



**LOCAL  
PARTNERSHIPS**

## **WARWICKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

West Midlands Property Alliance

Using assets for growth



### **Introduction**

#### **Background**

Warwickshire is a landlocked non-metropolitan county in the West Midlands region of England. The county town is Warwick, although the largest town is Nuneaton.

The county is divided into five districts of North Warwickshire, Nuneaton & Bedworth, Rugby, Warwick and Stratford-on-Avon. The current county boundaries



were set in 1974 by the Local Government Act 1972. The historic county boundaries also included Coventry and Solihull, as well as much of Birmingham. The county is bordered by Gloucestershire to the south west, Worcestershire and the West Midlands to the west, Staffordshire to the north west, Leicestershire to the north east, Northamptonshire to the east and Oxfordshire to the south and south east.

The majority of Warwickshire's population live in the north and centre of the county. The market towns of northern and eastern Warwickshire were industrialised in the 19th century, and include Atherstone, Bedworth, Nuneaton, and Rugby. Major industries included coal mining, textiles, engineering and cement production, but heavy industry is in decline, being replaced by distribution centres, light to medium industry, and services. Of the northern and eastern towns, only Nuneaton and Rugby (as the birthplace of rugby football) are well-known outside of Warwickshire. The prosperous towns of central and western Warwickshire including Royal Leamington Spa, Stratford-upon-Avon, Kenilworth, Alcester, and Warwick harbour light to medium industries, services and tourism as major employment sectors.

The south of the county is largely rural and sparsely populated, and includes a small area of the Cotswolds, at the border with northwest Gloucestershire. The only town in the south of Warwickshire is Shipston-on-Stour. The highest point in the county, at 261 m (856 ft), is Ebrington Hill, again on the border with Gloucestershire, grid reference SP187426 at the county's southwest extremity.

The north of the county, bordering Staffordshire and Leicestershire, is mildly undulating countryside and the northernmost village, No Man's Heath, is only 34 miles (55 km) south of the Peak District National Park's southernmost point.

There are no cities in Warwickshire since both Coventry and Birmingham were incorporated into the West Midlands county in 1974 and are now metropolitan authorities in themselves. The largest towns in Warwickshire as of 2004 are: Nuneaton (pop. 77,500), Rugby (62,700), Leamington Spa (45,300), and Bedworth (32,500). Stratford, Warwick, and Kenilworth all house 20,000-25,000 inhabitants, while the smaller towns of Atherstone, Alcester, Coleshill, Southam, Bulkington, Polesworth, Kingsbury, Henley-in-Arden, Studley, Shipston. Wellesbourne and Whitnash have populations between 5,000 and 12,000.

## The Council

Like all local authorities Warwickshire is facing unprecedented reductions to its budgets. In this tough economic climate it is looking at how it can achieve savings by targeting resources at those with greatest need and creating opportunities for growth.

It wants to deliver safe, secure services that meet people's needs, and to strengthen the local economy by attracting more investment and maximising business and enterprise opportunities. It is committed to being an open and transparent council and Members want to continue this conversation as services are reshaped to meet savings targets.

As part of this conversation a public interest debate on unitarisation has been started in Warwickshire to open the thinking on whether a unitary council or councils could deliver essential services and growth more effectively.



## 1. Market town regeneration

### 1.1 Background

Warwickshire is characterised by a series of small market and other towns. Many of these towns have struggled to retain vibrancy in the recession. Warwickshire with its partners have carried out 12 town studies, starting with the mapped public sector estate. The aim has been to identify collaborative opportunities and key sites, the development of which could stimulate further growth, either for housing or commercial and employment use.

### 1.2 Exceptional characteristics

An example is in Nuneaton, where consolidation of county and district council land and some land assembly has delivered a strategic site. This is being developed to provide a new library, multi-storey car park, food store anchor, offices, small sale retail units and, crucially, premises for FedEx. FedEx are the key employer in the town and had been looking for better premises to expand. This development will secure FedEx's presence in Nuneaton, delivering a much-needed vote of confidence in the local economy.

### 1.3 Key lessons learnt

This scheme has been hard to deliver and has taken 4 years. Key to its success was the determination to retain FedEx in the town and concerted work between county and district council to make the most of the opportunities their combined holdings presented. Additionally some funding has been provided by the HCA.

### 1.4 Future aims

Warwickshire is keen to work through the other town centre studies with district council partners in order to deliver significant opportunities identified. However, while joint occupation of accommodation is happening in 6 locations across Warwickshire, more could be done with additional resource and commitment. Currently issues of sovereignty impede some of this potentially productive joint working.

The debate on unitarisation and other means of joining up services could be interesting and fruitful for asset management. Assets could potentially be used to demonstrate the benefits of adopting a more joined up approach.



## 2. Supporting the rural economy

### 2.1 Background

It is a key policy objective of Warwickshire County Council to support its large rural population and their need for affordable and decent homes both for rent and for sale in villages. WCC wants to ensure the county has a living working countryside with inclusive rural communities, which will help young people to remain in the areas where they grew up.

### 2.2 Key facts

WCC owns some 5000 acres of land in rural areas. It is currently in the process of reviewing this estate to identify potential housing development land adjacent to settlements. It is targeting £50m of land sales to generate a fund that can be reinvested in the provision of new homes, especially affordable units across the county. The fund will be used for both infrastructure and to positively influence the quality of new builds to ensure their acceptability to local people as well as to stand the test of time.

Current studies show that Warwickshire will need over 300 new rural affordable homes throughout the county in the next five years. In some districts, average house prices are more than 14 times average annual household income.

WCC generates £700,000 pa in rental income from its rural estate via farm tenancies. This revenue supports the delivery of vital key services. The asset review will compare the performance of individual assets which will guide decisions about estate rationalisation.

### 2.3 Exceptional characteristics

In addition to farms, the WCC rural estate also contains 200 small workshop and office units at 10 rural business centres, which provide incubator space to fledgling and micro businesses essential to the health and development of the rural economy. These centres are well distributed across the county and are a vital staging post for local entrepreneurs. They range from 150 – 2000 sq ft and are available on flexible lease or licence terms. Warwickshire is one of just five Rural Growth Network (RGN) pilots in the country. WCC offer a flexible package of advice and support to rural businesses in any sector and to people looking to start their own business. With drop-in clinics, specialist advice, one-to-one mentoring, coaching, loans, grant funding and property, the Council and its partners aims to provide the support needed to encourage existing small businesses to grow. Warwickshire County Council is leading the RGN on behalf of Coventry and Warwickshire Local Enterprise Partnership and the services or projects are delivered by a range of specialist organisations and partners. The Warwickshire Rural Growth Network is funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Rural Development Programme for England which is part financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, the Government Equalities Office and Warwickshire County Council.

Warwickshire Rural Housing Association (WRHA) specialises in the provision of affordable homes in the county's villages. In the first of what is planned to be a series of joint schemes, WCC provided land to WRHA at agricultural value to enable the development of a 10 new homes scheme in Ilmington. This project consists of affordable rent and shared ownership units with 4 homes sold at full market value. Half the land value attributed to the market units was reinvested by WCC in the scheme as a cross subsidy to assist the provision of the affordable units. Further funding was provided by the HCA. The 4 market homes will be sold to local people. A village based housing needs survey undertaken by the Parish Council identified a requirement for 14 affordable homes for named individuals so this scheme will make a significant contribution towards meeting this need.



## 2.4 Key lessons learnt

Some of the rural business centres are aging and have not been actively managed, so occupiers have settled and churn has not always been encouraged. There is a lack of appropriate grow-on space so centres have tended to fill but have not kept pace with demand from new businesses. The £50m to be raised from land sales will look to address this unmet need by direct investment by the Council in a new generation of small business units to create an actively managed and progressive portfolio not on offer from the private sector.

WCC land assets in and around settlements can be a catalyst for the provision of mixed tenure housing development schemes which are supported by local people which would otherwise not happen. The obligation to obtain best value from the sale of land can be respected whilst at the same time ensuring that non-viable affordable homes are subsidised from market value plots within a blended scheme.

## 2.5 Future aims

WCC will continue to look for innovative and pragmatic ways of intervening in markets in order to support communities in its extensive rural areas. Asset reviews may well highlight the opportunity to dispose of well-let mature business centres raising vital funds that can be used to vary the range of this portfolio by location and unit typology, either by WCC direct development or via a JV with private developers, investors or landowners.

The Ilmington affordable homes project will be rolled out to other similar situations capitalising on locations where WCC land abuts settlements and where vacant possession can be negotiated with the Council's tenant farmers.

## 3. Conclusions

### 3.1 Strengths

Warwickshire was an early adopter of asset mapping and has a comprehensive map of the public sector assets in the county.

Warwickshire's programmes to support the rural economy are beginning to bear fruit. The precise tailoring of schemes to meet the individual needs of villages for housing and business premises is building support for local scale developments in rural areas.

### 3.2 Constraints

Joint working is not so fully developed in Warwickshire as in other parts of the region. The debate about the best shape of local government in Warwickshire going forward should help to clarify how the best value can be extracted from the combined public estate in the county.

### 3.3 Sharing ideas

Warwickshire Council are happy to share ideas and learning with other authorities from the West Midlands and nationally.



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