## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key messages</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Context</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 The Problem</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 The Stakeholders</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 The Solution</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Conclusions and Recommendations</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 County Action Plans</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Research brief</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Key factors leading to rural deprivation and possible solutions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Local access studies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Glossary of names and terms in Figure 4.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Funding sources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Consultation questionnaires</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Current activities and good practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Representation on Local Strategic Partnerships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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KEY MESSAGES

Deprivation from Sport and Recreation (S&R) opportunities in rural communities is part of a general problem of deprivation from services and facilities.

The main problem facing the planning and delivery of S&R opportunities and facilities within rural East of England is therefore how to overcome the issues linked to the isolation - or deprivation - of rural communities from many S&R opportunities. To be effective the way in which such opportunities are planned and delivered for rural communities must differ from approaches adopted within the urban centres.

The key factors influencing S&R opportunities in rural areas can be summarised and distilled into the themes:

- Economics
- Access and transport
- Identifying needs
- Matching needs with opportunities
- Joined up thinking and working
- Signposting and availability of mentor support
- Land use planning.

Small communities ranging from isolated houses, through hamlets and villages to small market towns usually lack sufficient people to justify in economic terms many facilities considered normal for urban areas. This problem can also be compounded by stricter planning and design criteria that might be employed in the countryside in comparison to urban areas, and also by a lack of community coherence and unity in creating and maintaining opportunities of the types found in urban areas.

But other sorts of opportunity exist in rural areas, based on the natural environment.

Recent changes in the way that rural needs will be prioritised and services delivered present excellent opportunities for better joined up thinking and working in the field of rural S&R.

This report provides recommendations for ways in which ‘stakeholders’ involved in providing rural S&R opportunities can more effectively work together within the context of changed structures for the delivery of all sorts of rural services. It also stresses the need to recognise S&R covers a very wide spectrum of healthy activity and the role of the natural environment should play at least as important a part in providing opportunities for rural communities as the more conventional facilities and formal activities.
A series of recommendations and county based action plans convert the findings and conclusions of this report into a series of discrete, practical tasks involving a range of partner stakeholders. It is hoped that much of this work will be co-ordinated through the Eastern Region Rural Sport and Recreation Working Group, and also through a new post with the specific remit of driving through these recommendations and promoting in other ways opportunities for S&R within rural communities.
1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 GENERAL

This is a report of a study that has examined the best ways of delivering opportunities to participate in sport and active recreation for rural communities. The project was run through the Eastern Region Rural Sport and Recreation Working Group (ERRSRWG), and was funded by the East of England Development Agency (EEDA). The study focuses on rural communities in the East of England, although its findings and conclusions have relevance to other areas with similar characteristics.

The full research brief for this study is provided in Appendix 1, but the study has aimed to:

- highlight the main factors contributing to rural sport and recreational deprivation, and the barriers to the development of opportunities among rural communities
- identify the key partners, networks and structures, highlighting links and gaps
- pinpoint the priority areas for future allocation of resources, and identify funding sources
- identify and promote good practice in the region, and develop ways in which these can be replicated elsewhere
- develop statements of local needs in each of the constituent counties, highlighting the particular and different circumstances which may exist in each
- advise ERRSRWG on its future role in coordinating action.

Sport, recreation and physical activity (from now on shortened to S&R) is a wide-ranging concept, but for the subject of this report is defined as any leisure time physical activity that makes a positive contribution to physical health and well-being. Potentially this not only covers organised activities like football and cricket, but also normally casual pursuits such as walking and cycling.

S&R is an enjoyable activity, and is important in its own right as a means to become physically fit, develop balance and co-ordination, achieve self-esteem, a sense of fulfilment, and more. But S&R is also increasingly seen as integral to achieving a more active, healthy and less sedentary population.

The Public Health White Paper published in November 2004 highlighted a number of overarching priorities for attention nationally. These include reducing obesity and improving diet and nutrition, increasing exercise and improving mental health. S & R have an important role to play in contributing towards this agenda, by improving levels of activity. The Health Development Agency in the region is already working with Sport England and other groups to address the particular problems associated with people in rural areas, where health inequalities are compounded by other aspects of social
exclusion affecting groups such as the low paid, older people, especially women and school leavers.

S&R is not just important for its physical health benefits\(^1\), but can also contribute to other wider agendas – quality of life, social inclusion, personal development, crime and disorder reduction, community regeneration, the environment, the economy, education and understanding. These benefits have been evidenced elsewhere on many occasions and there is no point going over well-trodden ground again within this report\(^2\), but they present implications for the way in which S&R opportunities are both identified and delivered for the benefit of rural communities. In many ways it would be helpful if we could avoid the distinction between ‘Sport’ and ‘Recreation’ in their promotion as the underlying recognition is that they both help to improve health. Perhaps in time they might be subsumed under the term ‘healthy activity’, and the relevant public agencies and organisations reorganised around this single concept.

1.2 WHY THE NEED FOR THIS STUDY AND ACTION?

Encouraging and enabling people living in rural communities to take part is seen as a particular issue in much of the East of England. The apparent lack of local opportunities coupled with poor access to towns and cities where most conventional sports and leisure facilities are located are often identified as key obstacles to improving participation rates in such areas. This perceived 'deprivation' from opportunities is a facet of a bigger problem affecting many rural communities lacking good access to other facilities and services that urban dwellers may take for granted.

What can be done? It would be naïve to assume rural communities could ever enjoy the same level of access to facilities and services in general as their urban counterparts. The Government has already stated that those living in rural areas cannot expect to have the same level of access to sports and recreation facilities as in towns\(^3\). The answer to the question must therefore be to make better use of existing and likely future opportunities, and these must be planned and delivered with greater overall imagination, integration, and effect.

This study comes at an important time as the Government (through the Rural White Paper, Haskins review and its Rural Strategies of 2004\(^4\)), stresses the importance of access to S&R opportunities in helping to sustain healthy and

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\(^1\) The Eastern Region Public Health Observatory database contains approximately 250 examples of projects to encourage physical activity in the East of England. (www.erpho.org.uk/extras/PhysAct.asp)

\(^2\) See for example Best Value through Sport. (Sport England and Local Government Association 1999).

\(^3\) Planning Policy Guidance Note 17: Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation. (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2002).

sustainable rural communities, and advocates a review and overhaul of the way in which rural services generally are delivered. Elsewhere other important strategies and organisations are emerging which will have a very important bearing on the way in which S&R needs are both identified and met, as discussed later in this report. There are also now the beginnings of a serious attempt to dovetail the various regional strategies and policies and reflect them in a single integrated strategy.

It is essential for those involved in promoting and maintaining S&R opportunities for rural communities to be aware of this shifting context for the delivery of services, and to exploit it fully. This report amongst other things presents ideas on how this might be best achieved.

1.3 WHAT DOES THE 'EAST OF ENGLAND' COVER?

For the purpose of this report the East of England covers the administrative counties of:

- Bedfordshire
- Cambridgeshire
- Essex
- Hertfordshire
- Norfolk
- Suffolk

and the unitary authorities of Peterborough, Southend-on-Sea, Luton and Thurrock.

1.4 A FEW POINTS OF CLARIFICATION

1.4.1 What does 'Rural' mean?
For the study the terms 'rural' and 'rural community' can be interchanged and include settlements of up to 10,000 people. In practice this covers isolated houses and hamlets within areas of countryside, as well as larger settlements of up to 10,000 residents (which will include market towns).

1.4.2 Where does 'The Countryside' fit into this?
Both the 'natural' environment of the countryside and the extensive network of rights of way and permissive routes are important media for many forms of S&R. The recent 'Right to Roam' legislation is leading to the creation of many open access areas, and some activities such as air sports, riding and golf rely on the natural resources which are only available outside the main towns. The Sustainable Communities drive by the government is also leading to the creation of new open space some of which may be within reach of rural communities. Opportunities to use the countryside for S&R are therefore

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5 This definition is based on a new definition of rurality developed in part by the Countryside Agency which is summarised in its research note CRN 86: New definition of urban and rural areas of England and Wales (2004).
increasing. Similarly, the coast is an important resource for S&R, being within easy reach of many rural areas.

1.4.3 Deprivation from S&R: one facet of a much larger concept
Deprivation from S&R opportunities in rural communities is part of a general problem of deprivation from services and facilities. In turn deprivation from services and facilities of all kinds is one dimension of a much broader concept of 'Overall Deprivation'. 'Overall Deprivation' might be described thus:

"people can be said to be deprived if they lack the type of diet, clothing, housing, household facilities and fuel and environmental, education, working and social conditions, activities and facilities which are customary”

Deprivation from S&R opportunities clearly fits somewhere into this bigger picture of Overall Deprivation.\(^7\)

1.5 STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

This report includes:
- A fuller description of the context of this study (section 2)
- A review of the key factors that lead to deprivation from S&R opportunities in rural areas (Section 3)
- A review of the relevant stakeholders with an interest in promoting S&R in rural areas (Section 4)
- A review of the existing (and likely future) mechanisms and structures for delivering sports and recreation opportunities within rural areas (Section 4)

\(^7\) Townsend (1987) from an extract contained in The English Indices of Deprivation. (ODPM 2004).

\(^8\) The 2005 National Rural Affairs conference organised by DEFRA drew some general conclusions about the way forward in terms of tackling deprivation arising from lack of access to facilities and services, and these are particularly relevant as background to the resolution of specific issues relating to S&R. The factors to be especially considered include the following:

- The need to empower rural communities
- The essential nature of constructive partnerships
- The importance of engaging young people in decision making
- The essential interrelationship between urban and rural areas
- The concept of neighbourhoods in rural areas
- The role of Parish Councils as ‘community organisations’
- Co-location of village facilities, and rationalisation to avoid duplication
- The need to make procedures less cumbersome
- A move towards 5-year funding programmes
- The important role of community based organisations in rural partnerships
- Better use of IT and e-Government
- Development of rural sounding boards which include both individuals and groups
- The role of social enterprise
- Prioritisation of ‘lagging’ rural areas, based on need
• Ideas for overcoming some of the identified problems, including how best to identify 'deprivation' as it relates to S&R opportunities in rural areas (Section 5)
• Overall conclusions and recommendations and County based Action Plans (Sections 6 and 7).

The research method has been based on questionnaire surveys distributed to many of the key stakeholders involved with rural S&R; a series of county workshops each composed of stakeholders; a regional workshop; and, a review of relevant existing research, policy and other literature. Essentially a ‘bottom up’ approach has been adopted in which the views of local stakeholders have been solicited and assimilated prior to consultation with higher-level stakeholders. The reasoning behind this approach is that because the problems raised in this report affect local communities and people, it is first and foremost their views that are needed in the attempt to highlight potential solutions.
2. CONTEXT: THE PROBLEM IN MORE DETAIL

2.1 RURAL EAST OF ENGLAND: WORDS AND PICTURES

2.1.1 A big region
Geographically, the East of England is a very large area covering 19,000 sq kms and representing about 15% of the total land within England. Countryside covers 80% of the area of the region. Despite recent development trends it continues to have a very large rural population with 43.5% of all its 5.4m residents living in districts classed by the Countryside Agency as rural, the second highest proportion of any region. About 1/3 of residents live in towns of less than 10,000, and 10% in settlements of less than 500 residents. Between 1981 and 2001 the region’s rural population increased by 17.8% to 2.35 million.

Within the region there is considerable variance in the distribution of people, and therefore the degree of 'rurality'. The following two figures show:
- The relative population densities for the 'higher tier' local authorities (county and unitary councils); and,
- All 'lower tier' and (again) unitary authorities.

Figure 2.1: Population densities for county and unitary authorities (people/hectare)

![Population densities for county and unitary authorities](image)

Figure 2.2: Population densities for lower tier and unitary authorities (people/hectare)

![Population densities for lower tier and unitary authorities](image)
2.1.2 A rural region

When looking at the higher tier authorities, there is generally a significant contrast between the population densities of authorities closer to London and the remainder. However, analysis at the lower tier of authority shows that even in those parts of the region close to the M25 there are some authorities with a low population density. Similarly in the northern part of the region, there are densely populated local authorities. The following figure (urban areas in the region with more than 10,000 people) shows that the least densely populated parts of the region still have almost their fair share of towns and cities. Likewise the parts closer to London still have their rural areas. There are certainly more and bigger 'gaps' between the towns and cities in the northern half of the region then the south - and it is these gaps that house 43.5% of the region's population.
2.1.3 A diverse region with diverse needs
Although it has its own share of towns and cities much of the East of England therefore has a very rural character, and a very large proportion of its residents live in rural areas. This even applies to parts of the region which perhaps feel a greater affinity with London than (say) Norwich, Hunstanton, Kings Lynn or Cromer. Although it would be wrong to think that Thurrock in the extreme south is affected by ‘rurality’ and all its attendant issues to the same extent as Kings Lynn and West Norfolk in the north, there will be some shared experiences. In fact there are very few parts of the region that do not have at least a sprinkling of rural communities.

Rural life in the East of England has much going for it; some might argue that the region’s rural residents generally enjoy a high quality of life. Indeed, the Countryside Agency recognises that within the region rural employment rates are high; average gross weekly earnings are above the national average, crime rates are low, and the environment is generally attractive and in good condition. However, set against this is that many rural households have

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9 All this is evidenced in the regular ‘State of the Countryside’ reports produced by the Countryside Agency, both nationally and for the regions. (Countryside Agency 2003 and 2004
poor access to services compared with the rest of England, and whilst this might not be so much of a problem to those with easy access to their car, 16.5% of rural households do not have this benefit.\textsuperscript{10} Even in those households that do have access to their own vehicle there will be many people dependent on the availability and willingness of others to do the driving. Residents of towns and cities generally do not suffer from physical remoteness to key services and facilities as experienced by many of their rural counterparts. This problem applies to many S&R facilities.

A recent study completed by the New Policy Institute concluded that:

"whereas most aspects of poverty and social exclusion are less common in rural East of England than elsewhere, a lack of access to rural services is more common. Even comparing rural East of England with other parts of the country rural East of England usually scores worst"\textsuperscript{11}

Another often noted bi-product of this remoteness (from both people as well as services) can be social isolation and exclusion for many residents both young and old. S&R can serve as a social catalyst and the absence of such opportunities merely compounds the sense of exclusion and loneliness felt by many.

As this report will go on to explain, the main problem facing the planning and delivery of S&R opportunities and facilities within rural East of England is therefore how to overcome the issues linked to the isolation - or deprivation - of rural communities from many S&R opportunities, as part of a wider problem. To be effective the way in which such opportunities are planned and delivered for rural communities must differ from approaches adopted within the urban centres - but how?

The reason why many rural areas lack the sorts S&R opportunities commonplace in towns and cities is simple economics. Small communities ranging from isolated houses, through hamlets and villages to small market towns usually lack sufficient people to justify in economic terms many facilities considered normal for urban areas. This problem can also be compounded by stricter planning and design criteria that might be employed in the countryside in comparison to urban areas. But other sorts of opportunity exist in rural areas. As this report will consider later rural areas offer an equally large range of S&R opportunities as urban areas, but they are based on the natural environment and are therefore not commensurate to those found in towns and cities.

'The Problem' is not new. Issues linked to access to services from rural areas in general have already received a considerable airing over the years. Similarly, how best to provide S&R opportunities for the benefit of rural

\textsuperscript{10} As above.
communities has been the subject of much academic review, case studies and good practice guides aimed at leisure management professionals.

2.2 THE NEED TO LOOK AGAIN AT THE PROBLEM

However, the context within which The Problem must be considered has changed, requiring a fresh look. The reason why the context has changed is as a result of the following:

- The shift in national health policy from a focus on the remedial to the preventative, with the implication this has for health improvement measures;
- The corresponding elevation of S&R up the agenda as a means of improving the overall health of individuals and communities in line with the above changing policy focus;
- The rapidly expanding (and often confusing) array of agencies and organisations involved either directly or indirectly in promoting S&R opportunities, as a result of both changing national health policy, and on-going efforts to achieve 'joined-up' thinking and practice in the planning and delivery of all manner of services and facilities for local communities;
- Imminent structural changes in the way in which many services will be planned and delivered as a result of the Government's changing strategy for rural areas, including the changing land use planning context; and,
- The beginnings of a serious attempt to dovetail the various regional strategies and policies and reflect them in a single integrated strategy.

The above changes (discussed more fully in Section 4) present opportunities to improve the S&R lot of rural communities in both effective and imaginative ways. To exploit these opportunities requires all agencies and organisations responsible for promoting S&R amongst rural communities to be aware of this shifting context.