



Essex Rural Partnership

www.essexruralpartnership.org.uk

'2020 Vision for Rural Essex'

ESSEX RURAL STRATEGY



*A New 10-year Vision to 2020,
with a 5-year Strategy for 2010-2015*



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Executive Summary

Essex is a county of immense contrasts. It has a total population of 1.6 million and a series of large urban settlements, but with 72% of its land area devoted to agriculture the county is still significantly rural in character.

The Essex Rural Strategy establishes a new vision for the county's rural areas. It seeks to create a vibrant future for rural Essex, based upon six strategic aims:

- **Active and Caring Communities**
- **Improved Access to Services**
- **Greater Availability of Affordable Housing**
- **A Thriving Economy**
- **A Rich and Varied Environment**
- **A Responsive Planning and Policy Framework.**

The Strategy is written, adopted and owned by the Essex Rural Partnership (ERP) and its member organisations. ERP is a non-statutory body that brings together a wide range of organisations drawn from the public, private and voluntary sectors, all with a responsibility for the future of the county's rural areas. The Strategy will guide and inform the work of ERP and its members. More specifically, it will be used:

- **To raise the profile of rural Essex**
- **To identify priorities for ERP members**
- **To inform and influence future strategies**
- **To encourage partners to work together towards a shared vision and aims**
- **To offer evidence and support for applications for funding for the benefit of rural Essex.**

Rural communities throughout Essex exude an air of prosperity even in difficult economic times but behind the façade there is evidence of deprivation which because it is widely spread can be hard to identify. The Index of Deprivation shows much of rural Essex within the most deprived 10% category with regard to access to services and housing.

Rural Essex also has immense potential. With ready access to London, the port gateways and the wider transport network it is ideally situated to support a wide range of business and innovation. Its 350 miles of coastline are a natural treasure and provide the county with areas of wilderness as well as centres of recreation. There are also plenty of examples of rural communities in the county that are responding positively to challenges such as the shortage of affordable housing and the loss of key services.

With ownership from the major rural stakeholders in the county, the Essex Rural Strategy can help to develop this potential and provide a co-ordinated response to the major issues that will affect rural Essex over the coming years.

Introduction

Essex is a county of immense contrasts. It has a total population of 1.6 million and a series of large urban settlements, but with 72% of its land area devoted to agriculture the county is still significantly rural in character.

The landscape of Essex is attractive and varied without being dramatic. The highest point at Langley in the far north-west of the county is only 482 ft. (147 metres) above sea level. From here the land gradually slopes away until it reaches the coast interrupted only by occasional hills as at Danbury and Wickham Bishops. Dominated by five substantial estuaries stretching from the Stour in the north to the Thames in the south and flanked for the greater part by marshland, the coastline of Essex extends for a total of 350 miles making it the longest in England. As an important trading gateway to the continent the coast has contributed much to the county's prosperity with major international ports at Harwich and Tilbury sandwiching a clutch of smaller ports in between.

Parts of the coast also act as a magnet for visitors especially Londoners and more generally the development of the county has been influenced enormously by its proximity to London. Essex traditionally supplied the capital with agricultural produce, but in more modern times it has additionally provided space for concentrated 'overspill' housing developments as well as a home for many commuters who are able to combine work in the city with a good quality of life in the Essex countryside. Epping Forest, another of the county's outstanding features, has also provided a natural check to the eastward expansion of London's outer boroughs.

The major transport arteries that cut through the county, including the M11 and M25 motorways and the main railway lines to Cambridge and Norwich, have all been developed primarily to service the needs of London, as has Stansted Airport. Further changes are in store with the development of the Thames Gateway and the staging of the 2012 Olympics just beyond the county boundary.

The local government structure of Essex is complex with jurisdiction currently divided between the County Council, two unitary authorities serving Southend and Thurrock, and 12 district/ borough councils. There are also 282 parish and town councils* predominantly although no longer exclusively serving the rural areas.

Defra in its Classification of Local Authority Districts and Unitary Authorities in England classifies seven Essex districts – Braintree, Brentwood, Chelmsford, Colchester, Maldon, Tendring and Uttlesford - as predominantly or significantly rural, but by excluding Epping Forest and Rochford both of which possess identifiable rural areas this actually underplays the continued rurality of the county.

** Parish and town councils is a general name given to the group of Local Councils, also known as first tier councils, or with alternative names included in an approved list in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (LGPiH) Act 2007, such as 'Village'.*

The Importance of Rural Issues

The debate continues as to whether rural issues require special attention. Whilst some of the issues experienced by rural areas may be the same as their urban counterparts, the solutions are often very different. There are also issues of isolation which are unique to rural communities, economies and environments.

The last 10 years has seen a tendency to encourage 'mainstreaming' of rural issues; to resist the temptation to identify rural as being different, and to consider rural issues alongside urban, merely sometimes accepting that a different solution may be required according to geography. This runs the risk of rural issues losing their identity, and being overlooked when actions are implemented.

Rural deprivation tends to be more widely spread than urban, occurring in smaller 'pockets' which make it hard to identify. As a result, rural deprivation can be overlooked, and therefore can also miss out on potential funding and investment opportunities.

Urban deprivation, in its clearly identifiable locations, is not only an easier target for financial support, but offers a better return per capita; addressing dispersed rural deprivation is inevitably more costly and brings about lower overall impacts on deprivation figures.

There are also issues which have a far greater impact on rural areas. While fuel costs may have an impact on the urban dweller, ready availability of public transport and local services make life without a car a realistic option – in most rural areas a car is a necessity rather than a luxury, and such fuel price increases have a far greater impact.

In economic development terms, rurally-based businesses can face issues not shared by their urban counterparts; for example, planning regulations can prove a barrier to development of enterprise. Finding a balance between preservation of the countryside and development so as to ensure economic and social viability is a challenge unique to rural areas.

It is rightly perceived that those living in rural areas are surrounded by countryside, but often overlooked that access to the countryside and to green space may be more restricted than in urban areas. Country parks and dedicated areas for recreation are a requirement in urban planning; in rural areas a small village green (where ball games are often prohibited!) may be the only accessible green space for local residents.

Rural areas are likely to be the first to be affected significantly by climate change. Coastal erosion poses a threat to agricultural and recreational land – there is a considerable length of sea wall footpath along the Essex coast which may be at risk. Climate change will also raise river levels, increasing the vulnerability of the built as well as the natural environment.

Whilst this highlights the importance of 'rural' – what about 'rural Essex'? When rural issues are considered at a national level, priority is repeatedly given to remote rural areas, such as the extremes of the north and south-west of the country. Certain rural areas in Essex can be as affected by deprivation as these remote rural locations – hence the need for an Essex Rural Strategy to co-ordinate a response to the issues which affect rural Essex .

The Strategy in Context

The first Essex Rural Strategy was published in 1998.

The Essex Rural Partnership was founded in July 2002, a result of a merger between the Essex Rural Strategy Steering Group and the Essex Rural Renewal Forum (established in 2001). In 2005 the Essex Rural Partnership published a revised Strategy, the predecessor to this document. The revised Strategy highlighted 15 Key Delivery Priorities, with a number of smaller projects and issues built into Action Plans. It was at this time that the structure of the Essex Rural Partnership was formalised. The resulting three Action Groups (focussing on *Community, Economy and Environment*) were instrumental in achieving many improvements based on the 15 priorities (details are highlighted under 'Achievements of the Previous Rural Strategy').

At the time of writing this Strategy, the Essex Rural Partnership is managed by Rural Community Council of Essex, itself an independent charity.

The Essex Rural Partnership is a non-statutory body. Whilst it has no statutory powers it enjoys the position of being an independent lobbyist and is fortunate to be able to represent the combined interests of the public, private and voluntary sectors focussing on improvements for rural areas in terms of social, economic and environmental issues. There are a number of identified bodies that the ERP engages with regularly to help achieve this.

At a regional level the East of England Rural Forum (EERF) meets 3 times a year to discuss issues of common interest to the six counties in the East of England. Through collaboration with equivalent regional bodies across England the EERF enjoys direct contact with ministers in Defra.

EERF is proposing to prepare a regional 'rural white paper' to represent the interests of all six counties in the region; an up-to-date Essex Rural Strategy will play a key role in supporting and influencing this document, which will in turn be used to inform and lobby at a regional and national level.

ERP recognises the importance of association with other Partnerships and Structures at a county level. Of key significance at the time of writing is the County Strategic Partnership, known as the Essex Partnership. The Essex Partnership is responsible for both the Essex Strategy and the Essex Local Area Agreement. ERP has championed the needs of rural parts of the county as these documents have been developed, to ensure that the importance of rural issues is acknowledged in the wider context of the county.

The Essex Rural Partnership has formal representation on these two bodies, affirming its position as an influencing organisation in the county and region:

- The Essex Rural Partnership nominates one representative to sit on the East of England Rural Forum (EERF) and on the EERF Steering Group
- The Essex Rural Partnership nominates one representative to sit on the Sustainable Essex Partnership (one of the thematic partnerships which have responsibility for monitoring the delivery of the Essex Local Area Agreement)

In 2008, Essex County Council established the Essex Rural Commission. It was asked to examine issues around living and working in rural Essex and to develop innovative recommendations for improving the quality of life in rural areas. The Commission published its report in September 2009. There is a strong synergy between the priorities of the Essex Rural Commission and this Strategy. The two are complimentary but, with ownership from the major rural stakeholders in the county, the Essex Rural Strategy is uniquely placed to take forward priorities identified by the Commission.

The Essex Rural Strategy is written, adopted and owned by the Essex Rural Partnership and its member organisations. The Strategy is intended to influence other future Strategies which impact on rural Essex, but is also affected by and responsive to some other Strategies. At the time of writing, the economic and political futures and structures at various levels are experiencing some uncertainty; for this reason a list of relevant Strategies is not listed in the document, but can be found on the website of the Essex Rural Partnership at www.essexruralpartnership.org.uk



Achievements of the Previous Rural Strategy

Since 2005 the Essex Rural Partnership has operated with 3 action groups. The full Partnership has met 3 times per annum, with the elected Steering Group meeting 6 times per annum.

During this time a number of successful projects can be attributed, at least in part, to the work of the Essex Rural Partnership, some examples of which are cited below.

In **2005** Essex was the first county in the region to have its Business Case approved for the 2006-8 **Rural Social and Community Programme** (RSCP). This was partially due to the fact that Essex benefited from not only an organised Rural Partnership structure, but also from having an agreed and published Rural Strategy, which clearly identified priorities for the county. This programme (RSCP) delivered a wide range of benefits to rural Essex, summarised as:

- **A new Community-Led-Planning Fund, developed in response to local needs and delivered with dedicated support offering one-to-one advice to applicants**
Outputs from which included:
 - 56 Community-Led Planning projects funded with £109,000
- **Support for a specialist Rural Housing Enabler for Essex**
Outputs from which included:
 - 35 units of affordable housing in 5 communities (and 28 additional units under construction)
 - 31 housing needs surveys completed (and an additional 4 in progress)
- **Support for Linking Communities, a project designed to assist local communities in accessing services – through innovative solutions as well as through more traditional transport schemes**
Outputs from which included:
 - 32 new community-based projects supported
 - 16 new projects benefited from funding support
 - £400,000 investment attracted, supported by needs survey in Dengie
- **Capacity Building for Parish Councils, contributing to strengthening the abilities of Parish Councils to act locally for the benefit of residents;**
Outputs from which included:
 - Essex achieved the record for the highest number of parishes attaining 'Quality Status' in the country: 48
- **Support for development of the Essex Rural Partnership, including partial support for a dedicated co-ordinator to manage meetings, focus the work of the Partnership and advise members on national and regional policy developments**

In **2007** Essex Rural Partnership oversaw a new Research Project – **Rural Retail: A Study of the Support Requirements of Retailers in Rural Essex**. This 6-month research examined the current support available to retailers in rural locations, and explored the benefits of specialist support provided elsewhere in the country. A report detailing recommendations was published in spring 2008.

In **2007** the Essex Rural Partnership formed a **Post Offices Working Group** in response to plans announced by Post Office Limited (POL) to close 2,500 branches across the UK. This Working Group formed links with POL and PostWatch, as well as engaging with existing member organisations such as the Rural Shops Alliance. Practical help and support included:

- **Issue of a briefing paper for all parish and town councils**
- **Issue of posters to raise awareness (phase one in all parishes, phase two targeted at those where closures were proposed)**
- **Public meetings to inform and advise those affected (sub-post-masters, local residents and small businesses)**
- **Identification of those communities most likely to suffer through loss of their sub Post Office**

The efforts of the Essex Rural Partnership raised the profile of Post Office closures to a headline issue in Essex. This led directly to an Essex County Council initiative to re-open sub Post Offices and to establish 'Community Information Points'. The Essex Rural Partnership's list of those communities most affected was used by Essex County Council to focus the efforts of this new and innovative project.

Essex Rural Partnership also contributed to raising the national profile of this issue, when it welcomed the Government's Rural Advocate and Chair of the Commission for Rural Communities, Dr Stuart Burgess, to Essex where he was able to see at first hand some of the Post Offices under threat and to better understand the implications for the communities. He was also able to join the Essex Rural Partnership's Post Office Working Group to hear how the issue was being addressed in Essex, and what action was needed on a wider geographical scale.

In **2008** Essex Rural Partnership was approached by Dr Andrew Fieldsend to act as a support forum for a major European research project entitled **Ruraljobs**. This task was delegated to the Economic Action Group, where this research has been discussed as a regular agenda item for over a year – and at the time of publication of this Strategy this situation continues.

In **2008** the Essex Rural Partnership oversaw the undertaking of a **Rural Services Survey**, the first to take place in Essex for almost a decade. This survey has gathered up-to-date information about the availability and accessibility of services in rural areas. A number of partners have requested access to the data to use it for local work, but the most significant outcome has been the development of an **Access to Services** target within the county's Local Area Agreement (LAA), based solely on the data obtained through the survey. This will enable resources to be aimed directly at those communities most in need of improved access, as identified through completion of the survey questionnaire.

Furthermore the LAA Access to Services target has been used as a basis for the Local Transport Plan for 2009, providing an even greater benefit of the Survey data.

In **2008** an independent Rural Commission was set up and tasked by the County Council to take evidence and advise interested parties on the long term rural needs of the county. The Commission, made up both of experts familiar with Essex and those with a more national perspective, compiled a report made up of a number of recommendations. These recommendations were published in September 2009. The Essex Rural Partnership played an integral role in the evidence gathering exercise and partnership members were frequently called to appear as witnesses to the Commission. The County Council's response to the Commission's report set out how some of these recommendations could be implemented and both documents were able to influence, in part, what this strategy is setting out to achieve.

In **2008** the Essex Rural Partnership influenced the targets included in the Local Area Agreement securing the inclusion of National and Local Indicators regarding Access to Services, Living Landscapes and Local Wildlife Sites, and ensuring a rural dimension to the Housing target.

Representatives of ERP met with Sir Bob Kerslake, the Chief Executive of the newly created Homes and Communities Agency when he visited Essex in January 2009. Sir Bob was leading a delegation of senior executives from the housing, economic and finance sectors brought together by the Commission for Rural Communities with a brief to examine progress on the provision of affordable housing based on case studies in Uttlesford and Epping Forest.

In **2009** Essex Police began working with the Essex Rural Partnership and its members to shape a seminar aimed at educating and training Police Officers who work in rural Essex. The seminar is intended to inform Officers about the issues they may face and the best ways in which to work with existing organisations to address crime, and the fear of crime, in rural areas.

The ERP has been pleased with the progress made during the past two years in achieving a more favourable planning regime towards business related planning policy. In particular, the ERP influenced the recommendations of the Matthew Taylor report on Rural Economy and Affordable Housing. In March 2009, the Government published its response to the report and has taken on board many of the recommendations. Already, the Taylor Report has influenced the content of the new 'Planning for Prosperous Communities' policy statement (PPS4), which draws together previous statements and guidance into a more coherent approach to economic growth in town and countryside.

The ERP also took the lead in developing a lobbying paper on the rural economy, which was endorsed by the East of England Rural Forum. This was submitted by the EERF to the then Minister with responsibility for rural affairs. Furthermore, booklets on 'Planning for Farmers' and 'Farming for Planners' have been produced by one of the ERP members and have been well received.

The Potential of Rural Essex

Socially, economically and environmentally speaking, Essex is a diverse county, and its rural parts are no exception. Far from being a disadvantage, however, this range of qualities and attributes makes rural Essex an ideal location which has much to offer through all aspects of life.

Rural Essex is geographically ideally situated to support a wider range of business and innovation. Access to London, the port gateways, airports and the wider transport network make the county attractive to entrepreneurs keen to develop businesses in an attractive environment which satisfies their lifestyle choices. Innovative, high technology based businesses, including those focussing on renewable energy sources need to be nurtured and encouraged to locate in Essex. Essex is well served by academic and research institutions including two major universities and numerous colleges. Combined with the availability of a well educated and experienced middle management layer resulting from the adjustments in the capital's financial services sector, this is a time of great opportunity for new and emerging business.

Local shops, Post Offices and pubs are an essential part of the economic and social fabric of rural Essex yet can only thrive if they are innovative, flexible and efficient. Advice and support to encourage these businesses to be innovative, flexible and efficient needs to be well directed, funded and promoted.

With the advent of Next Generation Access (NGA) Broadband and the prospect of high quality universal broadband in the next three years, provided the offer of premises is suitable, locations in rural Essex, in villages or in converted farm units, will become even more attractive to businesses. In the meantime, identifying where broadband is inadequate is essential so that mechanisms can be put in place to stimulate demand is a matter for urgent attention.

Land use for agriculture, horticulture and equestrian activities far outweigh any other land use (72%) and it must not be overlooked that there are ever increasing pressures on the agricultural economy to supply more quality food to expanding and more demanding markets. People care about the food that they eat. They want to know its provenance, its nutritional value and want assurance as to its quality. This presents the sector with challenges in its supply chain and production methods but great opportunities for small and medium size businesses to add value to locally produced food products. As a coastal county, fishing, through farming in estuaries and ponds, the culture of shellfish or the trawling and line catching of fish, adds significantly to the local food offer. Essex's 350 miles of coastline are a natural treasure and provide the county with areas of beautiful wilderness as well as centres of culture and recreation. They are part of Essex's unique sales offer and, along with Essex's countryside, need to be promoted innovatively to attract visitors and tourists.

There is a net drain of young, skilled, people who choose to leave the county and yet there is evidence to suggest that were opportunities to exist, school leavers and graduates would welcome the chance to stay, develop careers and raise families in rural Essex.

Essex has a very rich and varied environment – most of the Essex population know little of this and those outside Essex know even less. Essex has a long coastline with large estuaries of international importance; superb ancient woodlands, hedgerows and veteran trees, important river corridors and a mosaic of grassland and heath dotted throughout productive arable land. Rural Essex therefore has an important reservoir of biodiversity and there are several significant geological sites and many important heritage sites.

The Essex coast and rivers experience pressure relating to the land sinking, sea level rising and more extreme weather events due to climate change. The majority of the Essex coast and rivers in their flood plains are protected by flood defences which, for the most part, are of a good standard.

Some of the biodiversity, geodiversity and heritage diversity is on publicly owned land or land owned by non government organisations (NGO's), however a great deal is on private land where it is a greater challenge to achieve both control, to protect, and access, to study and appreciate.

Intellectual access to information concerning tourism and local attractions is poor and physical access has not been greatly encouraged in ways which would bring economic benefit to the rural communities of the county.

Without the rich diversity of Essex, the county's population would live in a sterile environment with little interest for our people leading to poorer mental and physical health, with social and economic deterioration and with poor ability to buffer any change including climate change.

Rural communities throughout most of Essex exude an air of prosperity even in difficult economic times. However, behind the attractive façade there is evidence of deprivation which is not confined to certain identifiable, geographic "hot spots". Instead it can be found side-by-side with affluence in many communities which makes it hard to detect in statistical studies of deprivation.

Long-term issues such as the lack of affordable housing for young families and the decline in the provision of accessible local services such as shops and post offices seriously restrict choice and opportunity for a significant segment of the rural population. By restricting the availability of labour and infrastructure they can also have a damaging effect on the rural economy.

The Index of Deprivation shows much of rural Essex within the most deprived 10% category with regard to access to services and housing. The Essex Rural Partnership's Rural Services Survey conducted in 2008 identified 61 shop closures over the previous five years alone. This lack of access to essential services inhibits not just those households that do not own a car (16.5% in the East of England including Essex do not) but also teenagers, mothers with children, elderly relatives in households with a car, who are not personally mobile.

Community life in rural Essex is extremely dependent on volunteers who are required not just to run clubs and societies but to manage facilities such as village halls and to provide care and support to the elderly and housebound. Intervention by volunteers is also a method of sustaining services such as shops and transport formerly provided on a commercial or statutory basis. There are some outstanding community-run shops and other similar initiatives in Essex villages but such dependency can bring with it the risk of 'volunteer fatigue'.



There are, however, plenty of examples of rural communities in Essex that are responding positively to these challenges. More than 50% of rural parishes have to date either produced a parish plan or equivalent or are currently engaged in preparing one. In some villages, public participation levels in these plans have exceeded 90%!

Housing is a sensitive issue given the concerns many rural residents have about over-development, but local housing needs surveys conducted by parishes in conjunction with Rural Community Council of Essex (RCCE) are providing consistent evidence of need and a series of schemes designed specifically to address such needs have been successfully developed by housing associations.

Governance at local community level appears to be in good order. A total of 48 parish councils in Essex have attained quality accreditation under the Government's Quality Councils scheme; the highest number of any county.

Further encouragement can be drawn from the inclusion of a target within the current Local Area Agreement (LAA) that focuses exclusively on improving access to services in rural areas and from the decision of Essex County Council to invest £1.5 million over three years in a programme designed to re-open sub-post offices closed last year under the Post Office's controversial closure programme. These measures indicate a growing strategic awareness of the needs of vulnerable people in rural communities.

A New Vision / Statement of Purpose / Delivery

A New Vision:

To create a vibrant future for rural Essex, based upon **6 Strategic Aims**:

- **Active and Caring Communities**
- **Improved Access to Services**
- **Greater Availability of Affordable Housing**
- **A Thriving Economy**
- **A Rich and Varied Environment**
- **A Responsive Planning and Policy Framework**

Statement of Purpose

In working towards this vision, Essex Rural Partnership will use this Strategy:

- **To raise the profile of rural Essex**
- **To identify priorities for partnership members**
- **To inform and influence future strategies**
- **To encourage partners to work together towards a shared vision and aims**
- **To offer evidence and support for applications for funding for the benefit of rural Essex**

The Strategy is intended to offer a 10 year vision for Rural Essex, to the year 2020. It is recognised however, that we exist in a constantly changing environment, and it is therefore expected that the issues and solutions relevant to rural Essex will need to be reviewed and refreshed after a period of five years.

Delivery

Where practical and desirable, the objectives of this Strategy will be developed into Action Plans with specific timetables and targets. With the agreement of partners, these actions will be led by named organisations, and the activities to achieve the objectives will be encouraged and monitored by Action Groups.

It is hoped that the format of the three Action Groups will remain, with foci on *Community, Economy and Environment* – the latter also giving consideration to coastal issues. These Action Groups will meet both individually and collectively to best address the needs of specific issues. The role of the Action Groups will be to monitor progress, encourage added value through joint working and collectively to promote the Essex Rural Partnership's Strategy and Vision. Members of the Action Groups will also be members of the full Essex Rural Partnership, which will meet 3 times per year and will debate and make recommendations regarding current issues of concern to rural Essex. This will be the conduit for communication with the East of England Rural Forum.

Active and Caring Communities

- *Encouraging community involvement*
- *Healthy communities*
- *Community empowerment & leadership*
- *Civic responsibility*



Community-wellbeing encompasses all the things that make up quality of life and healthy living; rural communities should be supported to be inclusive, vibrant and sustainable.

Key issues

Active and inclusive communities are essential to maintain sustainability in rural areas. It is vital that people in rural communities support local commercial services, but it is just as important that they feel inspired to get involved with local self-help projects. Local leadership is an integral part of ensuring that rural communities have the necessary guidance and motivation to realise their potential.

- **Historically in rural areas communities have been self-supporting. Due to changing demographics and social trends this is declining. This can lead to:**
 - Increased isolation
 - Decreasing participation in informal voluntary networks
- There is an increased expectation for volunteers to take on roles previously deemed to be the responsibility of the statutory and private sectors. This increases pressure on existing volunteers and reduces stability in the delivery of services and community development
- An ageing population, sedentary lifestyles, and indicators of deprivation such as childhood obesity and substance abuse are all as prevalent in rural areas as in urban; however in rural areas access to support networks and positive recreational opportunities are limited
- Young people growing up in rural areas are no longer understanding the role of and need for local voluntary activity
- Fear of crime in rural areas remains an issue of concern

ERP Proposes

- Voluntary Community Groups should be supported in their development and on-going management responsibilities
- Local Leadership is essential and should be developed and supported
- Community Led Planning should be encouraged as a mechanism for achieving community empowerment and development
- In Parished Areas, the potential of Parish and Town Councils to enable and improve Community Development should be developed
- Outreach projects to address health issues should be appropriately tailored to be suitable for delivery in rural areas
- Existing local organisations should encourage young people to be actively involved in their local community

What Needs to Happen

- ERP will encourage Parish and Town Councils to create Voluntary Community Sector Grant Funds
- ERP will support provision of a Framework for Developing Local Leadership through the Quality Council Scheme, which includes the training of Councillors, Clerks and Other Officers
- ERP believes Strategic Policies should be provided for the Promotion of Community Engagement (including Community Led Plans) and other enabling skills to aid local people to influence decision making

- ERP believes Parish and Town Councils should be encouraged to work with other organisations and agencies to deliver services to rural areas
- ERP supports the Work of the Village Agents, Neighbourhood Action Panels (NAPS) and other such projects to assist rural communities. These projects should be encouraged to link with other existing networks
- ERP will explore options to improve communication within communities
- ERP will encourage and support efforts by young people to get more engaged with their local communities.



Improved Access to Services

- *Access to services*
- *Improving transport*
- *Improving infrastructure*
- *Improving information*



People living in rural areas should have affordable and readily available access to essential services, transport and infrastructure.

Key issues

The Government's Index of Deprivation shows much of rural Essex within the most deprived 10% category with regard to access to services and housing. The Rural Services Survey conducted by ERP in 2008 showed that almost 50% of parishes in Essex have no shop or post office and only 32% possess a GP surgery even on a part-time basis.

- The limited availability of key services, transport and ICT infrastructure in rural areas has a negative impact on the life chances of individuals and the sustainability of communities.
- The long-term trend towards the centralisation of key services as a result of the higher costs of provision in rural areas.
- The increasing pressure on volunteers to intervene to sustain services originally provided on either a statutory or commercial basis.
- Demographic change and an ageing population in rural areas will exert an increasing impact on the demand for essential services such as schools and healthcare
- Greater travel to work distances combined with longer working hours encourage people at work to use services (such as retail) close to their workplace thereby adversely affecting the viability of rurally-based shops and services

ERP Proposes

- The Essex Strategy and Local Area Agreement (LAA) and all other major statutory plans and strategies must not advocate measures that disadvantage rural communities.
- ERP supports initiatives that give particular priority to:
 - Sustaining the 'last' service in an individual community where there is evidence of need.
 - Addressing the needs of 'disadvantaged' groups such as elderly, young people and carers
 - Developing multi-purpose models of provision, particularly in smaller, more isolated communities.
- Rural communities should be entitled to equitable access to Next Generation Access (NGA) Broadband.
- ERP supports enhanced provision of community transport
- ERP supports greater use of ICT to alleviate disadvantage in access to essential services
- ERP supports retention of rural schools wherever possible and advocates their wider use in the community
- The regulatory burden on facilities managed by volunteers, such as village halls, should be kept to a minimum wherever possible

What Needs to Happen

- ERP will support the delivery of LAA targets for access to services
- ERP will support innovative projects that help improve access to services for vulnerable people such as the Essex County Council Post Office initiative and the Village Agents scheme.

- ERP will support initiatives to help young people access education, employment and training, such as 'Wheels to Work'
- ERP will support measures to help vulnerable rural services innovate to survive such as the creation of a specialist Rural Retail Adviser post.
- ERP will support projects that increase availability and accessibility of transport, particularly initiatives that will create opportunities for young people
- ERP will support research to identify minimum access standards for services and facilities appropriate to different sizes of rural community and will encourage service providers to adopt them.
- ERP will support research and development of new models for the community provision of key services
- ERP will support the shared use of community buildings, such as Village Halls, schools and churches, for the provision of services. This may include Community Information Points and public ICT facilities.
- ERP will support Parish Councils using the powers and resources at their disposal to invest in key local services
- ERP will support measures to make information regarding services more accessible to people in rural areas. This may include information dissemination via mobile services.



Greater Availability of Affordable Housing

- *Housing for local people*
- *Identifying the need*
- *Encouraging provision*
- *Improving understanding*



There should be sufficient affordable housing in rural areas to meet the immediate needs of those with local links, and to create lasting benefits for families, businesses and communities.

Key issues

The Affordable Rural Housing Commission reported in 2006 that 11,000 new homes were needed annually throughout rural England to satisfy local needs. In many rural areas today households need at least eight times their income to purchase a house. This means even in a recession house prices would have to fall by 63% to be affordable.

- The sustainability of rural communities is dependent in large measure on maintaining a balanced demographic profile.
- Provision of affordable housing gives young people and families the choice of continuing to live in villages rather than being compelled to migrate to urban areas.
- There is sometimes a presumption against development in rural areas, which can serve as a barrier to potential affordable housing initiatives
- Much affordable housing has focussed on parishes below 3,000 population; many parishes with populations above 3,000 have therefore not benefited from such initiatives
- Local support for affordable housing is not always forthcoming, often caused by:
 - A lack of understanding of the distinction between 'affordable housing' and 'social housing'
 - A lack of knowledge and understanding of the benefits of affordable housing in a given community
 - A lack of confidence that the homes on exception sites will be for local people
- Availability of suitable land for development can be a problem even in communities where there is evidence of need and support from the wider community.

ERP Proposes

- ERP believes provision of affordable housing should be based on up to date evidence of local need.
- ERP will encourage all levels of Local Authority (Parish, District and County) to play a proactive role in identifying evidence of need and appropriate sites
- ERP recognises the importance of the Rural Housing Enabler service in providing parish councils and local communities with independent support in assessing local needs and developing appropriate solutions.
- ERP will encourage local planning authorities to adopt a positive approach regarding planning applications for needs-led affordable, rural housing.
- ERP supports a focus on the housing needs of older people and those with disabilities as well as young people and families.
- ERP supports initiatives to secure the provision of affordable housing in rural communities of over 3,000 population, and believes that a percentage of these should be for local people

What Needs to Happen

- ERP will encourage every Parish Council to identify the housing need in its community and to take steps towards addressing outstanding need
- ERP will support the Rural Housing Enabler project and recognises it as a means of ensuring that development is initiated in accordance with local need
- ERP will engage with the Rural Housing Enabler project to raise awareness of the socio-economic benefits of affordable housing to rural communities
- Landowners, eg local authorities, faith groups, etc, should be encouraged to review availability of land for affordable housing
- ERP supports the concept of specialist support for the creation and development of Community Land Trusts
- ERP believes that a fair proportion of Government funding should be directed at rural projects to enable realistic targets to be met.



A Thriving Economy

- *Promoting Essex*
- *Business Support*
- *Skills*
- *Employment*



Business growth in rural Essex is key to the well-being of communities and the wider economy and must be supported and encouraged.

Key issues

Business support and an environment in which entrepreneurship can thrive is essential to the Essex economy. Promoting Essex both as a visitor destination and as somewhere to invest in the longer term will help both in times of economic prosperity and otherwise. The following need to be addressed;

- How rural Essex can take full advantage of its strategic location, its well trained and motivated workforce and high quality of life to attract home grown talent and entrepreneurs
- How local shops, Post Offices and pubs are an essential part of the economic and social fabric of rural Essex yet can only thrive if they are innovative, flexible and efficient. Advice and support to encourage these businesses to be innovative, flexible and efficient needs to be well directed, funded and promoted.
- How Next Generation Access (NGA) Broadband which is critical to rural Essex's future business needs can be rolled out across the county
- Food production, arable, livestock, fishing by farming or capture and shellfish culture are a major essential asset of Essex and its coastline. They are activities that also create a landscape suitable for tourism and visitors, health and recreation.
- How better to understand the drivers for business growth in rural Essex. What are the importance of factors such as available buildings; lower rents; owner's lifestyle considerations; local labour market; location; availability of Broadband.
- How rural residents can access training and education at all stages of life whether they are school leavers, in work, or considering a career change and that all skill sets are catered for.

ERP Proposes

- ERP want to see a wide range of successful businesses and commercial activities taking place in the rural parts of the county. As well as more traditional rural businesses, they should also include innovative and research based enterprise in particular focussing on renewable and green energy.
- ERP advocates the universal coverage NGA Broadband for future business and household needs.
- ERP encourages quality support, advice and training infrastructure along with access to grant funding to ensure that Essex is a destination of choice for new entrepreneurs.
- ERP encourages high levels of employment in rural areas where workforces are not required to commute long distances by car. To support this, public transport and cycling infrastructure needs to be available and fit for purpose.
- ERP recognises that rural Essex is not homogenous and that different pressures and issues affect different parts of the county. However, ERP calls upon rural planning authorities to make clear their aspirations for their districts through their Local Development Documents as to what type and size of business will best "fit in" to their district so allowing appropriate diversification projects to go ahead.
- Perception surveys show that whilst Essex residents enjoy visits to the countryside, visitor attractions need further promotion to improve viability. Although ERP has a limited profile with the local media, this needs to be worked on so that there is a voice to rural Essex.
- The benefits that appropriate business development can have on rural communities need to be communicated to sometimes sceptical local residents and councils

What Needs to Happen

- ERP to play a leading role in identifying areas with insufficient broadband coverage (notspots) and to stimulate demand in them. By doing this, commercially viable broadband solutions can be put in place to support both households and businesses in remote rural locations. This is both a national and local priority and needs a co-ordinated approach in gathering data and dealing with communication providers.
- ERP to develop work on the rural profile of the county both within its borders and beyond by working with the media to have an ongoing story about rural Essex and its “sense of place” – what makes Essex different to the Cotswolds, the Fens, Dorset etc. Essex Tourism will need to take the lead on this but it is also about changing the perception of Essex to investors as well as visitors
- ERP can bring strands of the partnership’s work together to ensure that the economy of rural Essex is strengthened and designed to be more resilient through all sectors.
- ERP to act as a conduit to share information about training and skills opportunities.



A Rich and Varied Environment

- *Diversity*
- *Heritage*
- *Coast and Rivers*
- *Access to countryside*



The importance of good land management of the rural landscape should be understood by both residents and visitors. Rural communities should be proud of local initiatives, local produce and the rich diversity of wildlife and heritage which contribute to a sustainable future.

Key issues

Essex has a rich and diverse environment, with habitats including wetlands, ancient woodlands, flower rich grasslands, heathland and old orchards and a range of other sites such as churchyards and quarries. There is also an abundance of wildlife, including such species as otters, water voles, skylarks and brown hares.

- It is crucial that we retain the diversity which is threatened by massive development pressure and changing agricultural methods.
- Essex has rising sea levels, increased storminess and limited resources to maintain flood defences. Decisions are going to have to be made about where flood defences can be retained and where they will be realigned.
- It is important to respect landowner's wishes and find ways to encourage these landowners to look after and be proud of the diversity for which they are stewards.
- Essex, unlike most other counties, does not have a County Records Centre which covers biological and geological records – however it does cover heritage records extremely well.
- Essex has a reasonable network of public footpaths, green lanes and bridleways. However, in rural areas people have relatively poor access to any green space of any size, e.g. village greens, playing fields, community woodlands, allotments etc.
- As in many counties, there is a relatively slow take up of more sustainable life styles in Essex and this is particularly the case in rural Essex, e.g. local power generation, local food to reduce food miles, reduction of waste at source, improvements to public transport.
- There is a lack of awareness, compared with other areas of the UK, of the beauty and importance of the countryside and coast of Essex both in the Essex population and potential tourists

ERP Proposes

- ERP supports measures to maintain and improve the rich diversity of rural Essex – its biodiversity, its geodiversity, its diversity of heritage and culture.
- ERP supports farmers, land managers and land owners who manage their land in ways which improve biodiversity, geodiversity and heritage diversity alongside the production of good quality food and local produce. ERP supports initiatives, incentive schemes and grants to these ends.
- ERP supports the aims of the Essex Biodiversity Project which directs effort at the list of nationally recognised Biodiversity Action Plans which apply to both important habitats in Essex and to important species in Essex. It is therefore important that we have robust systems of recording these habitats and species and the Wildlife Sites.
- ERP supports a Local Records Centre for biological records, a good Wildlife Sites System and incentives which support appropriate management
- In terms of geodiversity, ERP supports the selection of important sites by Essex geologists and a system for their selection and care.
- In terms of heritage interest, ERP supports the recognition of scheduled monuments and other important heritage features and buildings and encourages their upkeep.

- ERP supports the need for Shoreline Management Plans of the coast and Catchment Management Plans of rivers so that landowners can plan for change.
- ERP supports sustainable practices such as:
 - Green and renewable power sources
 - Local food production and consumption
 - Water saving measures in home/garden/farm
 - Green tourism alongside other local tourism
 - Manufacture and sale of local crafts and local produce
 - Reuse of existing redundant buildings which support the above
 - Water saving and energy efficiency in domestic, community and commercial contexts.

ERP supports initiatives that will improve information about and physical access to these sustainable practices, which can be of benefit to the local economy and environment as well as to the individual consumer.

What Needs to Happen

- ERP will support those Agri-environment Schemes and other Incentives which pay landowners to protect and improve biodiversity, geodiversity, and heritage diversity, alongside the production of good quality food and local produce.
- ERP will encourage the establishment of a County Records Centre in Essex covering biodiversity and geodiversity as well as heritage interest.
- ERP supports local projects to improve green infrastructure, biodiversity, geodiversity and heritage interest.
- ERP will support green tourism trails including cycle hire and conversion of redundant buildings which benefit rural communities.
- ERP will promote information about and access to rural green space, rural incentives and rural improvements relating to specific selected rural initiatives.
- ERP will support the introduction of Shoreline and Catchment Management Plans and will seek to assist those landowners who are facing up to the changes brought about by rising sea levels and changing climate.
- ERP supports initiatives which encourage local people and visitors to see or buy local food, local crafts, water saving, green power generation, reused and sustainable buildings etc.

A Responsive Planning and Policy Framework

- *Influencing policy & co-ordinating delivery*
- *Influencing the planning system*
- *Research*
- *Awareness*



Planning and policy frameworks should enable appropriate development in rural areas to ensure the future health of all aspects of rural existence. Sustainable development techniques and sustainable energy provision should be favoured, and re-use of redundant buildings should be encouraged. Where applicable, the value of new development to local communities and economies should be recognised, whilst the value of local habitats and heritage should be protected.

Key issues

None of the other 5 strategic objectives can be achieved without a flexible planning and policy framework; it is therefore important for fulfilment of the strategy as a whole. Planning policies and their interpretation are critical to the well-being of rural communities, for they determine the future availability of housing, employment and other infrastructure. Given the high landscape and ecological value of rural Essex, planning decisions are often far from straightforward. Particular issues are:

- How to achieve the right balance between:
 - a. business growth in rural Essex;
 - b. economic growth as a driver of higher house prices;
 - c. maintaining the qualities of the built and natural environment.
- How to ensure that the Planning system recognises the needs of rural businesses and permits appropriate and sustainable economic growth in rural Essex.
- How to provide more opportunities for residents to work at home in order to reduce commuting.
- How to provide the right conditions in which businesses can diversify in order to increase employment and make the businesses more resilient. In terms of wider benefits, the priority is to support the diversification of businesses that provide local services;
- How to provide adequate levels of affordable housing that will meet the needs of people from within the community.

In setting its standpoint on this issue, the ERP has attempted to achieve the right balance of response to these issues. In other words, the right mix of development and conservation.

ERP Proposes

The ERP supports flexible planning policy in rural areas providing that it does not have a significantly negative impact on the community and that developments are at least environmentally neutral. Within this context, the ERP supports planning policy and planning applications related to economic growth or affordable housing in rural Essex when the following, as appropriate, can be facilitated or delivered:

- Employment opportunities are increased within the locality;
- Affordable housing needs in the locality are addressed;
- Redundant buildings and especially those of historic merit are utilised or, alternatively, new buildings are integrated into the landscape using sustainable materials and construction methods, without damaging bio-diversity;
- Traffic generation is appropriate to local road capacity;
- Sustainable energy sources provide most or all of the power consumed;
- Working from home is facilitated;
- The viability of local services is increased;
- Benefits to the local community brought about by development are tangible and effective.

- **Essential services such as post offices, pubs and shops are maintained and that every village should retain some kind of service**

Rural areas already support many rural businesses that make an important contribution to the local economy, including providing custom for village services and employment for local people. In this way, they support facilities that also benefit residents. When conducting employment land surveys, District Councils should ensure that rural areas are included and that provision is made for the growth of existing businesses as well as the establishment of new ones. Such land should be included in the council's LDF and protected from the conversion to other uses. Working with parish council's the amount of land allocated should be kept under regular review to ensure that it remains adequate.

What Needs to Happen

To support the above position the member organisations of the ERP will explore further the following work areas.

- ERP will support Community Led Plans to provide a community based view of local needs and circumstances, especially with regard to affordable housing and employment. Community Led Plans should be suitably reflected in Local Development Frameworks.
- ERP will continue to work with parishes and housing associations to support developments through the planning process. ERP will also promote better understanding of affordable housing aimed at Parish and District members and officers.
- ERP will continue to work with District planning staff in order to achieve LDFs that are supportive of the development needs of established businesses. This is in recognition of the fact that established businesses tend to employ local people.
- ERP will monitor the influence of advice contained within the new PPS4, with regard to new businesses. Where District planning departments are not allocating sufficient land in LDFs or not making decisions based on the spirit of these statements, the ERP will raise this with officers and appropriate Members.
- ERP will seek to influence planning policy in order to increase opportunities for home working.
- ERP will continue to facilitate business diversification by promoting greater understanding of farming and rural business issues, possibly through the establishment of a landowner/planner forum. The ERP will promote the benefits of diversification, including increased employment opportunities and greater business resilience.
- ERP will support the undertaking of a study of rural businesses in order better to understand and champion their needs.
- ERP will raise awareness of the impact of planning policies on rural communities.
- ERP will promote innovative opportunities for the multi-use of buildings that may fall outside of established planning policy.
- ERP will highlight and promote the benefits of 'rural proofing' planning policies at an early stage in their development.

Lobbying

Essex Rural Partnership recognises that it has a role to play in lobbying for improvements in rural Essex. Whilst some specific lobbying opportunities have been referred to throughout the previous sections of this Strategy, there are some wider issues which are cross-cutting and will have an impact on more than one strand of this Strategy.

In particular, Essex Rural Partnership will wish to highlight the following issues:

- **Recognition of the qualities of rural areas and the importance of the interdependence between urban and rural**
- **Recognition of the true extent of rural disadvantage and deprivation**
- **Recognition of the critical role that the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) plays in rural areas**
- **A fair allocation of funding for rural areas**
- **Commitment by all levels of Government and by service providers to the rural proofing of key strategies, policies and documents**

It is expected that lobbying will take place at local, regional and national levels. Due to the uncertainty of future structures at the time of writing, specific information about organisations that we wish to influence can be found on the Essex Rural Partnership website at www.essexruralpartnership.org.uk, and will be updated as necessary.

To assist in raising the profile of key issues, ERP proposes to:

- **Organise demonstration tours for MPs, local authority councillors etc. to examine new and innovative ways of improving access to services in rural areas.**
- **Engage with district LSPs to encourage the use of the refreshed Essex Rural Strategy as a reference point on addressing rural issues**
- **Make maximum use of media opportunities**



Appendices

APPENDIX 1 Methodology

Showing consultation and key meeting dates

24th October 2008	Essex Rural Partnership Meeting at Blackwater Sailing Club. Additional invitees. Focus on Transport, but also opportunity for delegates to identify key issues.
24th October 2008	Essex Rural Partnership Steering Group determined 6 key themes on which to base the new strategy.
24th February 2009	Essex Rural Partnership Conference at Reid Rooms. Wide invitation to all agencies with an interest in rural Essex to attend. 6 key themes explored through workshop groups. Opportunity to identify other areas of concern/interest.
24th February 2009	Essex Rural Partnership Steering Group nominated a working group to progress the writing of the new strategy.
27th April 2009	First meeting of Strategy Working Group, held at RCCE Offices, Feering.
15th May 2009	Essex Rural Partnership Meeting at Essex Records Office.
15th May 2009	ERP Steering Group Meeting
12th June 2009	Strategy Working Group Meeting, held at County Hall, Chelmsford.
22nd July 2009	ERP Steering Group Meeting agrees Editing Team of 4 to progress the Strategy.
28th July 2009	Strategy Editing Team Meeting
6th August 2009	Strategy Editing Team Meeting
Aug – Oct 2009	Consultation period
9th September 2009	Essex Rural Partnership Meeting at The Salings Village Hall. Presentation of Draft Strategy to ERP members. Draft Strategy approved.
9th September 2009	ERP Steering Group Meeting. Final timescale agreed. Steering Group members formally approved Draft Strategy and delegated final editing responsibility to the Strategy Editing Team.
9th October 2009	Strategy Editing Team Meeting
22nd October 2009	Copy of final text circulated to ERP Steering Group for final comments. Copy also sent to ERP members who had commented on the previous draft.
29th October 2009	Authorised for print by Steering Group
24th November 2009	Official Strategy Launch at Ingatestone Hall

APPENDIX 2

List of current member organisations of ERP

Steering Group:

The Steering Group of the Essex Rural Partnership is made up as follows (with the number of representatives for each area/organisation shown in brackets):

The Chair and Vice Chair of the Essex Rural Partnership (2)

Representatives for the following areas of work, elected by Action Groups where appropriate:

- Community (Action Group) (2)
- Economic (Action Group) (2)
- Environment (Action Group) (2)

Representatives from the following organisations, elected by these organisations:

- Local Government Association (Essex representatives) (2)

Representatives from the following administrative bodies:

- Essex County Council (1)
- Rural Community Council of Essex (1)

Representatives from Regional Governmental Organisations are non-voting members:

- Government Office East (1)
- East of England Development Agency (1)

Members of the East of England Rural Forum who are Essex-based are ex-officio members of the Steering Group – this number may vary according to nominations made by other bodies.

Full Partnership Members:

These members currently include representatives from:

- Active Chelmsford
- Age Concern Essex
- Association of Universities in the East of England
- Barleylands Farm Museum & Visitors Centre
- Business Link
- Chelmer Housing Partnership
- Chelmer Residents Forum
- Campaign to Protect Rural Essex
- Country Land and Business Association
- County, Unitary, District and Borough Councils
- Diocese of Chelmsford (Church of England)
- Environment Agency
- East of England Ambulance Service
- East of England Development Agency
- Essex Association of CVS (and some individual CVS members)
- Essex Association of Local Councils
- Essex Chambers of Commerce
- Essex Community Foundation
- Essex Council for Voluntary Youth Services
- Essex County Fire and Rescue Service
- Essex Disabled People's Association
- Essex Libraries (Essex County Council)
- Essex Police
- Essex Racial Equality Council
- Essex Tourism Association
- Essex Wildlife Trust
- Essex-based Community Transport Schemes
- Essex Southend and Thurrock Infrastructure Consortium (ESTIC)
- Farm Crisis Network
- Federation of Small Businesses
- Greenfields Community Housing
- In-Tend
- Learning and Skills Council
- LINks (Essex and Southend)
- Local Government Association (Essex representatives)
- Local Strategic Partnerships (various)
- Moat Housing
- National Farmers Union (Essex)
- Natural England
- Rural Community Council of Essex
- Rural Shops Alliance
- Various Volunteer Bureaux in Essex
- Voluntary Sector Training
- Writtle College (Centre for Environment and Rural Affairs)

Notes





Essex Rural Partnership

www.essexruralpartnership.org.uk

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YOUR COMMUNITY
YOUR ECONOMY
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