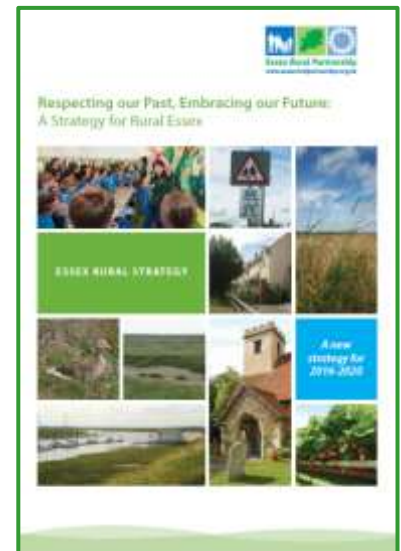


Introduction

Essex Rural Partnership (ERP) brings together organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors to co-ordinate action on the major economic, social and environmental issues facing rural Essex.

In July 2016, in order to give renewed focus to this work, we published '*Respecting our Past, Embracing our Future: A Strategy for Rural Essex 2016-2020*'. This report summarises the progress made in delivering the strategy over the past year and highlights some of the challenges we will face as we focus on refreshing the strategy.



Our Vision

A county which engages, values and respects its rural environment; and where rural communities fully contribute to and benefit from a healthy, prosperous and connected Essex.

Our Aims:

- 1. Prosperity.** To build a dynamic and sustainable rural economy, where businesses and communities are mutually supportive, and where all the assets and benefits of rural Essex are actively promoted to encourage investment.
- 2. Well-being.** To enable everyone in Essex to enjoy our rich and diverse environment, and support rural residents to live well and access health services when they need them.
- 3. Connection.** To support the development of rural broadband and rural transport, while championing rural networks and facilities.
- 4. Innovation.** To promote new approaches to service access and delivery for rural communities, with a focus on mobilising community assets.

Our Strategic Priorities – Progress and Developments in 2018/19

1. Harnessing the potential in our rural economy

- Over £3.8 million allocated to support economic growth and job creation in rural Essex through the current LEADER programme, creating more than 150 new jobs.
- Concerns over future funding for rural businesses after Brexit presented to Defra and SELEP.
- £5 million grant secured from the Rural Development Programme for England to provide ultrafast broadband to almost 1,000 rural businesses as part of the Superfast Essex programme.
- Ultrafast rural broadband supplied by Gigaclear is made available in Uttlesford district from April 2019, with further investment scheduled in Braintree, Colchester and Epping Forest.



2. Education and skills for life

- Over 3,000 primary school students participate in the 12th annual Essex Schools Food and Farming Day organised by Essex Agricultural Society with support from Essex County Council and Writtle University College.
- 220 entries for RCCE's Growing Communities Healthy Packed Lunch Plot Competition. Which educates children about growing and eating locally sourced food



3. Farming for the future

- NFU commits to working with the Government to achieve NetZero carbon emissions from UK agriculture.
- Continued uncertainty for UK agriculture with the risk of a disorderly Brexit and with direct payments scheduled to be replaced by environmental-based schemes.
- NFU becomes a partner in Water Resources East, which aims to ensure water resources are effectively managed and water courses properly maintained.
- NFU and Essex Police Rural Engagement Team continue to develop good relationship between local farmers and the police.



4. Attracting visitors to rural Essex

- Visit Essex launches 'Gardens and Gourmet' project.
- Funding secured for 'Essex Path to Prosperity' project to raise awareness of the Essex coast.
- Visit Essex collaborates with partners in Kent and East Sussex as SELEP recognises the importance of tourism to the rural economy.



5. Celebrating our culture and heritage

- Diocese of Chelmsford Rural Church Buildings Conference, supported by the Church of England's senior Church Buildings Officer, All Churches Trust, RCCE, SPAB and Essex Police, promotes creative ways to ensure rural churches remain at the heart of the community.
- A film produced from the conference will provide churches with an ongoing resource to support initiatives.



6. Securing a place to live

- 28 new affordable homes facilitated by RCCE's Rural Housing Enabler service.
- RCCE and other Rural Community Councils in the East of England prepare bid to the Government's Community Housing Fund to create regional Community Led Housing Hub.
- Revised National Planning Policy Framework sets out new guidance on affordable housing.



7. Accessing the services we need

- Essex County Council's 'Future Library Services Strategy' proposes greater community involvement in sustaining the service and is subject to extensive public consultation.
- The Community Agents Essex service, managed by RCCE, continues to support vulnerable elderly people, with 93.5% of clients still able to live independently 12 months later.
- Essex County Council introduces a new countywide programme to tackle social isolation and loneliness.
- Essex County Council provides 5 Demand Responsive Transport (DaRT) services in Braintree, Maldon and Uttlesford districts.



8. Thriving and pro-active communities

- Community Initiatives Fund is relaunched including a new Micro Grants scheme. Management of the fund is delegated to EALC.
- Neighbourhood Plans continue to be promoted by RCCE and EALC – more than 50 in progress across the county.
- Local Council Awards continue to raise standards in the parish sector.
- EALC creates new post to promote health and wellbeing initiatives in parishes.
- Defra introduces new Village Hall Improvement Grant scheme.



9. Feeling safe and reducing crime

- Rural Crime Awareness Day held in November 2018 with extensive partner and public involvement.
- Funding secured for expansion of the Essex Police Rural Engagement Team.
- Business Crime Forum launched with strong representation from rural businesses.
- Essex Police stages 'days of action' on fly tipping and hare coursing.
- Countywide Fly Tipping Group brings together statutory bodies to explore ways of further reducing this problem.
- Essex Police participates in reinvigorated regional rural crime group.



10. Protecting and promoting our natural environment

- Beavers introduced at Spains Hall, Finchingfield as part of Natural Flood Management (NFM) interventions.
- Holistic Blackwater Estuary Strategy led by Essex Wildlife Trust provides discussion forum on coastal change and Bradwell power station.
- Proposals for strategic infrastructure projects such as the Lower Thames Crossing and 'Garden Villages' raise concerns for the environment and local communities.
- Glover Review of National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty in progress.



Strategic Links and Key Relationships

The Essex Rural Strategy emphasises the importance of partnership working and of developing relationships with strategic partners. The following are key relationships for Essex Rural Partnership at present:

- **Defra** – ERP is one of 17 local rural partnerships or networks in membership of Defra’s Rural and Farming Network. The working of the network has been under review but it provides us with an opportunity to meet with and question Defra ministers and senior civil servants, usually on a twice yearly basis. Tim Goodship, Defra’s Head of Rural Policy, spoke to ERP in October 2018, and members of the Agricultural Transition team met with ERP representatives this summer to discuss agricultural payments and rural development funding post-Brexit.
- **South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP)** – through RCCE, ERP has representation on SELEP’s Rural Sector Working Group. This group, set up in 2017 is charged primarily with reviewing SELEP’s own Rural Strategy and ensuring rural needs are recognised within the overall Strategic Economic Plan. The relationship with SELEP will be increasingly important as it develops its Local Industrial Strategy. This will establish its priorities for future investment.
- **Essex Assembly** – a number of ERP members participate in the bi-annual meetings of the Assembly which has responsibility for monitoring the development of ‘The Future of Essex’, the new shared vision for the county, launched in 2017.
- **Rural Crime Forum** – a number of ERP members participate in the forum which is run by the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner. Stronger collaboration on rural crime and the creation of Essex Police’s Rural Engagement Team (until recently, Gypsy, Traveller and Rural Engagement Team) have particular successes during the lifespan of the current strategy.
- **Essex Libraries** – the review of library services has been a high profile issue in the county over the past year. Cllr. Susan Barker, the ECC cabinet member with responsibility for libraries, spoke to ERP in April and participated in a question and answer session. Two ERP members – EALC and RCCE – have been active in encouraging community engagement in the review process. This will continue following the publication of the Future Library Services Strategy.

Emerging Issues and Future Plans

The past three years has seen major strategic changes which could not have been fully envisaged when the current strategy was being produced.

Pre-eminent among these is **Brexit** which will have substantial economic, social and environmental impacts for rural Essex, however the matter is eventually resolved.

The past year has been frustrating with the Agriculture Bill on hold in parliament and the proposed consultation on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the Government's intended successor to European structural funds, postponed at a time when the existing EU-funded LEADER programme is coming to an end.

A number of ERP members – notably NFU, Essex Wildlife Trust and RCCE – continue to engage closely with this issue, whilst nationally, the Rural Services Network has initiated a campaign calling for an overarching rural strategy for England post-Brexit.

Another issue which cuts across many of the priorities identified in the current strategy is the prospect of **large-scale strategic development** in the county. Essex will need to accommodate 180,000 new homes over the next 20 years and a number of big infrastructure projects such as the proposed North Essex Garden Communities will have a substantial impact on rural areas.

Loneliness and social isolation has emerged as a frontline political issue since 2016. It is already being addressed through a number of services and activities provided by ERP members, and recognised as a significant challenge in the current Joint Essex Health and Wellbeing Strategy published this summer.

Climate change is a global challenge recognised in the current strategy, but with the development of initiatives such as the Green Essex Strategy, it is likely to feature more prominently in the coming years as a local policy priority.

Against this background, the ERP Strategic Board has committed itself to refreshing the Essex Rural Strategy. Through a process of public consultation and partner engagement, it plans to have the refreshed strategy in place from summer 2020.



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