in defining how the area should develop. There was a strong feeling that land management and farming were key to any vision of the future, and that

“small is beautiful”.

- **Good practice examples.** A wealth of projects were identified as exemplars from which this strategy could learn and/or build on within the Strategic Programme. These spanned the themes of tourism; sustainable tourism and transport; environmental management; community development and partnership and economic development.
- **Ideas for the programme.** A wide range of initiatives were proposed, including community-based projects; ways to add value to day to day provision of services and facilities; low carbon communities; transport; sustainable tourism; increasing visitor spend by building on the Offa's Dyke Trail; community owned energy; landscape, farming, forestry and water and business development.
- **Delivery mechanisms.** Respondents were asked for any practical suggestions they had to offer about delivery structures and processes. The advice given included to break it in to chunks; to secure political support; to ensure that the business case was strong; to provide a framework with deliverables within it; to engage people; to establish a decentralised structure with money and decision-making power and to build a strong partnership.

Rationale for Strategic Programme

Community-based interventions are at the heart of the programme. This meets the clearly expressed need to make a difference on the ground. These were selected to address the topics that were considered by stakeholders to be the most important in terms of need, and where also there is a real will to bring about change and a realistic chance of achieving success. Success here is defined as adding value, rather than continuing what is already being done or at worst, replicating or replacing current successful activity.

However, on their own, community-based interventions will not be enough to bring about the scale and types of changes and benefits that the Partnership are aiming for, so additionally, a small number of process interventions are proposed. The strategic programme will provide the opportunity for three key pathways to added value:

- Scaling up an intervention to have an impact over a broader geographical area or a wider audience;
- Sharing of information and networking to enable other programmes and/or organisations to benefit from the learning;
- Providing robust evidence with which to try to influence key organisations at local,

regional or even national level in terms of policy-making and service delivery. Also, the programme will be able to act as a co-ordinated ‘voice’ for the England-Wales border areas, reaching out to policy makers.

A vital question for this research was whether the programme should launch across the full extent of the border or whether it should focus first on the ‘central zone’ or Powys, Shropshire and Herefordshire. R4C’s recommendation that in the first instance, the programme is focussed on the ‘central zone’. With firm foundations in this ‘central zone’, and with ongoing work to develop potential relationships to the north and south, it will be possible to extend collaboration along the border. This collaborative work should focus on interventions where there are real gains from a holistic north-south approach, such as sustainable transport and tourism. In this way, there is an opportunity for other areas, such as Monmouthshire and Gloucestershire, to get involved in the strategic programme, and perhaps build from joint interventions on a pilot basis to a more established framework over time.

Recommended Interventions

Whilst the research has identified a multitude of opportunities where intervention might be beneficial, there are only a limited number of areas of activity where this combines with serious interest in and potential for their implementation. The recommended programme is made up of three strategic and five thematic interventions, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Proposed Interventions

Intervention	Description
PROCESS INTERVENTIONS	
Stronger Strategic Voice for the Border	Influencing and advocacy at national, regional and local level.
Framework for the Border	Framework mapping out the key elements of sustainable regeneration for the border , so empowering local communities to drive their own agenda and providing a basis for managing and measuring performance.
Better Networking and Information Sharing	Enabling communities and businesses to share good practice to meet their common challenges
THEMATIC INTERVENTIONS	
Sustainable Tourism	Strengthen the existing tourism offer in the England-Wales border areas, creating a distinctive sustainable tourism offer that supports and promotes the local brands.
Border Link	Pro-active support for business (esp. micro-business), social enterprise and individuals and for community groups. This would complement existing services with an engagement and sign-posting role

Sustainable Business - Eco Innovation	Demonstrate how businesses can meet the challenge of climate change
Thriving Communities	Increasing the resilience of local communities
Benefiting from Natural Resources	Making use of and showcasing the area's natural resources in a responsible way

Funding Opportunities

At the end of this scoping study committed funding for this programme ends. Any further programme development will be dependent on new funding and in-kind contributions from partners and stakeholders. In order to gain momentum, new seed corn money will be needed. There are two different elements to consider:

- Funding to administer the programme as a whole
- Funding to enable implementation of specific activities.

In the current financial climate, sources of funding will be scarce and competitive. Respondents to the consultation were clear about the need to consider how the use of existing funding sources could be maximised.

In relation to funding specific activities, many of the activities that are proposed overlap or build on existing activities that are currently funded e.g. from Rural Development Programme, Local Authority budgets or European programmes. Therefore, in developing the programme, there is a need for the Partnership to identify ways in which existing budgets could be allocated to enable them to meet needs more effectively at a community level. For example, by joining together communities across the border to work together on a common problem, such as failing village halls, a better service may be able to be provided at less cost. For the Border Link, existing resources across business support services could be brought together to provide a programme on the ground. This approach to funding relies on activities carried out through the Strategic Programme adding value over and above what is already in place.

In relation to funding to administer the programme as a whole, there are likely to be more challenges. There will be considerable work needed to raise awareness of and to evidence the need for core funding or in-kind support for programme administration. If the Central Wales – West Midlands MOU agrees to absorb this programme into their work plans, the new MOU officer role may be able to provide some co-ordination resource to help get the programme moving.

Strategic Fit of the Programme

The emerging Strategic Programme is strongly aligned to priorities in the relevant strategies: the Wales Spatial Plan; West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy; The West Midlands Economic Strategy: Connecting to Success; West Midlands Rural Regeneration Zone Implementation Plan; W:AVE – Wales: A Vibrant Economy; Rural Development Plan for Wales; Rural Development Programme for England; Central Wales – West Midlands Memorandum of Understanding on Cross Border Collaboration and Mersey-Dee Alliance Business Plan.

Preparing for Delivery

The strategic delivery plan provides an outline of the shape and nature of the proposed Welsh-English Border Strategic Regeneration Programme. However, there is still a substantial amount of work needed before the Programme and the Partnership are ready for implementation.

Key tasks include developing an organisational structure which has the right representation and 'clout' to be able to prepare a detailed business case for the interventions and then to deliver them. In the long term this is likely to involve embedding the programme into existing organisations and delivery mechanisms, rather than creating new structures. However, to be achieved there will need to be a managed process of change which will involve pilot projects and short term task and finish groups.

A culture of co-operation and commitment needs to be developed, building on the good will and effort that was evident from the consultation process. This will mean participants committing to invest time and resources in the programme and working constructively together to overcome the very real differences in how things are done each side of the border.

The partnership need to develop a plan for implementation which will make clear the priority actions, the timetable and who is responsible for making them happen. This will be discussed at the Partnership meeting on 27th July 2009.