

## Introduction

This report presents the evidence base, which informs the Kent Rural Delivery Framework. Its purpose is to provide a current and objective analysis of Kent's rural area to:

- raise the profile of rural issues and needs in Kent
- provide an evidence-based approach to rural delivery in Kent
- identify key gaps in current knowledge and data collection
- formulate a baseline for monitoring future rural change

It is intended that, with the support of partners, this rural evidence base will be updated and extended as the priorities identified within the Kent Rural Delivery Framework are taken forward.

The approach taken follows that of the Commission for Rural Communities' evidence base for rural England, "*The State of the Countryside 2006*." Unless otherwise indicated, rural Kent means that part of Kent County Council's administrative area defined under the 2004 Urban/Rural Definition as town and fringe, village, hamlet and isolated dwellings (see Annex1). The figures appearing in the text and tables have in most cases been rounded for clarity. Some datasets are adjusted to maintain confidentiality, summations of breakdowns may therefore not always match totals. Different geographical bases may also give rise to differences in totals.

## Executive summary

### 1. Kent's rural economy

Rural areas are an economic asset and contribute significantly to Kent's economy. More than a third (36%) of Kent's businesses are based in the rural area<sup>1</sup>. This equates to over 18,000 businesses. The performance of Kent's economy is therefore directly influenced by the prospects of its rurally-located businesses.

Kent's rural economy is complex and diverse in its composition and has strong interdependencies with urban areas. The majority of businesses in rural Kent are rurally located as opposed to land-based. Indeed the profile of rural businesses is broadly similar to that of urban-based businesses.

Small and micro businesses tend to be a particular feature of rural economies and Kent is no exception. Three-quarters (74%) of Kent's rural businesses are in the 0-5 employees category, compared to two thirds (66%) of urban businesses. These small businesses are to be found across the rural area.

Self-employment is a significant feature of Kent's rural economy with 13% of rural residents being classed as self-employed (this represents 19% of the working population). In Kent 40% of those who are self-employed live in the rural area compared to the regional average of 31%. This makes the prospects for rural self-employed business a significant economic opportunity.

Homeworking and home-based businesses are also significant in Kent's rural areas. Some 23% of the rural workforce (34,977) work from home. This compares to just 14% (57,924) of the urban workforce. The success of the rural economy is dependent upon the skills, flexibility and productivity of its workforce. Over a quarter (27%) of Kent's working age rural population have no qualifications - the figure for the rural South East is 22%. Having over 75,000 rural residents with no qualifications, Kent is home to 26% of the unqualified rural population of the South East.

Agriculture and land-based industries remain a critical rural sector - recent estimates suggest that the land-based sector contributes around £600 million per year to the Kent economy. However, it is facing intensive pressures from reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and the globalisation of agricultural markets.

ICT and infrastructure advances are creating more opportunities for businesses to locate in rural Kent. Broadband is now widely available and the vast majority of the population (including rural areas) can now connect to broadband services. However, many areas still do not have access to high speed broadband which limits the range of ICT services available.

The knowledge economy tends to be perceived as an urban phenomenon. However, the evidence reveals that the proportion of employees working in the Knowledge economy is higher in the rural area than the urban area of Kent. Knowledge employees working in the rural area represent 18% of all rural employees – this compares to a figure of 13.4% for the urban area. Kent is well-positioned to further develop its rural knowledge economy – creating more and better quality jobs.

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<sup>1</sup> The Kent Business Database defines 'rural' on a post-code basis according to SEEDA criteria

## 2. Kent's rural communities

Rural Kent is a mosaic of many small rural towns, villages and hamlets. 392,067 (29%) of Kent's 1.33m population live in rural areas which is considerably higher than the figures for the South East (22%) and for England (19%). Significantly, **Kent is home to almost a quarter of the South East's rural population (22%)**.

**Kent has an ageing rural population profile** with more middle age and fewer young people and young adults (15-29s) than the general population. This trend towards an ageing rural population has implications for community activities and organisations, sheltered housing needs, social care and health provision in the rural area.

Rural Kent has an estimated 31,773 poor households<sup>2</sup>. This accounts for 19% of the Kent's rural households and represent **25% of the poor rural households in the South East**. More poor households are found in the town and fringe areas with fewer in the hamlets and isolated dwellings.

Many Kentish rural towns and villages are seen as desirable places to live by residents in urban Kent and South East London, creating a high demand for rural housing and pushing house prices up and beyond the reach of local residents. Over the next five years, it is predicted that that **some 1,925 affordable homes are needed across rural Kent** each year to service unmet housing need.

Many **people living in rural Kent have less access to services** than urban residents. However, work to support local services is paying dividends. Although there have been rural post office closures in Kent, there have also been branches opening.

Within the context of the South East, Kent is standing up particularly well. The South East area (which has approximately 950 branches) had a net loss of 17 branches in 2005-6 as compared to just 2 in Kent.

A significant minority of rural households (**13%**) **have no car**. Local accessibility to public transport is much greater for urban households than for rural households. The more remote parts of rural Kent are also those which are less accessible to public transport. Public transport does serve many small rural towns and villages but for most rural hamlets and isolated dwellings public transport is well beyond the accepted convenient walking distance of 1km.

**Internet access is increasing** in importance for rural communities as a means to communicate for leisure and social purposes and also as a means of gaining access to information services and to carry out transactions without having to make lengthy journeys.

**Broadband is now widely available** and the majority of the population can connect to broadband services. However, there are some rural areas not yet enabled and others without high speed broadband.

**Kent has by far the highest occurrence of severe rural deprivation in the South East**. The South East has 43 of the worst 20% of rural areas in England - almost half (21) of these are in Kent. There are counties in the South East which have none of the worst areas.

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<sup>2</sup> Poor households are defined as 'households with an income less than 60% of the median income' which equates to less than £14,865

### 3. Kent's rural environment

85% of the land in Kent is classified as rural. In the South East, Kent and Hampshire are the largest rural areas, both have over 300,000 ha. (1,200 sq. miles). **Kent constitutes 19% of the rural land in the South East** and 3% of the area of rural England.

**High quality, distinctive landscapes are a key feature of rural Kent**, with 52% of the county being covered by landscape designations. The Countryside Agency's Countryside Character approach recognises 7 character areas in Kent, reflecting the diversity of Kent's countryside, which ranges from the Weald and the North Downs to the North Kent Plain and Swale Estuary and Romney Marshes. Two of these areas, the Kent Downs and the High Weald, have been designated as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). Together they cover 32% of the area of Kent.

**There are a wide range of habitats in Kent** including wetlands, woodland, chalk grassland and habitats related to lowland arable farming and fruit cropping, extensive cereal field margins, ponds and old orchards. All are valuable for their biodiversity.

Kent has 40% of the UK's shingle habitat, just under 20% of its unimproved marsh grazing land and saline lagoons and 10% of its reed beds. In total, **semi-natural habitats in Kent cover some 112,000 hectares or 28% of the county**.

Kent is part of the most wooded region in England – it has 39,487 hectares of woodland, which is 10.6% of its land area. **The county also has the largest proportion of Ancient Woodland in the South East** - almost three quarters,

(73%) of Kent's woodland is Ancient Woodland. Ancient woodland is particularly rich in biodiversity and is of high conservation value.

Water is becoming an increasingly scarce resource. **The South East is one of the driest, yet most densely populated parts of the UK** and domestic water consumption is 15 litres per head per day, which is higher than the UK average. The Environment Agency has highlighted that per capita water consumption has risen between 3 to 5 percent in the last 10 years. Global warming is predicted to further increase water stresses in the county.

Climate change is also meaning that **the South East could be facing winters that are warmer, wetter and more variable, while summers could be hotter and drier** with up to a 50 percent decrease in precipitation and increases in surface temperatures of 4 degrees Celsius. There is a need to minimise the impact of climatic change, yet to adapt to its inevitable consequences.