

Welcome to the first edition of the new-look Essex Rural Partnership newsletter, **monthlybulletin**. In this newsletter we aim to give an overview of relevant developments over the past month, as well as keeping you up to date with ERP news and forthcoming events.

Economic

British pig industry needs you!

The 'Pigs are Still Worth It!' campaign, promoted by BPEX (British Pig Executive) and supported by the National Pig Association, is calling on everyone to sign an online [petition](#) in support of a fair price for British pigs. Soaring feed prices are pushing up the cost of pig farming – in the weeks leading up to Christmas pig farmers faced losses of nearly £25 million. The campaign replicates the previous 'Pigs are Worth It' campaign in 2008, which played a significant role in supporting pig farmers to demand a fair price for pork.

Rural broadband roll-out may take longer than expected

Government plans to install [digital hubs for rural communities](#) across the UK could be slowed, experts have said. Initial pilot hub schemes to discover the best method of delivering broadband to remote areas are yet to be put out for tender. Chief Executive of the Broadband Stakeholder Group Antony Walker said, "It's important to recognise that nobody's really done this before in terms of building out next-generation networks into challenging rural locations and therefore it takes time to work out how to get it right."

Town and country financial divide still very real

Rural dwellers are more likely to be concerned about rising fuel costs, a survey conducted by [NFU Countryside magazine](#) has revealed. More than 3, 700 people were polled on how they are managing their money, highlighting a divide between urban and rural areas. Over half (57%) of rural dwellers are "very concerned" over fuel costs compared to 44% in urban areas. Londoners appear to be most positive with 60% believing they will be as well off, or better off, by the end of this year; however, over half of those in the countryside think they will be worse off.

Communities

Community focus for Essex County Council budget

Essex County Council Leader Peter Martin has outlined the Council's priorities for the next twelve months, including how it plans to meet the financial challenges it faces. The full Council meeting, which has agreed a

£2.1 billion budget, also announced its 'EssexWorks' pledges for this year, which are "focused on enabling our partners, communities and individuals to take more control over the services they receive," Cllr Martin said.

Big Call for Ideas

Essex County Council has officially launched its Big Society 'Call for Ideas' from the voluntary and community sector (VCS) for how both parties can work together to improve the delivery of services to residents. Ideas can include new ways of working, service delivery and use of assets. A copy of the 'call for ideas' form, which enables all VCS organisations to submit ideas, proposals, thoughts and suggestions, can be requested by emailing voluntarysectorunit@essex.gov.uk.

Library Consultation launched

Local communities are being encouraged to have their say on library opening hours as part of a countywide consultation by Essex County Council running until 27th March. Due to budget pressures, opening times in static libraries must be reviewed; it is proposed that 54 libraries will see a reduction in opening hours, 6 will see a change in the pattern of opening hours and 13 will see no reduction or change. However, no libraries in Essex will be closed down and mobile services will continue to operate.

Radical shakeup for affordable homes

A new scheme launched by the Government to build more affordable homes is part of "the most radical reforms to social housing for a generation," says Housing Minister Grant Shapps. The Affordable Rent programme will allow landlords to charge rents of up to 80% of the local market rate, providing extra revenue to invest in new homes. The Government will also be investing £4.5 billion over the next four years in delivering up to 150,000 new affordable homes.

Community Rights consultation launched

The Community Right to Challenge and Community Right to Buy, two key elements of the Localism Bill, have been opened up for consultation. Under the Community Right to Buy, local groups will be able to nominate and potentially bid for vital community assets; the Community Right to Challenge will give communities new powers to challenge and take over local services. The consultation will run until 3rd May, 2011.

Environment

Plans to sell forests axed

The Government has announced that controversial plans to sell 40,000 acres of state-owned forest have been scrapped. Environment Secretary Caroline Spelman confirmed that a new independent panel will be established to look at public access and biodiversity within forests, with the intention of giving the private and voluntary sectors more involvement. The panel will report back to Mrs Spelman in the autumn.

Farmers must support Campaign for the Farmed Environment

Jim Paice, Minister for Agriculture, has written an open letter to the farming industry stating that "farmers cannot afford to relax" when it comes to food production and environmental protection. Paice states that the Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE), launched over a year ago, has "done much to raise farmers' awareness of the environmental benefits that their land can deliver", however there is still more that can be

done. Paice says that the CFE is an opportunity for the farming industry to demonstrate that “this voluntary approach can work better than regulation and that they [farmers] are best placed to decide on, and tackle, their local environmental priorities”.

New illustrated conservation guides for healthy habitats

[Natural England](#) has launched a range of free conservation guides that illustrate how to create and manage healthy habitats. The guides are designed to support land managers with Environmental Stewardship agreements, however anyone with an interest can download them for free. A variety of habitats are included, from trees, woodland and scrub to ponds and scrapes.

Renewable energy for communities

The Commission for Rural Communities, in partnership with Action for Communities in Rural England (ACRE), the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) and the National Association of Local Councils (NALC), has produced a renewable energy guide for rural communities. ‘[Get Generating: A renewable energy guide for rural communities](#)’ gives a basic overview of community-based renewable energy options including case studies and details of sources of advice and further information.

Other News

Boost for local wildlife

The Essex Partnership is celebrating the success of over 530 Local Wildlife Sites across Essex now in Positive Conservation Management. The National Indicator 197 established by Defra, which seeks to improve the management of wildlife sites, was selected by the Essex Partnership as one of their targets in the Local Area Agreement. To celebrate reaching this target, there will be a practical work party at Layer Breton Heath on 11th March. Please contact Michele Kench at [Essex Wildlife Trust](#) on **01621 862960** for more information.

Dates for your diary

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| 7th March | CANCELLED ERP Community Action Group meeting, 10:00am, RCCE Offices, Feering
(This meeting is being rearranged. Please contact Daisy Martlew daisy.martlew@essexrcc.org.uk for further details) |
| 11th March | Practical work party, 11:00am, Layer Breton Heath |
| 5th April | Full Essex Rural Partnership meeting, The Essex Golf and Country Club, Earls Colne |

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