Staffordshire County Council

APPENDIX 1

Staffordshire Rural Economic Strategy Draft for Consultation

2022-2030

May 22

With pride. With purpose. With you.

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April 2021

Executive Summary

Staffordshire County Council commissioned and has been working with Warwick Economics & Development (WECD) to prepare a new rural economic strategy for Staffordshire that responds to the opportunities and barriers facing the rural economy. It is a key component of Staffordshire's new Economic Strategy and recognises the significance of Staffordshire's rural areas to the county's economy and that of the wider region.

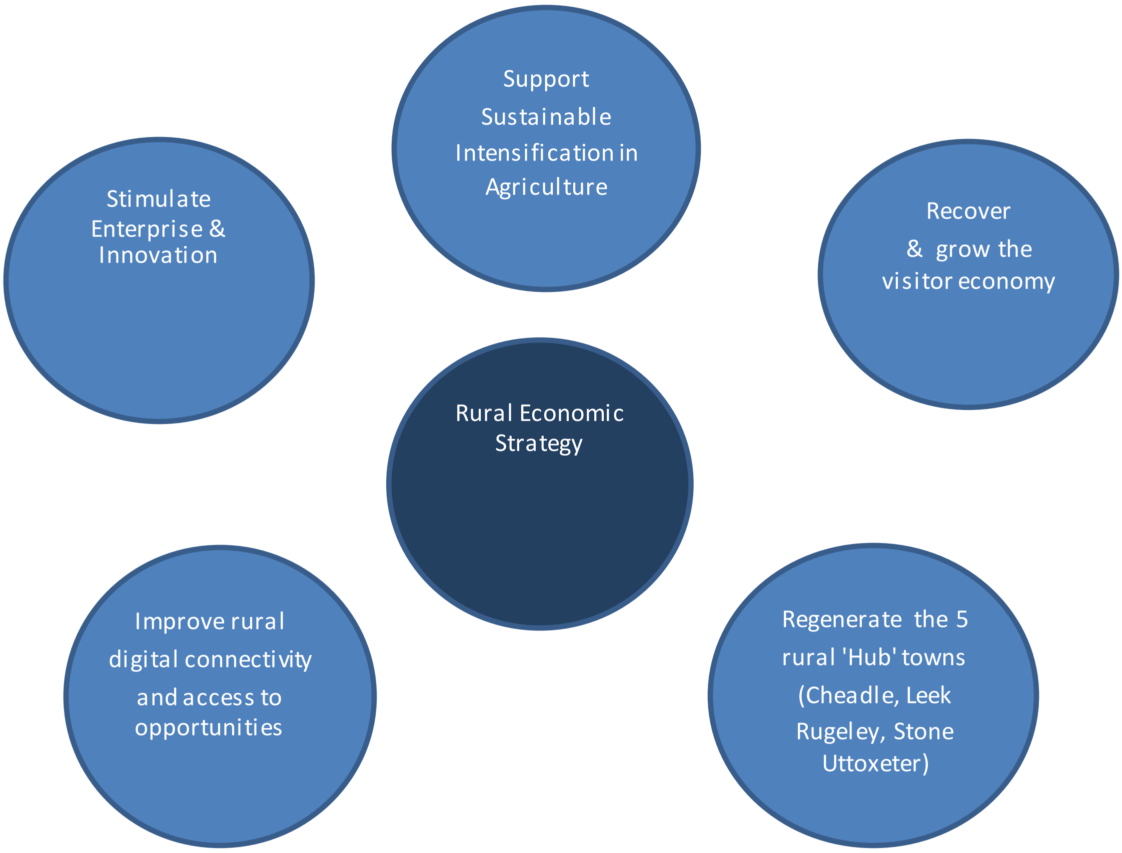
Staffordshire's rural area for the purpose of the Rural Economic Strategy have been defined by Lower Super Output areas based on DEFRA's 2015 urban/rural classification and also includes the urban areas associated with the 5 rural hub towns of Leek, Cheadle, Uttoxeter, Stone and Rugeley.

The strategy is based on evidence of Staffordshire's rural economy assets and strengths, and of the opportunities and challenges facing the rural economy, including the implications of national policy developments. The evidence base for the strategy and summary profiles of each of Staffordshire's five Rural Hub Towns (Leek, Cheadle, Uttoxeter, Stone and Rugeley) are available separately.

The strategy builds on stakeholders' commitment to the rural economy expressed in their Rural Declaration in 2013. and aims to "*maximise the contribution of Staffordshire's rural assets to the development of a 'thriving, digital, high value and clean economy' in Staffordshire that creates good jobs and supports inclusive growth, by developing the productivity, competitiveness and resilience of the rural economy".*

It is focused on five strategic priorities, as shown in the diagram below:

Staffordshire Rural Regeneration Strategy



The Rural Economic Strategy is central to the county council's Strategic Plan and is a priority for our new Economic Strategy by providing a specific rural focus for Staffordshire's economy, the challenges it faces and the opportunities it presents for growth and prosperity.

The Economic Strategy outlines the County Council's vision, ambitions, and priorities for the Staffordshire economy over the coming years and its focus are the overarching priorities agreed through the development of our Strategic Plan, namely town centres, start-ups & step-ups, higher skilled & higher paid workforce, the development of investment ready projects and strategic corridors.

The RES's priorities closely reflect the aims and objectives of the Economic Strategy and will provide a specific rural focus for Staffordshire's economy, the challenges it faces and the opportunities it presents for growth and prosperity. It also links with other county-wide strategies including the LEP's Strategic Economic Plan; the Stoke and Staffordshire Skills Strategy, the County Council's Climate Change Strategy, and other thematic strategies and improvement plans such as transportation and connectivity.

The draft RES has been prepared with the support of external experts and has engaged with key stakeholders including District Councils, FE/HE providers, Chamber of Commerce, Stoke on Trent and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, FSB, NFU, DEFRA and Women in Rural Enterprise. The Implementation Plan will be aligned to the County Council's Economic Strategy and Strategic Infrastructure Plan and will include a pipeline of new projects and initiatives that will need a lot of development, through to adapting existing projects, to ensure that the substantial levels of growth planned are sustainable, and can be accommodated, without being detrimental to accessibility, connectivity, and service delivery.

It seeks to build on the strength in diversity of Staffordshire's rural economy, whilst reflecting the role of agriculture in the rural economy in particular, and the significance of Staffordshire's rural assets to its visitor economy. Although manufacturing is the largest rural sector in employment terms, the strategy does not specifically target manufacturing, as it is addressed in Staffordshire-wide strategies.

The strategy prioritises tackling the infrastructure and access challenges that particularly affect the rural economy (i.e., weaknesses in digital connectivity) and the need to develop low carbon energy infrastructure in rural areas. The opportunity has been identified to develop low-carbon business activities in rural areas, such as micro-generation schemes on farms. The strategy prioritises the sustainable intensification of agriculture – a process by which agricultural productivity is enhanced, whilst also creating environmental and social benefits.

The strategy targets the role of the Rural Hub Towns in the rural economy, alongside Staffordshire's strategic towns, and prioritises their regeneration to unlock investment opportunities, improve their resilience and develop their visitor offers, drawing on and developing their individual distinctiveness and asset bases.

The strategy takes a medium- to long-term perspective, although shorter-term action is also underway to support individuals and businesses during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In detail, the **strategic priorities** are to:

1. Stimulate **enterprise and innovation** to increase productivity, competitiveness and resilience across all sectors of the rural economy, including in overseas markets, to enable high-quality, high-wage job retention and growth, and to enable the transition to net-zero carbon emissions;

2. Support **sustainable intensification (SI) in agriculture, whereby agricultural productivity is enhanced, whilst also creating environmental and social benefits** through productivity investments and business support for improved viability, diversification, carbon reduction and succession;

3. Recover and grow the **visitor economy**, including 'green tourism', by supporting tourism businesses and developing an on-trend visitor offer, including a high-quality accommodation offer, drawing on Staffordshire's rich countryside and heritage assets;

4. Improve **rural digital connectivity and access to opportunities** for rural businesses, workers, residents and visitors, and develop digital and low-carbon energy infrastructure; and,

5. Regenerate the five **Rural Hub Towns** (Leek, Cheadle, Stone, Uttoxeter and Rugeley) to unlock investment opportunities, develop their visitor offers, and improve their resilience via high-quality place management.

Skills are vital to helping achieve sustainable economic growth across all rural business sectors. Therefore, provision of relevant skills and knowledge is viewed as a crucial action to ensure that the objectives of each of the five strategic priorities are met.

Climate Change and its impact on our rural landscape is also an important consideration for the strategy when delivering economic activity around all its themes and priorities.

Successful delivery of the strategy will depend on a partnership that brings together the activities and resources of a wide range of stakeholders across the private, public, academic (HE and FE), voluntary, community and third sectors. A range of stakeholders have been consulted in the development of the strategy (see Appendix A for the list of stakeholders consulted).

A Rural Strategy Leadership Group will be formed, comprised of senior individuals from these sectors, with responsibility for driving forward the delivery of the strategy, using its expertise and influence to advocate for the rural economy, and a 'Think Rural' approach. The Group will lead on the development of new approaches to unlock the potential of the rural economy, and the development of strong business cases for investment and funding. The Group will draw on capacity and learning developed through Staffordshire's LEADER programme, and in other places.

The funding landscape for rural development has changed significantly with EU exit, and the end of the CAP-funded LEADER programme; a broad-based approach will be needed that draws on a wide range of partner assets, and resources and funding sources.

A number of intervention priorities are identified to guide the development of an action plan, including short-, medium- and long-term actions, including a combination of current and planned activities, and where gaps are evidenced, new initiatives and resources identified to address them.

1. Introduction

1.1. Staffordshire is a rural county. Approximately 80 per cent of its land area can be considered rural (see Figure 1.1) and it has a rich and diverse asset-base that plays an important role in the county economy and that of the wider region. Rural districts accounted for 61 per cent of Staffordshire's economic output (Gross Value Added, GVA) in 2018.

1.2. Staffordshire's central location and accessibility make it a popular business location. The rural business base is large and diverse, with 27,000 registered businesses accounting for 70 per cent of all registered businesses in Stoke and Staffordshire. Rural businesses operate across a diverse range of sectors, beyond land-based industries including farming, forestry and tourism; manufacturing is the largest sector in employment terms.

1.3. For those considering living in a countryside location, Staffordshire boasts the added attraction of accessible employment, reflected in a well-qualified rural workforce, a high proportion of whom are employed in senior occupations.

1.4. Staffordshire's beautiful countryside (including parts of the Peak District National Park and Cannock Chase AONB), heritage, market towns and visitor attractions (particularly Alton Towers and Drayton Manor Park) attract large visitor numbers each year.

1.5. However, Staffordshire also faces challenges typical of rural areas, including peripherality and isolation in some parts, with relatively weak internal transport, broadband and mobile phone connections, and significant gaps in some locations. Housing affordability and accessibility are relatively limited, with particular implications for younger and elderly residents.

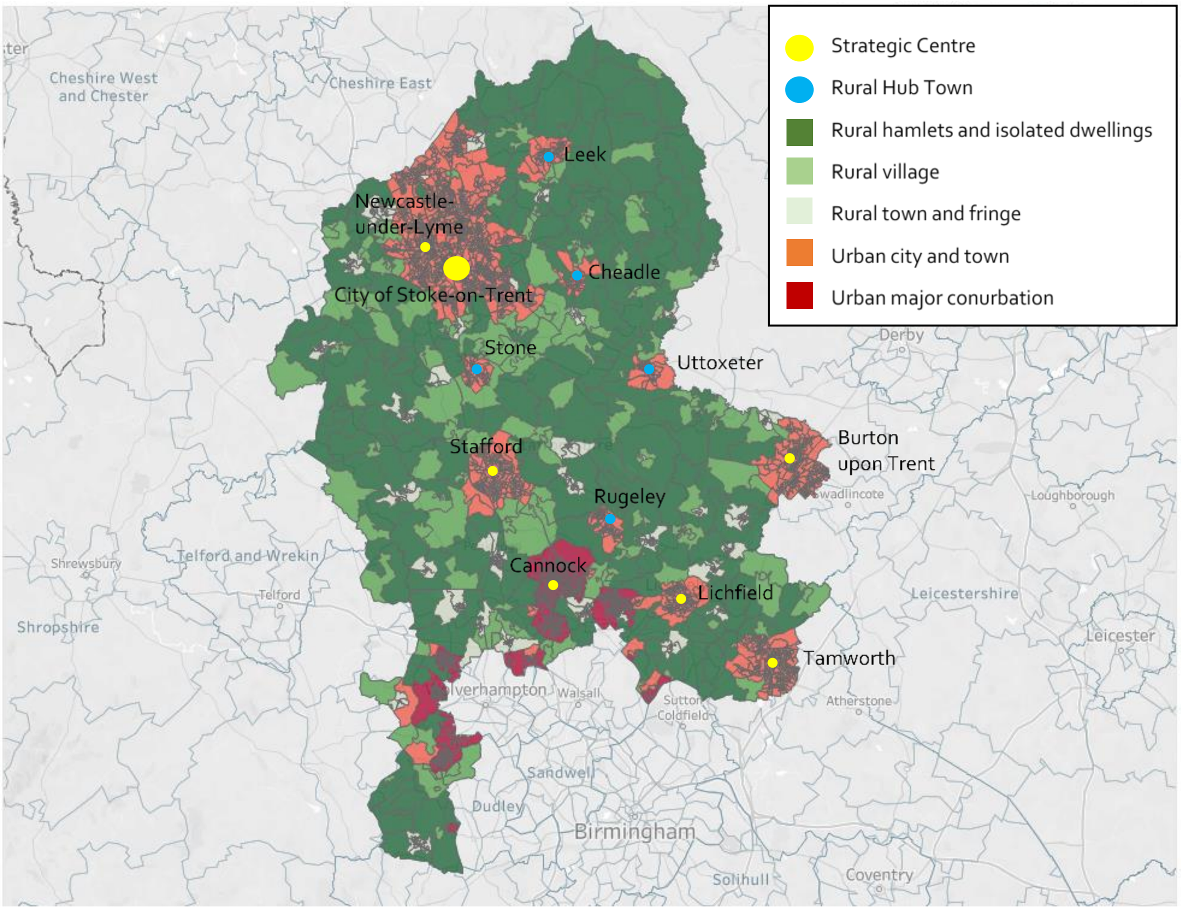
1.6. Social, technological and environmental developments have particular implications for rural areas. A large and growing elderly population necessitates changes to the way that health and social care services are delivered, for example through adoption of new technologies in assistive living. Net-zero targets and technology developments present opportunities and challenges in terms of demand for low-carbon energy generation and supply and transport.

1.7. The rapid evolution of digital technologies and the shift to online, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, requires ongoing upgrades to digital infrastructure and digital capability amongst businesses and workers to remain competitive, whilst creating opportunities for rural locations and sectors. EU exit brings significant changes for agri-food production, rural development policy and international trade, and may bring opportunities for attracting supply chain 're-shoring' investment, particularly in manufacturing.

1.8. A rural strategy is needed to support rural businesses, people and places (including the Rural Hub Towns) to identify and meet these specific opportunities and challenges and to become more productive and competitive. The rural strategy is a key component of Staffordshire's new Economic Strategy that will creates good jobs and support inclusive growth.

1.9. The rural strategy offers a framework for policy choices and investment-decisions. Its delivery will depend on wide stakeholder commitment and collaboration across the public, private, academic, voluntary and community and third sectors, building on the foundations established through Staffordshire's LEADER programme (2014-2020) and Rural Declaration of 2013.

Figure 1.1: Rural Staffordshire as defined by Lower-layer Super Output Areas



Source: DEFRA definitions

Evidence Base

1.10. The strategy is based on evidence of Staffordshire's rural economy assets and strengths, and of the opportunities and challenges facing the rural economy, including the implications of national policy developments. Figure 2.1 presents a summary SWOT analysis of Staffordshire's rural economy, based on data analysis and qualitative evidence, including stakeholder insights.

Figure 2.1: Staffordshire Rural Economy SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
• Centrally located in the country between the Birmingham and Manchester conurbations and well-connected by motorway and rail • A diverse rural economy across primary industries, manufacturing, construction, services and visitor economy with high rates of employment growth • Significant farming and food and drink processing (particularly brewing) sectors • A base of large companies including fast-growing and global companies • A rich natural resource base, high quality landscapes and heritage assets and large visitor attractions e.g., Alton Towers • A large, highly-qualified, skilled workforce • A strong knowledge base (Keele, Staffordshire and nearby Harper Adams Universities and South Staffordshire College, with Reaseheath College nearby) • A network of five Rural Hub Towns offering employment sites and growth opportunities	• Productivity constraints in agriculture and manufacturing • A limited connection between local food production and consumption • An ageing agricultural workforce and succession issues in farming • Limited levels of new enterprise formation • Gaps in broadband coverage, particularly at higher connection speeds (>/=100Mbps), for commercial and residential properties • Weaknesses in internal transport connections, including public transport • Limited supply of employment sites and premises including food ready units, commercial starter units, flexible office space and 'grow-on' space • Industrial legacy sites which are not viable for new uses without considerable investment • Limited accredited tourism accommodation • Seasonal, low-paid employment • Issues of housing affordability and access, particularly for younger households
Opportunities	**Threats**
• Investment in agri-tech skills (Agri-STEM Academy at Rodbaston) and investment opportunities in agri-tech • Growing interest food security, ethical and local foods • Growth markets for innovative health technologies and low-carbon goods and services, including opportunities in micro-energy generation • Increased demand for 'staycations', outdoor leisure and 'green tourism' • Increased demand for local products and services • Increased community engagement since the Covid-19 pandemic • Potential for manufacturing supply chain 'near-shoring' investment since EU exit • HS2 supply chain and connectivity gains • West Midlands Strategic Rail Freight Interchange at M6 J12	• Risk of sustained damage to key sectors including hospitality, non-essential retail, manufacturing and the Rural Hub Towns due to Covid-19 • Risks presented by EU exit to farming and manufacturing supply chains • Ageing and succession issues in farming • Risks of delayed or insufficient adaptation to trends, including climate change, the needs of a large and growing elderly population, competitiveness pressures, technology developments (including digital and low-carbon) and policy changes • Constraints on the supply of employment sites / premises and residential sites limit regeneration opportunities • Limited availability of investment finance and limited investment propositions, including limited growth of business propositions • Further decline of rural services

1.11. Staffordshire's rural economy assets and strengths include:

- A strongly performing and diverse rural economy that extends beyond traditional land-based sectors including agriculture and forestry, encompassing manufacturing (the largest sector in employment terms), construction and services, including a strong visitor economy.
- Some of Staffordshire's largest firms across manufacturing, construction and services. These include JCB, located across five rural locations, and firms based in the Rural Hub Towns such as Ornua Foods in Leek, 2 Sisters Food Group in Uttoxeter, automotive firm Klarius in Cheadle, software developer Instem in Stone, and Amazon in Rugeley.
- A highly skilled and qualified rural workforce, including a high proportion of senior managers and entrepreneurs.
- A rich natural resource base with high-quality landscape and heritage assets, underpinning an attractive offer to investors, households and visitors, including the Peak District National Park, Cannock Chase AONB, the Staffordshire and Worcestershire canal, and historic Rural Hub Towns.
- A strong University (Keele, Staffordshire and nearby Harper Adams) and Further Education base (South Staffordshire College and nearby Reaseheath) committed to offer excellence in research, innovation opportunities and education in disciplines, including agri-tech, food security, veterinary science, smart-energy networks, and innovative health technologies.
- Staffordshire's five Rural Hub Towns (Leek, Cheadle, Uttoxeter, Stone and Rugeley), centres for business, employment and services, offering visitor attractions and growth opportunities. There are examples of regeneration success, such as the development of Stone's visitor offer as a local 'food town', and arts and crafts hubs. However, further action and investment is needed to fully realise the potential of all five Rural Hub Towns.

1.12. The opportunities and challenges facing Staffordshire's rural economy include:

- The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which is having a major negative impact on businesses and employment across the rural economy, particularly the hospitality, non-essential retail and manufacturing sectors; the extent of the damage to businesses and supply chains remains to be seen. However, there are also some consequent opportunities for the rural economy, including potential for a sustained increase in demand for local services. The pandemic restrictions and responses have also highlighted the importance of digital capability amongst rural business and workers, supported by competitive broadband infrastructure.
- EU exit, which presents significant challenges, as well as potential opportunities for the rural economy. Key risks include impacts on farms and associated uses arising from changes to the EU grant regimes, the potential for increased competitiveness pressures in farming and food, reduced availability of migrant labour, and disruption to manufacturing supply chains. Potential opportunities include increased access to a wider range of export markets, and inward investment opportunities relating to 're-shoring' of supply chains, particularly in manufacturing.
- Technology developments in agri-tech, e.g. genetic improvements, digital, big data, robotics and precision technologies. These have the potential to enable increased productivity and output in farming, and may be facilitated by a forthcoming national

R&D support programme, focused on farmer-led solutions. At the same time, many farm businesses are still likely to face significant challenges to their sustainability and growth, including competitiveness challenges, barriers to investment, workforce and skills constraints, and farm succession issues.

- Rapid developments in technology are required – particularly, but not exclusively, digital technologies. These are driving change across the economy, in response to which, high levels of entrepreneurship, adaptability and resilience are required amongst businesses, workers, and in planning infrastructure and land-use. A strong culture of enterprise and innovation across the rural economy is needed to take advantage of new market opportunities being opened up by emerging technologies, in areas such as innovative health and low-carbon energy.
- There is potential to develop the visitor economy, to increase visitor spend and the number of overnight visits, by harnessing Staffordshire's countryside and heritage assets, and developing the visitor offer to become on-trend, including a higher-quality accommodation offer. This will include taking advantage of increased demand for 'staycations' (i.e., UK residents taking a holiday in the UK rather than overseas)[1], and self-contained holiday accommodation, outdoor activity-based tourism, ethical and 'green' tourism.
- Growth opportunities (employment and housing) in and around the Rural Hub Towns, which are reflected in District and Borough local and neighbourhood plans and masterplans. To achieve this, action is needed to identify and unlock investment opportunities, particularly commercial opportunities, and to develop the investor and visitor offer, including by addressing infrastructure barriers.
- Gaps in broadband coverage, particularly at higher connection speeds (>/=100Mbps) and in mobile phone coverage, which are significant limiting factors for rural businesses and workers, particularly in more remote areas, with ongoing investment required to ensure competitive coverage.
- Weak transport connections, including to Leek and Cheadle, and including limited public transport services, requiring ongoing investment. Forthcoming investments, including HS2 and the West Midlands Rail Freight Interchange at Junction 12 of the M6, should provide a significant boost to Staffordshire's transport connectivity and attractiveness as an investment location.
- Climate change and net-zero carbon targets require adaptation of rural businesses and energy and transport infrastructure, including development of electric vehicle charging infrastructure and incentives. Following EU exit, a new system of agricultural support is due to be launched, aimed at rewarding farmers for safeguarding environmental assets, with an accompanying grant scheme to support investment in technology, and equipment that improves environmental sustainability and carbon reduction. There are also potential opportunities for land-based industries to diversify into low-carbon and renewable technologies, such as micro-energy generation.

1.13. The evidence base used to develop the strategy is available in a separate report and in five Rural Hub Town profiles.

[1] Demand for staycations (also referred to as 'domestic tourism') has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic (see: https://www.visitengland.com/sites/default/files/visit_england_report_print_tcm30-39493.pdf)

2. The Strategy

Vision and Goal

3.1 A collective stakeholder vision for rural Staffordshire was expressed in Staffordshire's Rural Declaration of 2013: "*thriving rural communities and successful rural businesses in a living, working and respected Staffordshire countryside, contributing to the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of the whole county and beyond, with every community reaching its potential*".

3.2 In line with this vision, and Staffordshire's new Economic Strategy, this strategy seeks to *"maximise the contribution of Staffordshire's rural assets to the development of a 'thriving, digital, high value and clean economy' in Staffordshire that creates good jobs and supports inclusive growth, by developing the productivity, competitiveness and resilience of the rural economy".*

Strategic Priorities

3.3 The strategy is focused on **five strategic priorities** that reflect the diversity of Staffordshire's rural economy, the continued significance of farming and of the visitor economy, the role and potential of the Rural Hub Towns, and the connectivity and access challenges that constrain the rural economy, particularly in more isolated areas:

- Stimulate **enterprise and innovation** to increase productivity, competitiveness and resilience across all sectors of the rural economy, including in overseas markets, to enable high-quality high-wage job retention and growth, and to enable the transition to net-zero carbon emissions;

- Support **sustainable intensification (SI) in agriculture whereby agricultural productivity is enhanced whilst also creating environmental and social benefits** through productivity investments and business support for improved viability, diversification, carbon reduction and succession;

- Recover and grow the **visitor economy**, including 'green tourism', by supporting tourism businesses and developing an on-trend visitor offer, including a high-quality accommodation offer, drawing on Staffordshire's rich countryside and heritage assets;

- Improve **rural digital connectivity and access to opportunities** for rural businesses, workers, residents and visitors, and develop digital and low-carbon energy infrastructure; and

- Regenerate the five **Rural Hub Towns** (Leek, Cheadle, Stone, Uttoxeter and Rugeley) to unlock investment opportunities, develop their visitor offers, and improve their resilience via high-quality place management.

4 Intervention Priorities

4.1 A range of interventions will be required to deliver the strategic priorities. 30 intervention priorities have been identified in the strategy to guide the development of an implementation plan, including short-, medium-, and longer-term actions, and a resourcing plan. This will reflect and build upon current and forthcoming relevant activities and learning gained from previous initiatives in Staffordshire and elsewhere.

Stimulate enterprise and innovation to increase productivity, competitiveness and resilience across all sectors of the rural economy, including in overseas markets, to enable high-quality high-wage job retention and growth, and to enable the transition to net-zero carbon emissions:

1. Ensure that **enterprise and business growth support and peer networks** reflect the needs of rural businesses, and increase awareness and take-up amongst rural businesses. This includes knowledge transfer and technology demonstration activities, investment-readiness support, supplier engagement events and export support. This will be achieved via a 'Think Rural' approach to business support, e.g. involving targeted comms and engagement activities by the Growth Hub, and targeted support programme, where there is evidence of unmet need and demand, and sustainable funding models can be identified.

2. Increase the supply of **enterprise space** (light industrial, office and hybrid) available to rural businesses, including incubation and grow-on space. Consideration will be given to the needs of rural businesses in developing the county network of enterprise centres, to ensure that the network includes space that meets the requirements of rural businesses, in accessible locations, and with competitive supporting infrastructure, including high-speed broadband and 4G /5G mobile connectivity. Consideration will also be given to ways of incentivising and removing barriers to the conversion or redevelopment of rural buildings for employment use, such as those deployed in Enterprise Zones (e.g. business rate relief and simplified planning).

3. Develop **a rural youth enterprise programme** to inspire and equip young people living in rural areas with the knowledge and skills to start-up and grow their own businesses, alongside wider careers inspiration activity, targeting young people in rural areas. A key component of this will be the development of a 'new entrants into farming' programme (see below).

4. Develop a **rural enterprise and innovation hub** as a focal point for rural entrepreneurs and innovators, public sector, academic, third sector and investors to come together, to identify, develop and showcase solutions to rural economy challenges, including the transition to a net-zero carbon economy. Virtual and physical delivery models for the hub and hub activities will be considered. For face-to-face networking, and challenge and showcasing events, opportunities to deploy the county network of enterprise centres and other venues across the county, such as the County Showground, will be considered, drawing on learning from elsewhere (e.g. Stoneleigh Park in Warwickshire).

5. Participate in the development of **growth initiatives**, such as the A500/A50 East West Growth Corridor and the emerging North Midlands Innovation Corridor, where these are aligned to the strategy priorities.

Support sustainable intensification (SI) in agriculture whereby agricultural productivity is enhanced, whilst also creating environmental and social benefits through productivity investments and business support for improved viability, diversification, carbon reduction and succession:

6. Increase **farmer engagement** with business support, and knowledge transfer and technology demonstration opportunities (e.g. the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB) 'Farm Excellence' network) via targeted comms and engagement and specialist brokerage – including support for business and succession planning and diversification (e.g. into tourism, green energy or direct-to-consumer sales).

7. Develop one or more **agri-tech demonstrators,** that develop and showcase Staffordshire's strengths in agriculture, industry and science, and that are accessible and relevant to Staffordshire farmers. Delivery options considered will include opportunities to deploy the County Farm estate and collaboration opportunities, e.g. via the LEP-based 'Agri-Tech West' partnership. The County Showground will be considered as a potential focal point for demonstration activity.

8. Develop a **'new entrants into farming'** programme, including careers inspiration in schools and colleges, education and training pathways, including internships and apprenticeships, peer-mentoring, and specialist-brokered access to start-up support, including business planning and access to finance support. Consideration will be given to whether and how the county farm estate could be deployed to enable new entrants into farming, and opportunities to learn from previous initiatives, e.g. NFU Young Farmers initiatives.

9. Ensure a ready supply of **employment sites** in suitable locations for commercial agri-food developments, including for logistics and light-industrial uses, with interventions to unblock stalled sites as required, e.g. through increased promotion, enabling infrastructure investment, and Enterprise Zone-type incentives such as rate relief and simplified planning.

Recover and grow the visitor economy, including 'green tourism', by supporting tourism businesses and developing an on-trend visitor offer, including a high-quality accommodation offer, drawing on Staffordshire's rich countryside and heritage assets:

10. Develop **rural destination branding and marketing,** including for the Rural Hub Towns, aligned to Staffordshire's place-branding and market trends.

11. Ensure a responsive support offer for **tourism businesses,** to help them understand and develop their offer in line with emerging market trends and industry standards, particularly accommodation providers, and to develop their digital capability, informed by learning from previous programmes, e.g. Staffordsheer Excellence[2].

[2] https://www.stokestaffslep.org.uk/staffordsheer-excellence-taking-your-tourism-business-further/

12. Support **farm and forestry diversification** into tourism, in line with market trends (e.g. for self-contained accommodation and outdoor leisure), including through a supportive planning framework and business support.

13. Support the development and viability of Staffordshire's rural **cultural and heritage attractions,** by lobbying for funding, pursuing external funding bids, and through provision of enterprise and business support, including specialist brokerage.

14. Align **infrastructure investment** to visitor economy assets and opportunities, including investment in electric-vehicle charging infrastructure and high-speed broadband, and to create alternative forms of tourism accommodation, such as overnight parking for motorhomes and camping (e.g. French-style 'Aires').

Improve rural digital connectivity and access to opportunities for rural businesses, workers, residents and visitors, and develop digital and low-carbon energy infrastructure:

15. Work with telecoms providers and Government to secure the investment needed to improve **high-speed broadband and 4G/5G mobile phone coverage** to domestic and commercial properties, and, where necessary, explore alternative models of provision, e.g. digital white space and community-based models of provision, as per Broadband for the Rural North.

16. Develop **electric-vehicle charging infrastructure,** including incentives in hot-spot locations, e.g. via the On-Street Residential Chargepoint Scheme.

17. Pursue **investment in low-carbon energy infrastructure and supply** that is compatible with the needs of rural areas, drawing on R&D assets (for example, Keele's Smart Energy Network Demonstrator, SEND), industry capabilities, learning from elsewhere (e.g. the Association for Decentralised Energy), and by lobbying for more responsive funding models that reflect the needs of rural areas.

18. Ensure a readily available supply of **employment sites** in accessible locations, and unlock stalled sites as required, e.g. working closely with planning, marketing and through enabling infrastructure investment.

19. Bring forward investment in **road and rail** aligned to rural growth opportunities, including those in the Rural Hub Towns and key employment and housing sites, and to maximise the benefits of increased connectivity provided by the HS2 and West Midlands Rail Freight Interchange investments.

20. Embed a **'Think Rural'** approach across service delivery and planning, including via lobbying and advocacy and application of rural-proofing methodologies.

Regenerate the five Rural Hub Towns (Leek, Cheadle, Stone, Uttoxeter and Rugeley) to unlock investment opportunities, develop their visitor offers, and improve their resilience via high-quality place management:

21. Undertake a review and analysis of **growth opportunity sites** (employment and housing) across each of the Hub Towns including public sector-owned sites; and bring forward a portfolio of sites for marketing to potential investors, and a prioritised list of 'oven-ready' sites for public sector intervention where barriers have been identified.

22. Identify and pursue opportunities to **unlock growth-opportunity sites** that are not commercially viable, for example through gap funding, enabling infrastructure investment, and public sector acquisition – where this is feasible.

23. Support **master planning** for the Rural Hub Town centres and high streets, to encourage commercial investment and explore opportunities to support and enable investments in public realm, cultural assets, and small-business space.

24. Develop and implement distinctive **place branding and marketing** for each of the Rural Hub Towns, including working with and supporting high street traders and tourism businesses (e.g. as per Leek's 'Totally Local' branding approach).

Develop a skilled workforce:

Skills are recognised as vital for a successful rural economy and will run as an inherent strand through all strategy priorities.

25. It is important to ensure that labour supply and skills needs in key rural industries are met. These industries include advanced manufacturing & engineering (e.g. shortage of plant operatives as identified in stakeholder consultations), transport & logistics (e.g. challenges around supply of drivers) and hospitality (e.g. recruitment challenges due to labour supply).

26. Health and social care is the sector of highest projected jobs growth across the Stoke & Staffordshire LEP area and likely to be a key area of increased demand in the labour market, given the relatively large and growing elderly population in rural Staffordshire .

27. Efforts will be made to strengthen the AgriSTEM Academy at Rodbaston (Staffordshire College campus) and inspire and support new entrants into farming noting the changing opportunities and career types in farming being driven through agri-tech adoption.

28. There is a general need for digital skills development and development of skills for the green economy, particularly those related to building retrofit and renewable energy generation.

29. Demand for apprenticeships amongst young people in rural areas is limited and there is a need to enhance the attractiveness and accessibility of the apprenticeship offer in rural Staffordshire.

Climate Change:

It is important that we consider the impact of economic interventions (both locally and globally) on our environment and how we deliver effective climate change actions to provide long term benefits to our landscape.

30. All intervention activity through the strategy should seek to support Staffordshire's economy becoming net zero by 2050 in line with both local and national climate change policies and strategies.

5 Delivery Arrangements

5.1 Delivery of the strategy will depend on the action and resources of a wide range of stakeholders and organisations, across the private, public, academic (HE/FE), voluntary, community and third sectors. A list of stakeholders consulted during the strategy development is included in Appendix A.

Rural Strategy Leadership Group

5.2 A Rural Strategy Leadership Group will be formed of senior individuals from the private, public, academic, and voluntary, community and third sectors, who can bring the insights, expertise, influence, and resources needed to enable the successful delivery of the strategy.

5.3 The Leadership Group will be responsible for driving forward the delivery of the strategy, with the support of an executive team who will coordinate the development and implementation of an action plan, securing stakeholder and partner inputs and resources.

5.4 The Leadership Group will use its influence to advocate for rural economy opportunities and challenges. This will include influencing within the Leadership Group's own organisations to secure their commitment to the delivery of the strategy, including through the adoption of a 'Think Rural' approach to planning and delivery, and also externally to policymakers and funding bodies.

5.5 The Leadership Group will bring expertise and insights to develop new approaches to rural regeneration, that maximises the potential of Staffordshire's rural assets and stakeholder resources. They will build on capacity and learning from approaches previously and currently being developed in Staffordshire and elsewhere (see Appendix B), including the LEADER programme, to develop strong business cases for investment, and to establish Staffordshire as a leader in rural regeneration.

Action Planning and Resourcing

5.6 The development and delivery of the strategy will require a dedicated executive resource, including to establish and facilitate the Leadership Group.

5.7 An initial priority will be to develop an implementation plan, including short-, medium- and long-term initiatives, including a combination of current and planned activities, and new initiatives where gaps are evidenced, and resourcing opportunities can be identified. The implementation plan will be based on a robust understanding of:

- opportunities for / barriers to investment, particularly commercial investment, including specific viability gaps that necessitate non- or pre-commercial intervention;
- opportunities to adapt current and planned interventions to unlock rural growth opportunities, for example, by applying a 'Think Rural' approach;
- stakeholder assets, and any opportunities to deploy them for greater benefit for the rural economy, e.g. the Staffordshire County farm estate;
- the full range of relevant external funding opportunities, including, but not limited to the Levelling Up Fund for local infrastructure projects; the UK Community Renewal Fund and the forthcoming UK Shared Prosperity Fund for investment in communities and place in need; UKRI funding for innovation; and funding for low-carbon infrastructure development such as the On-Street Residential Chargepoint Scheme for electric vehicles; and
- opportunities to develop 'evergreen' or recyclable funds, should the need to set up new targeted funds be identified, drawing on models developed elsewhere (for example, loan or mezzanine-type funds offering combined debt and equity funding).

5.8 Potential schemes included within the Rural Implementation Plan will include both new initiatives requiring considerable development, through to adapting existing projects.

Progress Monitoring and Evaluation

5.9 A number of Key Performance Indicators have been identified to support the monitoring and evaluation of progress and impact in delivering the strategy (Appendix C).

APPENDIX A: Stakeholder Consultees

Name	Organisation	Job Title
Andrea Sammons	Staffordshire County Council	Senior Marketing Officer, Destination Staffordshire
Anthony Baines	Staffordshire County Council	County Commissioner for Skills & Employability
Anthony Hodge	Staffordshire County Council	Assistant Director for Business & Enterprise
Councillor Mark Deaville	Staffordshire County Council	Cabinet Member for Commercial Matters
Debbie Harris	Cannock Chase District Council	Economic Development Manager
Helen Pakpahan	Staffordshire Moorlands District Council	Senior Regeneration Officer
James Leavesley	Stoke & Staffordshire LEP	Board Director
Jeremy Lowe	National Farmers Union (NFU)	Staffordshire NFU County Adviser
Jill Norman	Support Staffordshire	North Staffordshire Operations Manager
Karen Woolley	Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)	Development Manager
Mark Parkinson	Stoke & Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)	Chief Executive
Martyne Manning	Stafford Borough Council	Senior Investment Manager
Matthew Shufflebotham	Staffordshire County Council	Senior Economic Development Officer
Matthew Hustwit	Staffordshire Chamber of Commerce and Stoke & Staffordshire Growth Hub	Growth Hub Team Leader and Funding & Finance Specialist Advisor
Paul Hodgkinson	Keele University	Associate Director for Programme and Project Delivery – Vice Chancellors Office
Polly Gibb	Women in Rural Enterprise (WiRE)	Director
Sam Hicks	Stoke & Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)	Strategy Lead
Thomas Deery	East Staffordshire Borough Council	Enterprise Manager

APPENDIX B: Learning Sources

- Rural Services Network (RSN) and Institute of Economic Development **Rural Economy Toolkit** https://www.rsnonline.org.uk/new-rural-economy-toolkit-to-support-missed-opportunity-around-rural-relevance-to-uk-productivity-and-prosperity includes 'Rural Best Practice' examples including:

    - Borderlands Growth Deal (Low-Carbon Best Practice)
    - Broadband for the Rural North (B4N)
    - National Innovation Centre for Ageing
    - Transition Town Totnes
    - South West Mutual

- **'What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth'** https://whatworksgrowth.org/

APPENDIX C: Key Performance Indicators

Key performance Indicators for Staffordshire Rural Strategy					
	Geographical definitions	Latest data	Latest update	Frequency of updates	Source
Economic Output (GVA)	Rural districts - DEFRA classification	£14262m	2018	Annual	ONS, sub-regional GVA estimates
Productivity (GVA per hour worked)	Rural districts - DEFRA classification	£35,102	£2,018	Annual	ONS, sub-regional GVA estimates
Business start up rate (no. business births per 1000 working age population)	Rural districts - DEFRA classification	6.1	2019	Annual	ONS, Business demography
Business 3-year survival rate (%)	Rural districts - DEFRA classification	55.6	2019	Annual	ONS, Business demography
Broadband coverage at 100 Mbps - % residential properties	Rural - Ofcom definition	20	2020	Annual	Ofcom, connected nations
Broadband coverage at 100 Mbps - % commercial properties	Rural - Ofcom definition	12	2020	Annual	Ofcom, connected nations
Total jobs	Rural Lower Super Output Areas - DEFRA classification	110k	2019	Annual	ONS, Business Register Employment Survey
Agricultural jobs	Staffordshire	10k	2016	Every few years	DEFRA survey of Agriculture
Visitor spend (£ per annum)	Staffordshire	£1.3bn	2018	Annual	Research report on economic impact of tourism