

# Respecting our Past, Embracing our Future: A Strategy for Rural Essex



# FACTS ABOUT RURAL ESSEX



**350 MILES**  
of coastline



**250,000 HECTARES**  
Total farmed area in Essex  
with 1,750 farmers



**72%**



of land area in Essex is classified as rural

**350,000**

residents in rural Essex  
(1/4 of the workforce)



**78**



Sites of Special Scientific Interest

**75,000**



Children living in rural Essex



**50%**

of parishes have no shop or post office



**11 MILLION**



Day visitors to Essex countryside annually

Footpath

**4,000**

miles of public rights of way

Businesses & industries based in rural Essex



**22,500**

Access to regular bus services

Rural

**42%**



Urban

**96%**



- 21% of deprived people in Essex live in rural areas.
- On average, people living in the most rural areas travel 45% further per year than those in England as a whole, and 53% further than those living in urban areas.
- A greater percentage of total annual mileage was made using a car in the most rural areas (58%) than in urban areas (49%).
- People living in villages and dispersed areas travel an average of 10,000 miles per year, compared to 6,400 miles for urban residents.

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## Essex Rural Partnership

The Essex Rural Partnership 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.

Established in 2002, the Essex Rural Partnership has met regularly since then, providing a forum to exchange information, develop collaborative projects and encourage a co-ordinated response to important policy issues. It also provides a rural evidence base, available to all member organisations. As an independent body, Essex Rural Partnership is well-placed to lobby on the strategic issues that matter to people who live and work in the county's rural areas. In 2012 Essex Rural Partnership was awarded membership of Defra's national Rural and Farming Network, enabling it to engage directly with Government.

**The Essex Rural Partnership works across Greater Essex, an area which boasts a unique mix of rural environment and high quality access to urban markets.** 72% of Essex is rural, its 350 miles of coastline are the longest of any English county, yet the M11 and M25 motorways and a number of other major trunk roads provide easy access to London and other urban centres. Essex is home to two London airports (Stansted and Southend) and two international ports (Harwich and Tilbury), which offer unrivalled access to continental Europe and beyond.



Our 2020 Vision for Rural Essex commented that ‘the debate continues as to whether rural issues require special attention’. The Essex Rural Partnership was established in 2002 because we believe that they do, and over the past five years we have been winning that argument.

Nationally, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for the Environment launched a ten point plan in summer 2015 ‘to harness the enormous economic potential England’s rural areas have to offer’. Regionally, our South East Local Enterprise Partnership published its rural strategy in 2015, setting out plans to address ‘fundamental issues for our rural economy, communities and environment’. The government’s financial settlement for local authorities has recognised the special challenges of delivering services in dispersed rural areas.

Recognition of the potential of the rural economy and for innovative approaches to rural services is welcome, but needs to be balanced with care for the rural environment and culture. In reality, preservation and growth are often two sides of the same coin, with many rural businesses depending on this heritage – whether, for example, that’s the 400 listed Church of England buildings in Essex, the 350 miles of coastline, 4000 miles of public rights of way or 78 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI’s). Rural Essex is, of course, all about the quality of its natural environment, and whatever we do to realise rural potential must involve custodianship of our rural environment.

Above and beyond that, of course, rural Essex is all about the people who live and work and visit here. There is much prosperity in our rural communities, and many advantages to rural life. The Essex countryside attracts as many as eleven million day visitors each year, many of them from our towns and cities. There is also significant deprivation, which can be more difficult to identify and address in sparsely populated areas than towns and cities. People may also face difficulties in accessing services when they need them, which is particularly relevant for the growing numbers of older people in rural areas. For younger people, the lack of availability of affordable housing is a real challenge.

The views of people living and working in rural Essex have been at the heart of this review of our strategy, and we are extremely grateful to everyone who has contributed their time and ideas. We have also undertaken a detailed analysis of the best available evidence to inform our plans, as well as the policy environment we need to work in and with. This review builds on our 2020 Vision by identifying some key strategic priorities for the Essex Rural Partnership up to 2020. We look forward to working with you to achieve this shared ambition for confronting the challenges, making the most of significant opportunities and ‘harnessing the enormous potential’ of our rural areas in Essex.

## Vision, aims and approach

**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.

### What we want to achieve: 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.

### How we'll do it: The Partnership's role

- 1. Voice.** By providing rural Essex with a strong and influential voice in local, regional and national policy, with a focus on our rural environment, economy, services and housing.
- 2. Engagement.** By engaging the whole rural community in the partnership's work, recognising its diversity, and including young people and the disadvantaged.
- 3. Knowledge.** By listening and learning about what works for rural communities, bringing people together to share their experience and insight and curating an evidence resource for rural Essex.
- 4. Promotion.** By championing and developing a compelling narrative for and about rural Essex.



# Delivery: Making it happen

Six key steps will support the journey from strategy to delivery:

**Step 1:** We will undertake a root and branch review of the Essex Rural Partnership's (ERP's) structures and processes, with a view to reinvigorating its work, broadening its membership and maximising its impact and effectiveness.

**Step 2:** We will produce an annual work programme to ensure that the partnership is fully engaging with key developments that will impact Essex's rural communities and that our limited resources are focussed on our key strategic priorities and on interventions that are timed and designed to have maximum impact.

**Step 3:** We will lead the development of an 'Essex rural pledge' which we will be inviting all individuals and organisations with a contribution to make to achieving our vision and ambitions to sign up to, and which will raise the visibility and profile of the partnership and Rural Essex.

**Step 4:** We will develop a map of local, regional and national agencies that we will need to engage and influence to achieve our strategic ambitions for rural Essex and develop an influencing strategy. We will develop and support 'ERP ambassadors' to broaden the visibility and representation of rural Essex.

**Step 5:** We will hold discussions with partners to agree on the best achievable evidence resource we can provide for rural Essex within our current resources, and deliver this through the ERP website.

**Step 6:** We will provide an annual 'outcome report' to ERP members, which will be available on the ERP website. This will report on our progress in developing the partnership and delivering our strategic priorities.



## Progress: Six key achievements

We are building on a strong record of progress and impact in providing support, voice and representation for rural Essex.

### 1. Securing membership of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' (Defra's) Rural and Farming Network

ERP secured a seat for Essex on Defra's Rural and Farming Network, which succeeded the Ministerial links with Regional Rural Fora in 2012. Whilst most other areas in the country were represented by a group covering a larger area, Essex was one of two counties in the initial membership to gain a county-level representation.

### 2. Helping to initiate LEADER funding activity in Essex and ensuring good county coverage

ERP led the way in establishing a new LEADER Local Action Group in Essex, which is now delivering £1.8million to rural businesses and communities. ERP also supported the creation of neighbouring Local Action Groups, working cross-border into Essex, to ensure maximum county coverage and to eradicate gaps between eligible areas. In total, rural Essex has access to £7.2million funding across four Local Action Group areas.

### 3. Representing rural interests on the South East LEP

ERP lobbied the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) to take rural issues seriously, and to make sure that Essex was fully represented in all rural discussions. As a result, ERP is represented on the SELEP-wide Rural Strategy Group, giving rural Essex a strong voice and helping to influence future SELEP activities and available funding.

### 4. Hosting Ministerial visits to promote the needs of rural Essex

ERP hosted two ministerial visits to the county. This gave us an opportunity to lobby Defra ministers on issues of concern to rural people and businesses in Essex. We were also able to demonstrate the rurality of our county, which is often seen as an urban neighbour to London.

### 5. Production of a Woodland Strategy

ERP wrote and published a Woodland Strategy for the county. This was the first of its kind and offered a vision and aims to help achieve an expanding woodland resource in Essex.

### 6. Services in Rural Essex – rural services survey

In 2010 ERP undertook a countywide survey to ascertain the level of service provision and to monitor service decline (or increase) in rural areas. The survey reached out to all parishes in the county and achieved response rates of over 60% on both occasions. The resulting reports provided an information base and identified trends in service provision.

# Consultation: What you've been telling us

To kick start the engagement process, the Essex Rural Partnership invited representatives of our rural communities, including District and Parish Councillors, to a consultation event at Foakes Hall in Great Dunmow in July 2015. This event mapped out the key issues of concern for communities in rural Essex and identified overarching themes for the strategy. The consultation event also helped us to develop a survey (Essex Rural Strategy Questionnaire) of people living and working in rural Essex, which we conducted in 2015 with over 1,600 responding, around 70% of them rural residents. The findings of this survey have determined our strategic priorities.

The people of Essex told us that...	...So we will
Better broadband is important for rural businesses and service access (but not everyone owns or feels comfortable with new technologies).	<p><b>Voice:</b> Be the eyes, ears and voice of rural communities on broadband and mobile receptivity. We will monitor progress, raising any concerns you have nationally and making sure the Essex Superfast Broadband Project is engaging with and listening to rural Essex.</p> <p><b>Connection/innovation:</b> Work with our partners to explore innovative ways to ensure that everyone in our rural communities benefits from new technologies in ways that improve their day-to-day lives.</p>
Our rural landscapes and communities are what is most special about rural Essex, and you generally feel safe, but litter is a problem, and you worry about road safety.	<p><b>Voice/evidence:</b> Represent your road safety concerns to councils and continue to work with the Police and Crime Commissioner and police service and develop ties to the National Rural Crime Network.</p> <p><b>Vision:</b> Capture your voices in developing a narrative for rural Essex, working closely with our tourism industry.</p> <p><b>Engagement and innovation:</b> Sort out the litter problem – this is something we can and should get to grips with.</p>
It is more expensive living in rural areas than in towns and cities, and there is a real need for more affordable housing for young people ... a lot of you also feel you pay too much for your energy bills.	<p><b>Evidence:</b> We will capture the views and experiences of young people and families looking for homes in rural Essex to inform policy and practice. We will map affordable housing provision as part of the new evidence resource.</p> <p><b>Voice:</b> The government has made a clear commitment to affordable housing and we will keep the pressure up to deliver for rural communities, and encourage local partners to commit to targets.</p> <p><b>Innovation:</b> Our members are running innovative schemes to reduce rural energy bills, and we will continue to support these initiatives.</p>
New housing provision to be developed sensitively, providing affordable housing in a way that is appropriate to rural communities, avoids over-development and is supported by transport and other services.	<p><b>Voice/engagement:</b> Work with District and Borough Councils to ensure a strong rural voice and perspective is shaping local development and housing plans. Support Parish Councils to have their say.</p> <p><b>Innovation:</b> Identify examples of good housing development in rural areas, looking to learn lessons from research and practice in Essex and elsewhere.</p>

The people of Essex told us that...	...So we will
Access to services is not a problem for people with their own transport, and voluntary services can often be accessed locally, but older people and people with disabilities can become isolated and lonely.	<b>Connection/Innovation:</b> Work with partners on new approaches to community transport, and learn from other rural areas.
	<b>Engagement/evidence:</b> Capture the views and experiences of people who may be isolated in rural communities, and find out what they think would help most.
There is a particular concern about ensuring that everyone in our rural communities has timely access to health services.	<b>Voice:</b> Ensure that the rural Voice is heard in the development of health services in Essex by developing our relationship with Clinical Commissioning Groups, Healthwatch Essex and public health teams, and bodies like the Health and Wellbeing Boards.
	<b>Innovation:</b> Explore innovative approaches to health and wellbeing, with a focus on prevention, community resilience and the role of technology.
Many people have to travel outside their local community to access leisure facilities and (for example) to buy their groceries and use the post office - there is a lack of public service presence within villages, and some people have issues getting appointments with GPs.	<b>Voice/evidence:</b> Continue to collect and monitor the evidence on access to services, and ensure it is seen by decision makers. Ensure the rural voice is represented in key discussions about health and social service delivery and reform in Essex.
	<b>Innovation:</b> Inform the development of LEADER projects in rural Essex to support local shops and facilities, and engage with the Essex Community Foundation on the role of the voluntary sector. Explore innovative approaches to improving access to GPs, including the role of new technologies in managing common health problems.
People generally feel safe in rural communities, but they are concerned about traffic and road safety.	<b>Voice:</b> Engage with transport and highways planning at County and Borough level, and meet regularly with the Police and Crime Commissioner on rural safety issues.
	<b>Innovation/evidence:</b> Review evidence on improving road safety in rural areas and develop approaches.

**Engagement:** Finally, we had an excellent response to our rural survey and engagement events. However, young people were not so well represented. We need to do more to involve younger people and young families in our work, and to ensure the full diversity of our rural communities is reflected in the Essex Rural Partnership, including those who may be marginalised or disadvantaged. This will be another challenge and focus for us in developing work to 2020. We note, for example, the opportunity for the Essex Rural Partnership to engage with Essex's Children's Strategic Partnership to discuss issues for young people in rural areas, as well as with the four children's locality partnerships across Essex. The new Essex Children and Young People's Strategic Plan recognises that rural isolation is an issue for some young people in our county.

*The full findings from our 2015 survey of rural Essex are available on the ERP website. An 'Action Plan' for Partnership activity over the next four years is also available on the ERP website.*

## Essex Rural Strategy Questionnaire - Results in brief

### Key priorities

1. Access to health services
2. Broadband connectivity
3. Improved traffic, road safety and speed control
4. More affordable housing

### Some key findings

- People value the landscape and communities of rural Essex.
- People in rural areas feel safe, either always or most of the time.
- The general perception is that it costs more money to live in rural Essex compared to living in towns within Essex.
- A large number of rural residents say that local young people struggle to get on the property ladder in their community.
- Over half of rural respondents believe they are spending too much money on their energy bills.
- Most residents consider elderly people and people with disabilities living in rural Essex as the most vulnerable to isolation and loneliness.
- A high proportion of Essex rural residents have their own transport and have no problems accessing services.
- A high percentage of rural Essex residents travel outside of their village at least once a week to purchase groceries, fresh fruit and vegetables, newspapers, items at the post office, eat a hot meal out and access a cash machine.

### Some current issues

- Accessibility and transport
- Fear of over-development in communities without adequate transport infrastructure.
- Public service presence in rural communities, including GPs and police.

## Policy environment

As well as listening to rural residents and businesses, we have reviewed and refreshed our strategic priorities to take account of policy developments.

In reality, of course, policy is changing all the time. One of the key roles of the partnership is to influence, monitor and discuss these changes, ensuring that our members and rural communities are heard by policy makers, know what is happening, what the implications are for them and can engage and respond effectively. We have excellent opportunities to shape discussions at senior levels in Government, including as a member of Defra's Rural and Farming Network.

The Essex Rural Partnership applauds the growing recognition of the importance of rural issues, nationally and regionally, and will continue to work with you and our friends and colleagues in other rural areas to shape and inform this policy agenda.

We note, for example, three broad policy trends which will be significant to the delivery of our 2020 vision for rural Essex.

1. **The Government is taking the rural economy seriously.** In August 2015, it published 'Towards a one nation economy: A 10-point plan for boosting productivity in rural areas'. The plan provides a national focus and drive for many issues highlighted in our 2020 Vision, and which are key to our strategic priorities now. These include, for example, extensive, fast and reliable broadband services, modern transport connections, expansion of rural apprenticeships, enterprise zones in rural areas, better regulation and planning for local businesses, affordable housing and accessible child care.
2. **The Government is engaging with the challenges of delivering services in rural communities.** For example, in announcing the financial settlement for local government in February 2016, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government increased the 'Rural Services Delivery Grant' to councils in sparsely populated areas fivefold to £80.5 million in 2016/17 in recognition of the extra costs of delivering services. In Essex only three districts benefit from this grant – namely Braintree, Maldon and Uttlesford – and (when viewed alongside other funding changes) the actual impact is unclear. Understanding the implications of such funding changes, and identifying where representation arguing for change might need to be made, is something that ERP is actively pursuing.
3. **The Government is reforming local government funding.** HM Treasury's Financial Settlement (February 2016) announced an additional £93 million of funding for rural authorities in recognition of the financial pressures resulting from changes to mechanisms for allocating funding to local government and the potential impact of these changes on rural services. The Rate Support Grant will be phased out by 2020 in favour of new powers for local authorities to retain business rates. It remains to be seen how this will play out in practice, but it has a particular relevance for rural communities. ERP will be keeping a close eye on developments and their impact.

At a regional level, the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) has published a rural strategy for 2015-20, which sets out a vision and a set of strategic objectives for 'a growing rural economy with a highly skilled workforce in full employment', along with the establishment of new businesses and the development of existing ones. The South East Local Enterprise Partnership is a strategic body bringing together the public and private sectors across Essex, Kent and East Sussex to support economic growth. There are significant overlaps between our priorities and its rural objectives and the partnership has a close and productive relationship with SELEP.

*Links to key documents are available on the ERP website.*

## What the evidence says...

Nearly three quarters of Essex is 'rural', with a quarter of the working age population living in rural areas. From national data, we know that rural communities are older, with less than half of rural residents younger than 45, and many over 70. People in rural areas are more likely to say their health is good or very good than their urban counterparts, and life expectancies are generally better. Nationally, however, a higher percentage of residents in rural areas are providing unpaid care of an hour or more each week.

Agriculture – with construction – accounts for the highest number of businesses. It is not the biggest employer in rural Essex, with more people working in areas like retail, construction, health and education. Agriculture appears to be contracting, but we need to take a closer look. Businesses are smaller, with over three quarters employing less than five people, and more self-employment and home working than in towns and cities. Rural tourism brought in nearly 11 million day visitors in 2014.

Rural Essex is generally peaceful and prosperous. Its residents tend to be better qualified than in urban Essex. Levels of long term unemployment are lower, although people over 50 are more often affected. There is evidence of deprivation which is exacerbated by expenses associated with rural living (for example, fuel costs) and difficulty in accessing services where people and families do need help and support.

Rural households in Essex tend to travel further to access goods and services, although generally not further than in other parts of rural England. In 2011, six in ten were within two kilometres of their nearest GP, nine in ten of their local primary school, and around a quarter of their nearest secondary school. National data says that rural residents travel around 50% further than urban residents, and are more dependent on cars. They may also find it harder to access services by bicycle. Nationally, the percentage of children in rural areas with reasonable access to secondary school by bicycle is 28% compared with 56%

in urban settlements. Bus availability is also significantly worse in rural than urban areas of England.

On average, house prices are higher than in urban Essex or rural areas in the East of England and England as a whole. Nationally, there are significantly more holiday and second homes in rural areas of the country. Around three quarters of residents in rural England are living in owned accommodation.

## What the evidence doesn't say...

Perhaps the most striking finding from the work the Partnership has been doing to gather together all the evidence on rural Essex is what is missing.

A lot of the available analysis of Essex's rural economy relies on findings from the 2011 Census, which means figures on key issues like business profiles, education and skills are five years out of date. Extracting figures for Essex from the available national data is often a laborious and error-prone process. There are significant gaps in available information on key issues like broadband development, rural tourism and access to rented and social housing.

A key part of our work on an evidence resource for rural Essex will be to engage with national and local government on the quality and availability of rural data. The more we know about what is happening in rural Essex the better we can represent our rural communities, and assess and highlight the rural impact of policies and service models.

There are also challenges in understanding and interpreting the data we have. In particular, it would be helpful to be able to separate out people who live in rural Essex but do not work there from those who work there too. This is not possible with a lot of the statistical resources that are currently available.

*A full evidence report to accompany this strategy is available on the ERP website, along with the findings of our 2015 survey of rural residents and businesses.*

## Rural Essex: Key messages from the evidence

- Over a third of people in Essex live in rural areas.
- A quarter of the working population live in rural areas.
- More than half of people in rural England are 45 or older.
- In 2013-14 the population of rural Essex increased by about 60,000.

### Prosperity

- Average earnings are higher in rural Essex than urban areas of the county.
- House prices are higher in rural Essex.
- 5,000 homes are off the mains gas grid and vulnerable to fuel poverty.
- Transport costs account for about 12 per cent of weekly disposable income in remote rural areas.

### Growth and innovation

- Rural areas add £210 billion 'Gross Value Added' to the national economy.
- Productivity in rural areas is 17% lower than in urban areas.
- Around 22,500 businesses are located in rural Essex.
- Nearly a quarter of workers in rural areas work from home.

### Well-being

- People in rural areas tend to live longer and are more likely than their urban counterparts to describe their health as 'very good' or 'good'.
- 1 in 8 residents in rural Essex provide unpaid care to family or friends.
- Sixty per cent of rural households in Essex are within two kilometres of a GP's surgery, but some have much further to go.

### Connection

- Over 11 million day visits were made to the Essex countryside in 2014.
- By February 2016 fibre optic broadband had been expanded to 77% of rural Essex, with a commitment to 95% coverage.
- Residents of rural Essex are more likely than those in urban areas to own a car or van, and to have two or three vehicles, but about 1 in 10 households do not have their own transport.
- In 2012, only half of households in rural England had a regular bus service, compared to 96% of urban households.
- 28% of children in rural areas have 'reasonable' cycle access to secondary school compared to 56% in urban areas.



- 1.1. A 'thriving economy' is at the heart of our 2020 Vision for Rural Essex. Business is one of the keys to the well-being of rural communities and a critical contributor to Essex's economy. Our rural businesses contribute to vibrant, resilient and connected rural communities too. Farming is critical for rural communities, but it is not the largest employer and is only one component in a diverse economy, which is also the home to many innovative new businesses.
- 1.2. Our 2020 Vision set out a range of issues and actions. It placed a particular emphasis on our role in four key areas:
  - **Supporting the expansion of broadband coverage;**
  - **Developing a compelling narrative to bring out what is special and unique about rural Essex, not only to support rural tourism, but also to inspire potential investors with a vision of our county and its countryside;**
  - **Providing focus, co-ordination and platform for a wide range of partners involved in developing the rural economy in Essex;**
  - **Acting as a conduit for sharing information about training and skills opportunities.**
- 1.3. There is real progress to celebrate, and significant work left to do, to fully realise our ambitions for 2020. On broadband, we have supported the Superfast Essex programme, with over 50,000 homes and businesses benefiting to date. We particularly welcomed the Rural Challenge pilot project which is working with Gigaclear PLC to bring Fibre-to-the-Premises technology to more than 4,500 properties in Epping Forest.
- 1.4. While we do not know as much about rural tourism as we would like, we do know that the Essex countryside welcomed over 11 million day visitors in 2014.
- 1.5. We have celebrated Essex's success in securing further investment through the Rural Development Programme for England. Essex Rivers Local Action Group secured £1.8 million for a LEADER programme to provide support for rural businesses and community enterprises in Braintree, Brentwood, Chelmsford, Colchester, Maldon and Rochford. This is one of four initiatives across Essex, making available £7.2million and working in the rural economy in support of our 2020 vision, and with a particular focus on small and micro-businesses and developing rural tourism.
- 1.6. The Partnership has contributed to debates at national and regional level. We have welcomed the Defra plan for productivity in rural areas, and look forward to providing support and challenge as this is implemented. This highlights the £210 billion of value created in 'predominantly rural' areas across England in one year, and explains that rural areas in England support 15% of all jobs and around half a million businesses. The Defra plan echoes ERP priorities including extensive, fast and reliable broadband, high quality mobile communications and education and training, including expanding rural apprenticeships. These things are all key if we are to deliver the Government's ambition to drive up rural productivity in our county.

- 1.7 Our agenda has also been supported by the first rural strategy of the South East Local Enterprise Partnership, the business-led body responsible for driving economic growth across East Sussex, Essex, Kent, Medway, Southend and Thurrock. This sets out a vision for 'a growing rural economy with a highly skilled workforce in full employment' with 'the establishment of new businesses, the development of existing ones, increased job opportunities and a thriving culture of entrepreneurship to support this vision'. We look forward to monitoring and supporting progress across the South East in implementing this strategy.

### OUR PRIORITIES FOR 2016-20

- 1a We will continue to provide both support and challenge to the superfast broadband programme to help address inadequate broadband and mobile connectivity – in particular, we expect to see the Rural Challenge pilot looking to reach out to other parts of rural Essex.
- 1b We have also become increasingly aware of the limited information that we have about our rural economy, and will be working with partners to address this, as we develop our new evidence resource.
- 1c We will seek to maximise the benefits of programmes and projects which encourage economic growth and job creation. We will also identify, support, and where appropriate lead on, opportunities to bring new programmes to Essex.
- 1d We will work with partners to remove barriers to diversification for land-based businesses.
- 1e We will encourage use of redundant buildings, especially those with historical merit, and we will explore the potential for under-utilised and redundant buildings to be adapted to support rural development.

*Related chapters: 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9*



- 2.1. Our 2020 Vision for rural Essex set out our ambition to ensure all rural residents are able to access training and education at all stages of life 'whether they are school leavers, in work or considering a career change', and that provision caters for all levels and types of skill and knowledge.
- 2.2. Providing the best possible educational experience for children and young people in rural areas along with the skills development to support our rural economy are at the heart of our 2020 Vision. Equally, we are passionate that everyone in our rural communities should have opportunities to learn new things and expand their horizons. We also need to continue to develop the resources to educate communities, visitors and businesses about our natural environment, rural history and traditions, which is closely linked to our ambitions for expanding rural tourism.
- 2.3. The ERP is committed to retaining rural schools wherever possible. As well as providing a good education, these schools can play an important role in bringing together our rural communities. We recognise that demographic change is reducing the demand for places in some of Essex's village schools and that there is a need to respond flexibly and innovatively to this. Can more schools work more collaboratively – for example, in 'school clusters' - to ensure their long-term future, while improving access to staff and creating new opportunities for joint learning and curriculum development? What further opportunities are there for diversifying the use of school buildings in our communities?
- 2.4. We will also be monitoring the impact of academisation on rural schools. Rural schools may be more sustainable if they join academy chains, and this can bring similar benefits to other kinds of 'school cluster'. There is, however, a risk that academy chains will not consider smaller rural schools to be financially viable. As well as continuing to engage with local authorities, the ERP will engage with academy providers to make the case for our rural schools and to support them to develop good and sustainable models for rural education.
- 2.5. We will also be highlighting rural education through our work on rural connectivity. Getting children to and from school safely – and healthily too – is a key objective for our transport system. Broadband is an important educational asset.
- 2.6. While rural Essex is generally well qualified, the picture is complicated by the fact that many people who live in rural Essex do not work there, and not all will have skills or experience relevant to the particular needs of the rural economy. In some rural districts there is a notable skills shortage, evidenced with higher than average levels of workers with no qualifications, when compared to the national average of 8.8%, including Maldon (13.2%) and Tendring (16.4%). This is not consistent across the county, however, as some other districts rate better than the national average. Despite a largely positive educational and skills profile for our rural areas, the Government has recently said that businesses in rural areas are more likely than their urban counterparts to outsource work, withdraw from markets and experience delays in developing new products and services as a result of skills shortages.

- 2.7. The Government's 10 point plan for rural productivity highlights the importance of education and skills, and the potential impact of existing government programmes, including 'fairer funding for schools' and apprenticeships. It makes a specific commitment to triple apprenticeships in food and farming, and help 'small tourism businesses to provide more, high quality apprenticeships'. A new apprenticeship levy on large employers is being introduced in April 2017 to deliver 3 million apprenticeship starts by 2020, with the potential to boost the rural economy.
- 2.8. Our ambitions have since been echoed in the South East Local Enterprise Partnership's Rural Strategy, which includes a commitment to 'develop the skills of the rural workforce and provide opportunities for people to work, learn and achieve'. Practical steps to deliver this prospectus include: skills hubs (including at Writtle); ensuring career pathways specific to rural business needs are available to students; access to transport for post 16 year olds attending Further Education colleges; and piloting innovative ways to deliver services to rural communities, including web and digital learning.

#### OUR PRIORITIES FOR 2016-20

- 2a We will engage with Government to ensure it delivers in Essex on its pledge to increase apprenticeships in rural areas to support food, farming and small tourism businesses, and support high quality apprenticeships in our communities.
- 2b We will engage with local authorities and academy providers to ensure the long term future of rural schools.

*Related chapters: 1, 8*



## Chapter 3: Farming for the future

20

- 3.1. From the high point of 147 metres at Chrishall common in the north west of the county the landscape of Essex unfolds with a range of soil types that have been adapted for agriculture over the centuries. The thinner chalk soils of the North West provide an open farming landscape that gives way to a gently undulating, chalky boulder clay plateau, the undulations being caused by the numerous small-scale river valleys that dissect the underlying geology. These glacial deposits are principally used for combinable crops while the river valleys support many grazing livestock.
- 3.2. Further south the soils change to a thin band of gravelly deposits that originally supported heathland; beyond this the heavy London clay provides a poorer quality soil that becomes waterlogged in winter and cracks and shrinks alarmingly in summer. Better quality grade one soil is found in areas that contain alluvial deposits from the Thames and other rivers in the area as they formed and changed position over time. These have led to pockets of intensive horticulture and specialist production.
- 3.3. The quality of these soils mean Essex is primarily an arable county with the focus on cereal production and combinable crops. The county accounts for 17% of the Eastern region's farmland.
- 3.4. The county's total farmed area in 2010 was 253,198 hectares (ha) spread over 2,323 holdings. This gives an average farm size of 109 ha, or 269 acres, which is 30% larger than the English average. Overall 69% of Essex is farmland. Arable cropping covers over 76% of Essex farmland with wheat being the most important crop, covering 43% of the farmed land. Nationally Essex has 3% of the farmland but has 6% of the wheat crop. Oilseed rape is the second most important crop covering 16% of the arable land.
- 3.5. While Essex is no longer a big cattle and sheep producing area, the county still has 38,900 ha of grassland, some 15% of the farmed area. Much of this is coastal grazing and meadowland along the various river valleys that drain across the county.
- 3.6. According to Natural England figures, in November 2012 there were 979 agri-environment agreements in place in Essex, with 153,134 hectares of the county managed under one or more of these agreements. There are over 4,000 miles of public rights of way across the county.
- 3.7. The gross value added of agriculture in Essex stands at £111 million (Defra 2010), representing 1.8% of England's total. In 2010 there were over 8,000 people directly employed in farming within the county.
- 3.8. Key grain processing sites include flour mills at Tilbury (Allied and ADM), Chelmsford (Marriages), Maldon (Greens) and Mistley (EDME) with major maltings at Witham (Bairds) and Mistley (Crisp Anglia Maltings). Major cereal and oilseed export facilities exist at Harwich and Tilbury, where cargoes up to 50,000 tonnes can be handled. Milk is currently processed at Hatfield Peverel and Dagenham and there are a number of abattoirs across the county.

- 3.9. Important pockets of horticulture exist: Tiptree is a major producer of fruit and preserves and is involved in innovative growing techniques, product development and community and education initiatives. The Lea Valley has traditionally been the heart of fresh food production for London and still has the largest concentration of glasshouses in the UK employing over 2,500 workers. For a period the Lee Valley held the largest concentration of glasshouses in the world. While the scale under glass has since contracted, output has been maintained through innovation and notable productivity gains. Further east, Tendring and Colchester have a number of innovative salad and root crop growers. Water resource is critical to these growers and they have demonstrated the kind of forward thinking crucial to future economic success.
- 3.10. Essex has a reputation for production of certain foods which are unique to, or have special association with, a particular area, including salt (Maldon) and oysters (Mersea Island and Maldon). There is also an abundance of local breweries and vineyards, helping to improve the quality of the food and drink that Essex offers to residents and tourists alike. Whilst some of these products are available direct from the producer, and some are distributed via larger retailers, there are also a large number of farm shops and farmers markets, helping to rebuild the connection between the food people eat and the farm where it was produced.

#### OUR PRIORITIES FOR 2016-20

- 3a We will help to promote and develop a food and farming sector that is resilient to global commodity price fluctuations by creating a dynamic and forward looking business environment and infrastructure.
- 3b We will support the food and farming sector to meet the challenges of climate change by exploring approaches that either protect against the negative impacts or enhance the positive aspects of climate change.
- 3c We will encourage developments that support and enhance the food supply chains across the county to help integrate local food production with the wider Essex population.

**Related chapters: 1, 4, 9, 10**



- 4.1. Tourism is a key economic driver and employer which contributes £2.9billion to the local economy and creates 55,000 jobs. There is a need to create low-impact sustainable tourism that cherishes, not destroys, and which builds environmental awareness as well as contributing to the local economy and supporting jobs. It must take into account the needs of the environment, local residents, businesses and visitors.
- 4.2. Our 2020 Vision for rural Essex set out a desire to promote Essex as a visitor destination. We identified a need for further promotion and awareness of the county and its countryside and attractions, giving it a sense of place and its own identity.
- 4.3. The diverse Essex rural landscape has so much to offer but it needs to be clearly packaged for the visitor so that they know what they can experience when they are in the county. The attractions, outdoor pursuits, pubs, restaurants, tea rooms, farm shops and accommodation providers need to work together on a collaborated product which sells the destination experience. The visitor needs to know what is unique about the Essex countryside to entice them to visit over competitor destinations. There is a need to work with Visit Essex to ensure consistency of messaging and co-ordination of activity.
- 4.4. The rural landscape and product is for visitors and residents alike to enjoy and local residents should be encouraged to enjoy what is on their doorstep. It is important to ensure economic growth is maintained and that the rural tourism product is developed, sustained and of a high quality in order to attract visitor spend. There are many opportunities for product development working with local farmers and existing businesses on diversification and expansion and land owners and planning authorities on new products.
- 4.5. As well as countryside recreation, Essex has a rural coastline which, at over 350 miles, is the longest coastline in the UK. The coast attracts a large number of visitors, accounting for over 15% of tourist visits within the county. Whilst the coastline is punctuated by seaside towns, including Clacton-on-Sea, Maldon and Southend-on-Sea, it is predominantly rural in nature. The England Coast Path is expected to be completed by 2020, and this will include new stretches of pathway along the Essex coast, providing new right of access for walkers. Work on the northern section, beginning near Manningtree, has already commenced, with further phases moving south towards Tilbury, all expected to be in preparation by 2018-19. This will create a pathway along the full length of the Essex coastline.
- 4.6. Amongst specific attractions rural Essex boasts are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's), castles, zoos, farm parks, gardens, railway preservation societies, windmills and historic buildings, including the 7th century Chapel of St Peter-on-the-wall at Bradwell-on-Sea.
- 4.7. Tourism should not be seen in isolation but should help to support the other key areas for example, the local economy, food and agriculture, education, culture & heritage, health, communities, and the natural environment.

- 4.8. The challenges of rural tourism in the county also need to be acknowledged, for example access, quality, lack of awareness, perception, lack of accommodation, the impact of external influences (e.g. foot and mouth) and the fragmentation of the industry. Some specific practical considerations have also been raised by ERP members, including the potential to review seasonal occupancy conditions, which can restrict the use of caravans and chalets for holiday makers to the March to October period.
- 4.9. In the Rural Strategy of SELEP, published in 2015, one of the strategic objectives for the rural economy is to 'Support the development of sustainable rural tourism to maximise the rich cultural, historical, landscape, health and wellbeing visitor offer'.
- 4.10. Tourism is also identified as one of the priority areas for support through the four Leader areas covering Essex (Essex Rivers, Wool Towns, Heritage Coast and Eastern Plateau), which offer financial support to businesses wishing to expand and increase employment.

#### OUR PRIORITIES FOR 2016-20

- 4a We will facilitate sustainable tourism development,
- 4b We will work with Visit Essex and local partners to promote rural Essex, package the tourism offer and give it an identity.
- 4c We will support the development of the England Coast Path in Essex

*Related chapters: 1, 3, 5, 7, 10*



- 5.1. Rural Essex has a rich and varied cultural heritage, and rural communities are living cultures too. This heritage includes, for example, battlefields and gardens, country parks and scheduled buildings and monuments. Its landscapes inspired John Constable's paintings and now provide idyllic rural settings for successful television programmes. It includes some of the oldest recorded settlements in Britain. Rural life is changing and developing and there are real opportunities to build on this heritage for new times.
- 5.2. Essex is not home to a wealth of large properties owned by large national charities, when compared to neighbouring counties, but it does boast some interesting built and natural heritage which is available for public access. Houses of note include Layer Marney Tower, Ingatestone Hall and Hylands House; whilst non-built attractions with cultural interest include RHS Hyde Hall gardens near Chelmsford and Beth Chatto gardens near Colchester. English Heritage owns the majestic Audley End House (used as a backdrop for music events in summer months) as well as some smaller properties, and The National Trust owns and maintains Paycocke's Barn in Coggeshall and historic Hatfield Forest in Uttlesford. There are also buildings of architectural interest scattered throughout our towns and villages, such as Thaxted Guildhall.
- 5.3. Parish churches continue to provide the most visible and distinctive landmarks for many villages and rural settlements. Two thirds of Church of England churches (10,199) are in rural areas of England. Essex contains around 400 listed CofE church buildings, as well as non-conformist chapels and Roman Catholic churches. Rural schools also contribute to the cultural life of village communities.
- 5.4. Rural Essex also features a number remarkable barns including those at Cressing Temple where the Barley barn has been dated to 1205 and is the oldest standing timber framed barn in the world. The wheat barn at the site was built in 1257, a similar age to the National Trust owned Grange Barn at Coggeshall.
- 5.5. Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) estimates that there are 10,000 village halls in England, with a total asset value of around £3 billion, which is 'the largest network of community owned facilities in rural Britain' (see below). Three quarters provide venues for artistic and cultural activities.
- 5.6. Heritage sites, listed churches, village halls, rural schools and, of course, the natural landscape enable a distinctive rural culture to flourish and attract visitors to rural Essex. Rural life needs to change and develop too, and there are challenges in adapting this heritage for new times – for example, in how church and school buildings and facilities are being used for and by local communities and visitors.
- 5.7. Our 2020 Vision set out a number of ambitions for rural heritage and culture. We made a commitment to our heritage features and buildings and their upkeep. We welcomed the Essex County Records Office's coverage of heritage issues. We pledged support for measures to maintain and improve the rich diversity of rural Essex, including heritage and culture. We gave our support for farmers, land managers and landowners who manage their land in ways that improve biodiversity, geodiversity and heritage diversity.

- 5.8. Key aspects of this agenda for rural Essex are being taken forward by researchers and campaigners nationally, including the Church of England's strategy for growing the rural church ('Released for Mission'), and RCCE's focus on Village Halls. There are also opportunities to work with The National Trust and Historic England. For example, Historic England – which is an arm's-length public body of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport – has a programme of work on rural heritage, including a National Farmstead Assessment Framework and a strategy for working with places of worship.
- 5.9. Essex's LEADER programme also presents new opportunities to make the most of our rural heritage – for example, to support our tourism offer.

### OUR PRIORITIES FOR 2016-20

- 5a We will continue to work with partners on creative approaches to ensuring our historic buildings remain at the heart of rural communities, for example, in the use of church spaces for community groups and shops.
- 5b We will develop closer links to national bodies to ensure their programmes are aware of and engaged with issues and opportunities in rural Essex.
- 5c We will assist in promoting our heritage to a wider audience.

*Related chapters: 4, 8, 10*



- 6.1. The Government has recognised the importance of developing rural housing, and there are good opportunities for ERP to inform and shape policy. The issues are not straightforward, with a need for a range of housing options, recognising the diverse needs and resources of individuals and families in our rural communities, as well as the challenge of balancing development with custodianship of the rural environment.
- 6.2. Our 2020 Vision for Rural Essex called for the provision of “sufficient affordable housing in rural areas to meet the immediate needs of those with local links”. With house prices in the county averaging £290,753 (Rightmove, January 2016) in 2015 rising to £450,300 in a rural district such as Uttlesford (Hometrack, August 2015), improving the provision of such housing is essential in order to directly address the aspirations and life chances of local people and their families. At present, people on lower incomes are being priced out of the market in rural areas where they have jobs and extended families. This has knock on consequences for the economy and for the sustainability of communities.
- 6.3. The Rural Housing Enabler service provided by Rural Community Council of Essex (RCCE) in partnership with registered housing providers, local authorities and parish councils has continued to make progress in providing small scale schemes based on the evidence of housing needs surveys and developed on exception sites provided at a discount by philanthropic landowners. This is encouraging, but the report of the Rural Housing Policy Review Group, sponsored by Hastoe Housing Association, illustrated that in 2015 just 2,279 new affordable rural homes had been built nationwide in the previous year, when a fair share would have been 7,500.
- 6.4. The Government has indicated its commitment to increasing the availability of housing in rural areas, whilst pledging to protect the Green Belt and countryside. The 2016 to 2021 Shared Ownership and Affordable Homes Programme will facilitate an increased supply of shared ownership and other affordable homes in England through a £4.7 billion capital grant. At the end of 2015, the Government also announced £1.1 million of new funding to support two new garden towns, including one in North Essex. The creation of garden towns will impact on rurality, and we will be keeping a close eye on developments.
- 6.5. In the Housing and Planning Act which received the royal assent in May 2016, the Government commits to augment this by providing 200,000 Starter Homes across the country, offered at a 20% discount for first-time buyers under the age of 40. The Chancellor’s autumn statement committed £2.3 billion to deliver 60,000 such homes by 2020/21.
- 6.6. Registered providers have expressed concern that the Government’s focus on starter homes, which has been underscored by its announcement that such homes will in future qualify as ‘affordable housing’, could impede the provision of other forms of housing for people in rural communities who are not yet in a position to buy a home. However, in a significant concession to the rural lobby, the Act removes the original proposal that rural exception sites (on which most affordable rural schemes have been developed) would be required to include starter homes.

- 6.7. Concerns have also been voiced around the Act's other flagship proposal, the extension of the Right to Buy to housing association properties. Without adequate protection for rural schemes, the principle of providing affordable homes in perpetuity would be extremely difficult to sustain and consequently there would be less incentive for landowners to provide discounted sites.
- 6.8. In the light of this rapidly changing context, which is further complicated by changes to the way funding for affordable schemes is made available by the Homes and Communities Agency, it is essential that registered housing providers and other partners explore new methods for delivering affordable homes. This is happening already, with cross-subsidy likely to be an increasingly important delivery mechanism. There are some excellent examples of this in Essex; including housing associations building small numbers of open market bungalows or family houses alongside affordable rental properties. Innovative approaches such as the creation of Community Land Trusts also require investigation.

### OUR PRIORITIES FOR 2016-20

- 6a We believe that the shortage of affordable housing in rural areas can only be addressed if a range of housing types and tenures, including provision of housing for rent, can be made more widely available.
- 6b We believe that provision of affordable housing should be guided by up to date evidence of local need and should prioritise meeting the needs of local residents.
- 6c We recognise the importance of the Rural Housing Enabler service but in view of the changing strategic context would encourage providers that support the service to explore new approaches to delivering affordable homes.

***Related chapters: 1, 7, 8, 9, 10***



- 7.1. Accessing the right services at the right time can be more of a challenge in rural communities, but equally they may benefit most from the wider trend towards new service models, including diversification to make the most of buildings and facilities and approaches that identify, support and mobilise community assets and networks.
- 7.2. Our 2020 Vision for Rural Essex said that “People in rural areas should have affordable and readily available access to essential services, transport and infrastructure”. Since then, the national debate over the provision of public services has intensified, with the Government’s long-term commitment to reducing public expenditure matched by an ambitious agenda for public service reform, which has already included reorganisation of the NHS. The way in which many public services are delivered in rural Essex, as elsewhere, looks set to undergo further change in the years ahead.
- 7.3. This debate has particular resonance in rural areas, partly, because of the demographic profile – 23% of the rural population of Essex are of pensionable age – but also because of the inherent cost and complexity of delivering services to small, dispersed populations.
- 7.4. Rural Proofing has been advocated periodically for more than a decade as a means of recognising these particular complexities. The current Government reaffirmed its commitment to the process in December 2015, when it published its response to the independent review of Rural Proofing conducted by Lord Cameron of Dillington. Rural Proofing aims to achieve equity rather than equality for rural areas with respect to the development and implementation of new policies and programmes. The test will be to see how consistently this is applied in future and to secure its acceptance as a process to be used by local service providers.
- 7.5. The public consultation that prefaced the refresh of this strategy highlighted anxiety around access to health services, particularly primary care, and concerns about the increasing risk of loneliness and social isolation, especially for elderly people and people with disabilities living in rural areas. This could intensify given demographic trends which suggest that across England as a whole the over 65 population will grow by 27% in the ten years to 2021.
- 7.6. In 2013, Essex County Council commissioned an independent enquiry into the future of health and social care in the county which resulted in the publication of the ‘Who will care?’ report. One of the outcomes from this was the creation of the Community Agents Essex service, run by a partnership of Rural Community Council of Essex (RCCE), Age UK Essex, British Red Cross and Essex Neighbourhood Watch, and funded by the County Council. The service, which operates in urban and rural areas, helps vulnerable elderly people retain their independence. Through early intervention it can also reduce the demand on public services.
- 7.7. As other services are reduced in rural areas, so providing affordable and flexible transport solutions will become more important. Levels of car ownership are traditionally higher in rural areas, where ownership of more than one car can be a necessity rather than a luxury even for families on low incomes. Essex County Council recently completed a review of its contracted bus services which primarily serve rural areas. This has signalled a greater focus on demand responsive transport, drawing on the success of the Dengie Dart service, run by a private operator on the Dengie peninsula in Maldon district since 2011.

- 7.8. Rural communities have a proud tradition of stepping in to run services that in an urban area would be provided on a commercial or statutory basis. In Essex today, there are a string of community-run shops (many including a sub-post office) and even some pubs, sustained by the efforts of volunteers. If more communities are to have the confidence to take action in this way, they will require accessible advice and support, including financial assistance, and a light-touch regulatory regime.
- 7.9. Village Halls endure in rural communities when other services disappear and with sustained support for the volunteer trustees that manage them, they could be used more to host services that would otherwise be lost to the community.
- 7.10. Rural libraries are less prevalent than they once were, but a proportion of the 74 static libraries in Essex are found in villages, particularly in the north of the county. As well as access to reading material, all libraries offer free internet and WiFi access. Some libraries are being developed as community hubs, enabling them to be used by community groups; others offer job clubs whilst others play host to local services. For those communities without a static library, the mobile library services visits on a fortnightly basis.
- 7.11. The improved availability of high speed broadband in rural areas, particular through the *Superfast Essex* programme, provides an important opportunity to explore ways in which technology can be used to improve access to services.

#### OUR PRIORITIES FOR 2016-20

- 7a We will encourage the development of effective rural proofing processes for use by local service providers.
- 7b We will support initiatives that improve access to health care, support independent living and reduce isolation and loneliness in rural areas.
- 7c We will encourage the development of innovative and sustainable transport solutions, which are responsive to the needs of dispersed rural populations.
- 7d We will ensure that support is available to facilitate community enterprise and other initiatives that strengthen the provision of essential local services.
- 7e We will encourage non-commercial solutions to providing the transport that is necessary to reach essential and valued services .

*Related chapters: 1, 6, 8, 9*



- 8.1. Our 2020 Vision for Rural Essex recognised that “active and inclusive communities are essential to maintain sustainability in rural areas.” It further recognised that effective local leadership is critical if communities are to fully realise their potential. There is a great deal of inspiring community activity to celebrate and build upon.
- 8.2. Parish and Town Councils which provide the most local tier of government across almost the entire rural area of Essex, are well placed to offer such leadership. Many Councils in Essex play an active role that extends beyond their immediate, statutory responsibilities, and some rural councils have received formal accreditation under the new, nationally recognised Local Council Award Scheme. This is managed by the Essex Association of Local Councils (EALC), which retains 100% of councils in membership. In keeping with the current political focus on devolution and localism, some larger councils are exploring opportunities to take responsibility for services previously provided by the principal authorities.
- 8.3. Community Led Planning, as championed by Rural Community Council of Essex (RCCE), and supported by the Essex Association of Local Councils (EALC), is a popular way of empowering local communities. It encourages the parish council and other community interests to work together to produce a coherent plan for the future. More than 150 communities in Essex have engaged in Community Led Planning, principally through the production of Parish Plans.
- 8.4. The 2011 Localism Act initiated a change of focus for community led planning with its introduction of statutory Neighbourhood Planning. This gives communities the power to prepare a Plan for their area which will give them the ability to influence development locally, subject to compliance with the National Planning Policy Framework (another provision of the Localism Act) and the Local Plan. A Neighbourhood Plan cannot propose less development than advocated by the Local Plan and to be adopted it has to be approved by a referendum. After a cautious start, an increasing number of Essex parishes are now engaging in Neighbourhood Planning.
- 8.5. The Localism Act also introduced a raft of new ‘community rights’ with the aim of giving communities more power to shape their own future. These include the Community Right to Buy, which encourages communities to register assets of community value – sites that provide a service or facility of value to the community – in order to delay any prospect of immediate disposal.
- 8.6. Every facet of community life in rural Essex is heavily dependent on volunteers. This includes the running of clubs and societies, the provision of care and support to the vulnerable, and the management of facilities such as village halls. Most halls are registered charities, maintained and managed not by the local authority or parish council but by volunteer trustees. According to ACRE’s latest national survey of halls published in 2014, such volunteers cumulatively devote 9.6 million hours to this task every year.
- 8.7. Village Halls continue to provide a focal point for community life in rural areas, catering for activities for all ages and interests, hosting meetings and events for the whole community and increasingly providing a base for services that might otherwise have been lost to the village. The ACRE survey also showed that nationally nearly a quarter of halls are more than 100 years old. This emphasises the continued need for funding to support redevelopment and modernisation. In this respect, the contribution made in Essex by the County Council’s Community Initiatives Fund (CIF) has been quite outstanding.

- 8.8. According to ACRE, the average age of a village hall trustee is 58. Many retired people bring invaluable professional skills and experience to the management of halls and indeed many other community activities. However, for future sustainability it is essential more younger people are encouraged to volunteer. In an age of lengthy commutes to work and irregular working hours, this will be a formidable challenge.
- 8.9. The Volunteer Essex website helps to match volunteers with opportunities to volunteer in their local area. It also offers advice and guidance for potential volunteers and for organisations looking to recruit volunteers.
- 8.10. For communities to thrive their residents need to be empowered. This often requires support from infrastructure organisations in the voluntary sector, who can provide advice, training and practical support. More locally, the Local Council sector, using their wealth of powers, can articulate the needs, wants and aspirations of the community to fund local groups and locally based activities.

### OUR PRIORITIES FOR 2016-20

- 8a We will encourage initiatives that promote leadership from parish and town councils and local voluntary organisations.
- 8b We will encourage the devolution of responsibilities to local communities in appropriate circumstances.
- 8c We will promote the benefits of Neighbourhood Planning and other measures that give communities greater influence over their future development.
- 8d We will support those who give of their time to keep community facilities available for those who live and work in rural areas
- 8e We will encourage de-regulation to reduce barriers to volunteering.

*Related chapters: 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10*



- 9.1. **A safe and secure environment is an essential pre-requisite for a thriving community.**
- 9.2. Crime levels are relatively low in most rural areas, but perception of crime can be a problem, particularly given the changing requirements of modern policing; only 31% of people responding to our survey are confident that they feel safe in rural areas all of the time. Police and Community Support Officers (PCSOs) had proved a useful resource in many rural areas, but the number of PCSOs in the county was reduced from 250 to 60 last year in a strategic transformation programme announced by Essex Police in response to reductions in funding.
- 9.3. Parish Councils and voluntary groups are able to initiate and manage other projects which can help to make rural communities safe places to live. One example is Community Speedwatch, which enables volunteers to compliment the work done by the Police Force to enforce speed limits in built-up areas. Our survey showed that 61% of Essex residents have felt unsafe due to traffic conditions in rural areas over the last 12 months. Another example is Neighbourhood Watch (and the other Watch schemes, including Farm Watch and Horse Watch) where volunteers are able to assist the Police in sharing information to best protect people and property.
- 9.4. Rural crimes, such as hare coursing, may not make the headlines, but are still evident and in some places in Essex incidents are increasing. Diesel theft and theft of agricultural machinery are also a problem for farmers and landowners. Essex is known to suffer badly from fly-tipping, which creates a particular nuisance (and cost) for landowners.
- 9.5. Rural policing is still a concern with 51% of respondents to our survey citing a lack of police presence as a reason why they have felt unsafe over the last 12 months.
- 9.6. There have been more positive developments. Essex's first elected Police and Crime Commissioner, Nick Alston, established a Forum on Rural Crime to facilitate better engagement between Essex Police and representatives of the farming and wider rural community. The Forum is briefed by Essex Police on the operation of specialist schemes such as Farm Watch and on the development of a dedicated team of Rural Special Constables, who have a brief to focus on specifically rural crimes such as hare coursing and the theft of agricultural machinery.

#### OUR PRIORITIES FOR 2016-20

- 9a **We will encourage the Police and Crime Commissioner for Essex and Essex Police to support community safety initiatives that address the specific needs of rural communities and businesses.**
- 9b **We will support communities in taking local action to make their homes and environments safer**
- 9c **We will support initiatives which bring benefits to rural areas.**
- 9d **We will work with other partners to ensure our residents feel safe. This will include Essex Trading Standards and Essex Civil Protection and Emergency Management.**

**Related chapters: 1, 3, 6, 7, 8, 10**

- 10.1 Many natural environments are the product of the interaction between nature and humans. This is definitely the case in Essex, where all the landscape has at some time been directly or indirectly influenced by humans. Whilst human intervention is inevitable, our Vision for Rural Essex is to ensure that activity within the rural landscape is undertaken in a harmonious manner, never losing sight that a thriving rural economy and rural social benefits are dependent upon a natural environment that is biodiverse and that is also ‘thriving’.
- 10.2 Essex has a variety of habitats, with the largest area of classification being arable and horticultural at 60%, and a further 18% being improved grassland.
- 10.3 There are 10 RAMSAR sites (Wetlands of International Importance) in Essex, the largest being Foulness, covering almost 10,000 ha, and the smallest being Lee Valley at just over 81 ha; this is also the only site in a district without a coastline.
- 10.4 There are 1,608 Local Wildlife Sites in Essex, covering over 15,000 ha. Distribution ranges from just 39 in Rochford up to 251 in Braintree. There are also 48 Local Nature Reserves (LNRs), with Epping Forest, Braintree and Colchester claiming 27 of them, and 162 Special Roadside Verges (SRVs). 40% of the SRVs in Essex are found in Uttlesford, although this is also the only district with no LNRs in its boundary.
- 10.5 There are 78 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and 6 National Nature Reserves (NNRs) in the county, covering almost 38,000 ha in total.
- 10.6 Less than 7% of land area in Essex is woodland. Epping Forest is the largest ancient woodland of the 907 recorded in the county. There are over 5 million trees on the national tree map, with the districts of Braintree, Epping Forest and Uttlesford being home to over 700,000 each. Despite these figures, Chelmsford has the largest area of accessible woodland – and also boasts the greatest area of parks and public gardens.
- 10.7 The 2020 Vision for Rural Essex evidence base recognises that a healthy natural environment is the foundation of sustained economic growth, prospering communities and personal wellbeing. It is also important to accept that an individual’s or organisation’s perception of what constitutes a natural environment, its potential use, preservation and access will vary according to their priorities. This is the reason a holistic approach has been taken in our 2020 Vision, ensuring Environmental considerations are embedded within the six overarching priorities of this document.
- 10.8 Our 2020 Vision for the Natural Environment encompasses (but not necessarily exclusively) the following four key areas:
- Protecting natural value through legislation and the planning system (National Planning Policy Framework);
  - Planning for low carbon infrastructure;
  - Protection of our natural environment focussing on protecting and improving our woodland, restoring our rivers and water bodies, managing our marine environment, biodiversity offsetting, and environmental land management schemes.
  - Reconnecting people and nature

- 10.9. The ability to influence and shape planning policies through Local and Neighbourhood Plans, is vital in shaping the Essex Landscape up to 2020 and beyond. By considering the benefits provided to society and our continuing economic prosperity through a vibrant and diverse natural environment it is possible to rank our environment equally against other competing considerations. Our 2020 Vision provides a focus as to the value of the natural environment and the ecosystem services and benefits it delivers for society.
- 10.10. In line with National and International policies our 2020 Vision through the evidence base has considered the changing climate and the need to reduce energy consumption and move to a low carbon economy. Where suitable the use of renewable technologies should be encouraged.
- 10.11. Our 2020 Vision supports those organisations whose role it is to manage and preserve our natural environment. It is clear from our consultation that residents do value the natural environment, this is the reason our 2020 Vision ensures residents are connected to the natural environment, because if they are not they will not embrace and protect all that makes the natural environment of Essex unique and irreplaceable.
- 10.12. Natural England is currently reviewing boundaries of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs). In the case of Dedham Vale AONB the proposal is to extend into Suffolk, whilst the proposal for Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB is that the designation be extended across the Stour into Essex. ERP is supportive of the extension of these designations, which both protect our natural landscape and encourage use and enjoyment through leisure and tourism activities.
- 10.13. There are 42 volunteer groups being supported across Essex to clear public rights of way as part of the County's PROW network. Some parishes are improving public rights of way at their own expense, with a whole range of community groups supporting work that is vital in opening our natural environment and supporting rural tourism – for example, the Bridleways Association, the Ramblers Association, The Green Lane Association, The Friends of Cockaynes Wood, Hike Essex, The Wivenhoe Society and the Friends of the Flitch Way.

#### OUR PRIORITIES FOR 2016-20

- 10a We will use our influence with Defra and DECC to ensure the voice of Landowners - as 'custodians of our landscape' is represented, and funding mechanisms do not have unintended impacts upon Rural Essex.
- 10b We need to interact fully with organisations such as EPOA (Essex Planning Officers Association) and statutory bodies (e.g. Environment Agency and Natural England) and the local environmental bodies (like Essex Wildlife Trust, the National Trust and the RSPB) at a strategic/national level.
- 10c We need to ensure that the Essex Rural Partnership continues to be both 'Champion' of the rural economy, environment and society, extending our membership to those organisations/decision makers whose actions impact directly upon the environment.
- 10d We will support initiatives that record and protect the unique biodiversity found in rural Essex, and which enable this to add value to tourism and benefit economic prosperity
- 10e We will engage with Natural England and the designated Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) in our county to ensure that ongoing boundary reviews are to the benefit of rural Essex

*Related chapters: 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9*

# What happens next: Delivering in partnership

The next four years promise to be both exciting and challenging times for rural communities in Essex. The Government's focus on rural productivity and the rural economy is an opportunity for our Partnership – working with other rural counties – to place some of the key issues identified in the 2020 Vision on the agenda nationally. The South East Local Enterprise Partnership rural strategy runs through to 2020, and provides a new link through to businesses and employers in Essex, as well as to work with our near neighbours in East Sussex and Kent.

Our LEADER projects in Essex provide a real lever to support and drive our rural economy. The continued roll out of superfast Broadband could revolutionise approaches to rural issues, including new ways of accessing services and support.

There will be challenges too, of course. We need to ensure rural Essex has a voice during a period where resources will be tight and there will be larger scale changes which will impact on rural communities, whether that is reductions in public spending, housing development or the integration of health and social care. We will ensure that partners have a voice in those discussions. We are also keen to develop our partnership to ensure all sections of the rural community are heard, and particularly our young people.

Other challenges for rural communities include: how we support the needs and recognise the contribution of an ageing population; how we ensure that improved broadband is augmenting and not displacing the face-to-face interactions in village halls, local shops, pubs, restaurants and green spaces that are the lifeblood of rural communities; and how we tackle those pockets of rural deprivation and ensure everyone in our rural community can access opportunities and services.

What happens next partly depends on how we work together to shape and realise our vision for the future at a time of change. Our Partnership is committed to continuing to play its role by bringing together key organisations to consider, debate and act on major issues affecting rural Essex, and to support and encourage partners to work together towards this shared vision. We will be producing a short annual update, to let you know how we are progressing with this strategy.

## TO MAKE THIS HAPPEN, PLEASE:

- Visit our website and find out how you can get involved with the partnership
- Sign up to our Newsletter to keep up-to-date on the latest developments
- If you are a member of the partnership (or want to be), support our meetings, help us to deliver our priorities
- Share our strategy with your networks... and do get in touch to tell us what you think

## CONTACT:

Suzanne Harris, RCCE, Threshelfords Business Park, Inworth Road, Feering, Essex CO5 9SE.

E-mail: [info@essexruralpartnership.org.uk](mailto:info@essexruralpartnership.org.uk)

Tel: 01376 574 330



## Essex Rural Partnership

c/o Rural Community Council of Essex  
Threshelfords Business Park  
Inworth Road  
Feering  
Essex CO5 9SE

Tel: 01376 574330

Email: [info@essexruralpartnership.org.uk](mailto:info@essexruralpartnership.org.uk)

[www.essexruralpartnership.co.uk](http://www.essexruralpartnership.co.uk)

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