

2009

Essex Rural Commission





Essex Rural Commission 2009 Report

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Executive summary

Background

The Essex Rural Commission (ERC) was established in autumn 2008. It was asked by Essex County Council (ECC) to examine issues around living and working in rural Essex, to develop innovative recommendations for the delivery of improvements in the quality of life in rural Essex, and to give guidance on how these might be implemented. Essex is predominantly rural and coastal, but the characteristics of its communities are changing rapidly.

The Commission has looked to the future, mindful of the substantial environmental, economic and social changes likely to affect the people, institutions and environments of the county in the coming decades. Many of these changes similarly affect rural communities in other parts of the UK; some are distinct to Essex itself.

The Commission used a variety of methods to receive evidence, assess the problems of the county, and develop recommendations for the future. These included open evidence sessions at which 45 witnesses gave evidence and were questioned by the Commission; site visits; submissions of written evidence; survey; and attendance at existing meetings.



Economic sustainability

The dominant pattern of rural economic development in recent decades has been largely what is called ‘exogenous’, which implies mainly looking to the outside for solutions. The aim has been to attract external capital, technologies or institutions to local contexts to boost economies. Such recruitment remains an important strategy in rural and regional development, but it cannot work all the time if all counties and regions compete with each other for scarce resources. Local authorities or development agencies have to offer incentives to encourage businesses to relocate, such as land, infrastructure, tax breaks, and exemptions from regulations. All too often, the net effect is simply to move the drivers of economic growth around the country - from areas where businesses do not receive subsidies to those where they will.

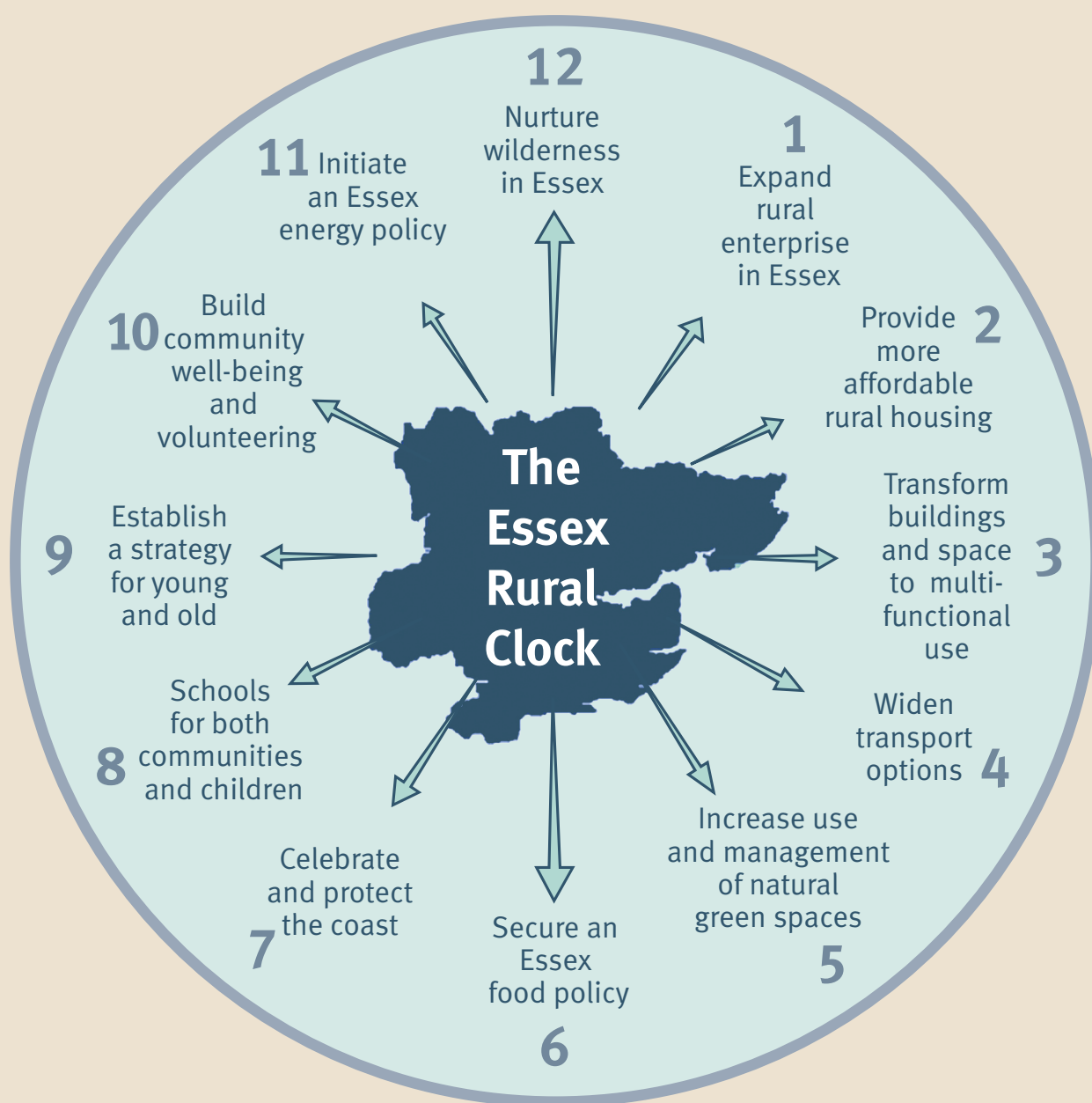
An alternative pattern focuses on ‘endogenous’ approaches, which imply growing or originating from within. Here the priority is to focus on locally-available human, social and natural assets, and to ask: can anything be done differently that results in more productive use of these available resources? Such development tends to emerge from local communities and cultures and so reflects the needs of local people. This locally-based model for local economies and cultures seeks to identify, preserve and improve valuable assets. Every time someone buys something sourced from outside the economy, then money leaks out. Each time raw materials are exported, then value is added somewhere else. Each time natural resources are depleted or polluted, or cultures are harmed, the local assets base diminishes. To balance such loss, assets must be created locally and/or money must flow in, such as a) when external people buy local products, such as food, timber, manufactured goods, tourist services, energy and information; b) when local people work outside and bring back or remit salaries; and c) when communities receive pensions, benefits and grants from central government.

The approach of the Commission has been first to recognise the value of attracting in external resources to the county, and second to seek ways to build on the distinctive nature of local assets, capacities, skills and environments. Here we look primarily at what can be achieved within the county by its own people and institutions. If this is successful, then businesses of all types will find it easier to attract customers and consumers. Such an approach would put Essex as a county on a pathway towards sustainability.

Recommendations

We make 60 recommendations in the form of an ‘Essex Rural Clock’ with 12 priority areas. The clock face does not imply any priority order but given the broad range of issues the Commission has addressed, it illustrates the scale of the challenge and opportunities ahead.

The Essex Rural Clock



1. Expand rural enterprise in Essex

Make it easier to run a business in rural Essex

We recommend:

- The expansion of universal New Generation Access broadband via all available technologies.
- More business advice and support via Business Link East.
- More hands-on advice on farm diversification projects to improve farm-based business expansion and employment.
- Establishment of forums across the county to ensure that landowners, planners and entrepreneurs work towards the common goals of improving the local economy which enhance the asset base.



2. Provide more affordable rural housing

A ten fold increase is needed in affordable rural housing (ARH) provision in five years

We recommend:

- The development of a county-wide action plan to increase the rate of provision of ARH ten-fold.
- ECC rolls out a publicity campaign aimed at parish councillors and district planning committee members to explain the benefits of affordable rural housing and its social and economic benefits.
- Every parish or cluster of parishes should conduct a housing needs survey using a proven and widely-accepted approach and then be responsible for identifying potential sites for affordable housing if local needs are found to exist.
- Investing in new Community Land Trusts (joint ventures between housing associations, local authorities and local people) as a mechanism to ensure community involvement, control and responsibility in ARH.
- ECC assesses its own estate to release land for the provision of affordable housing to Community Land Trusts.
- Increased high-quality public site provision for gypsy and traveller communities.



3. Transform existing rural space and buildings to multifunctional use

Encourage co-location of services including advice centres and Internet access community hubs as well as on-line shopping ordering points

We recommend:

- Endorsement of the work being done by the Rural Community Council of Essex (RCCE) and parish councils to bring about multifunctional projects.
- The provision of support to community groups for the widening of use of existing buildings (for example, village halls, churches, libraries).
- Support for ECC services with multifunctional capacity (for example, mobile libraries with community policy advice).
- Mobile Police Units should combine with Citizen's Advice Bureaux to offer services in rural communities.
- Provide ECC indemnity/insurance for local groups organising events.



4. Widen transport options

Rural areas need more than cars

We recommend:

- A scheme for free or reduced bus transport for the 18s and under.
- More public support for rural bus provision, and assessment of re-routing options to encompass villages without bus provision.
- ECC through the RCCE should ensure better communication between transport providers for the development of hubs and interchanges to encourage links between car-bus-rail-bicycle-walking use.
- Encouragement of innovative community transport schemes for all areas (such as Tendring and Maldon) across the county.
- Improve the ‘roadscape’ by introducing speed-limiting measures to encourage more cycling, walking and horse-riding on the county’s lanes.
- Encourage more moped hire schemes for younger people (through RCCE).
- Encourage cycling and walking between rural centres by making footpaths and bridleways suitable for everyday, year-round use; introduce a network of ‘inter-village routes’ that are off-road but surfaced (and possibly lit) in such a way that makes cycling and walking possible all the time.
- Investigation of electric minibus services for commuters.
- Provide regular ferry services across all estuaries and along parts of the coast with good waiting and interchange facilities.

5. Increase use and management of natural green spaces

More people using green places and nature will produce a healthier population in Essex

We recommend:

- An assessment of Essex’s excellent network of public rights of way to create more circular routes, with more linked car parks and public transport routes and amenities, and work with landowners to create permissive circular routes where possible or via planning gain from diversification projects.



- Making available maps and guides for these routes in attractive publications displayed on-line and in the usual information points and also at GP surgeries, school and colleges, leisure centres and private gyms across the county.
- Development of schemes to allow groups of young people to have access to areas of designated rural or farm land to manage nature, rights of way, and other projects on a time limited basis, thus giving children a sense of ownership and pride in their local land.
- Establish a new generation of community orchards to grow local and traditional fruit varieties in rural villages and market towns (by using the ECC tree-planting scheme).
- Development of a scheme for farmers to donate land on a temporary basis for allotments for both rural and urban dwellers. Districts should identify sites for larger scale allotment schemes.
- Ensure that county-owned woodland is accessible and adequately managed for all for leisure, education and health.

6. Secure an Essex food policy

Essex consumers and institutions who buy local benefit the local economy and land management, reduce food miles, and increase a sense of local pride, leading to healthier population

We recommend:

- The launch of an Essex food policy that will set out:
 - how local authorities and other public sector bodies can procure local food and thus support local businesses and farmland management;
 - how local produce can be best quality assured to remain attractive to Essex buyers;
 - how producers/sectors of the local food economy can obtain local accreditation;
 - a new network of county local food trails to encourage local people and tourists to visit local producers and their landscapes and buy direct.

- Continued support for many innovations that are already localising food and farming, such as the Essex Schools Food & Farming day, the Dengie Food and Leisure Trail, farmers' markets, community orchards and vegetable patches in schools.



7. Celebrate and protect the coast

The Essex coastline and estuaries are remote, tranquil and unique, and for too long have been the county's 'back yard' when they should be an impressive 'front garden'

We recommend:

- A robust approach by ECC to the Shoreline Management Plan and response to the Marine Bill, involving local farmer syndicates where possible, so that valuable farmland and wildlife habitats will be protected by a combination of 'hold the line' and 'advance the line' approaches, working wherever possible with local syndicates of farmers.
- An assessment of the full value (not just economic) of the agricultural and other land behind seawalls, as once lost to managed retreat or over-topping it is hard and expensive to reclaim.

- Increased access to coastal paths for different users whilst ensuring a balance is struck between habitat conservation and amenity. Circular paths, car parks and public facilities need to be introduced to make enjoying the coast easier. Schemes should be developed with local landowners and farmers.
- Develop a recreation use plan for estuary and inshore areas, including for sea angling, wildfowling, sailing and wind surfing. The health benefits of these pursuits should be promoted to all age groups, particularly the young, many of whom are losing contact with the natural environment.
- Promote the natural and built environment of Essex to all tourists and visitors through tourist routes, food trails, farm shops, quality holiday lets, restaurants, wedding and event venues which are beginning to flourish but need to be encouraged to establish sustainable businesses.
- Assess the options for sea and river transport, including better foot-ferries on all estuaries and more freight transport by water, with a dedicated section of Essex transport policy devoted to enhancing and encouraging coastal ship-borne trade.



8. Schools for both communities and children

Schools in rural areas form the bedrock of the community and are critical if rural Essex is to retain an intrinsically mixed population

We recommend:

- ECC continue its policy not to close any more village primary schools.
- Encouragement of the county's rural primary schools to provide buildings, space and facilities for use by the local community (with assurance that hire charges and insurance obligations are not prohibitive).
- Establishment of a programme of green outdoor education in all rural and urban schools using a wide range of green spaces beyond school bounds.
- Encourage all schools to provide healthy food education to children, develop their own gardens and allotments, and buy local food for their school dinner provision.

9. Establish a strategy for young and old

Increase inter-generational connections within rural communities of Essex

We recommend:

- The launch of an intergenerational scheme to support links between young and old (for example, between primary schools and care homes).
- Encouragement of Parish Councils to ensure all villages have space where local children can 'free-range', thus providing incentives to play, be active and socially connect.
- Develop a county-wide healthy walking scheme for the elderly.
- Support dog-walking and dog-sitting schemes for the elderly.
- Develop computer training schemes delivered by the young for the elderly.

10. Build community well-being and volunteering

A strong part of well-being arises not only from personal health and family but also from community linkages, and all forms of volunteering are an important part of rural community life

We recommend:

- The launch of a county-wide volunteering scheme (targeted especially at the out-of-work and elderly) to build and strengthen village institutions.
- A return to proper rural policing with every community in Essex having a designated officer with the appropriate skills and knowledge (one officer in charge of a small number of villages).
- All parish councils are encouraged to complete village design statements or parish plans to assess all aspects of community well-being, including a Community Landscape Character Statement dealing with the settlement's surroundings .
- The establishment with Citizens Advice Bureaux of a training programme for parish clerks and elected councillors to become qualified advisers and village agents.
- An investigation of the wider regulatory burden on locations (for example, buildings and village halls) and on people (for example, volunteers), and identification of solutions to encourage more volunteering, particularly for youth, children and elderly.

11. Initiate an Essex energy policy

Increasing energy generation and conservation will reduce the carbon footprint of the economy of Essex, save consumers and businesses money, and contribute to rural jobs

We recommend:

- Establishment of a micro-power generation scheme for schools and other public buildings, based on woodchip boilers using wood from Essex woodlands or on anaerobic digester power plants using food waste, farmyard manure, straw and/or other second generation fuels.

- Establishment by Essex County Council of an independent energy advisory service to advise on the most efficient energy generation and conservation schemes in private homes and in public institutions.
- Support for establishment of fuel-oil rings within parishes or parish clusters to reduce the price of fuel.
- Establishment of a ‘solar-power for all by 2020’ scheme for Essex - all houses and private businesses in Essex to have solar power in the next decade.

12. Nurture wilderness in Essex

The wildernesses of Essex are unique and should be protected

We recommend:

- Continued support and protection of the landscapes, habitats and ecosystems of rural and coastal Essex that provide the country’s unique character and identity.
- Assessment of the economic value of the ecosystem services (for example, flood protection, pollination, carbon sequestration, amenity) provided by the natural and semi-natural habitats of Essex and thus an improved understanding of their value to the people and economy of the county.
- Collaboration with Essex Wildlife Trust and other conservation agencies to improve the biodiversity status of all flora and fauna of Essex (including species introductions and revitalization, habitat connectivity and resilience, conservation and protection).
- Promotion of the value of wild Essex and its biodiversity, tranquillity and rural character on a national stage as a national destination.



Introduction

The Essex Rural Commission (ERC) was established in autumn 2008. It was asked by Essex County Council (ECC) to examine issues around living and working in rural Essex, to develop innovative recommendations for the delivery of improvements in the quality of life in rural Essex, and to give guidance on how these might be implemented. Essex is predominantly rural and coastal, but the characteristics of its communities are changing rapidly. The Commission has received secretarial support from ECC but has worked independently. The membership of the Commission comprises a Chair and eight other members appointed on the approval of the Economic Development and Environmental Policy and Scrutiny Committee of ECC.

The focus of the deliberations of the Commission centred on the vision recently produced by the Essex Rural Partnership:

'To create an environmentally and economically sustainable future for rural Essex.'

The Commission has looked to the future, mindful of the substantial environmental, economic and social changes likely to affect the people, institutions and environments of the county in the coming decades. Many of these changes similarly affect rural communities in other parts of the UK; some are distinct to Essex itself. We have therefore drawn upon an understanding of both the wider and specific problems and threats.

However, we restrict recommendations to those areas that the institutions and people of Essex can influence themselves. This is not to say that external support is not vital. It is more a recognition and prioritisation of what can be done within the county.

The areas over which Essex County Council and its partners have most direct influence are

access to services such as post offices and shops, and statutory services; transport; availability and affordability of housing; diversification of the economy and employment; planning and environmental issues; and education and learning.

Nonetheless, submissions have not been restricted to just those concerns that can be addressed within the county. We recognise the importance of a wide range of these issues, but have not addressed them in this report. These include such topics as the structure of local government from parish to county and unitary authorities, national educational policies and targets, planning law, the workings of parish councils, and the levels of national funding to Essex County Council or other local government associations. We have also not undertaken economic analyses of the cost-benefits of each recommendation made, though we have taken account of their likely technical and financial feasibilities.

In this report, we take ‘Essex’ to refer to the post-1974 restructuring of the county, thus including areas covered by current unitary authorities but not those parts of the eastern reaches of London now part of London Boroughs.

Methods and approach of the Commission

The Commission used a variety of methods to receive evidence, develop an understanding of the problems of the county, and develop recommendations for the future (see Annex C). These included:

- Open evidence sessions at which witnesses were invited to give evidence and were questioned by the Commission.
- Site visits.
- Submissions of written evidence from organisations and individuals who work in rural Essex.
- Public opinion surveys of both adults and young people (by QA Research).
- Attendance at existing meetings (for example, of Essex Rural Partnership, Area Forums).

The dominant pattern of rural economic development in recent decades has been largely what is called ‘exogenous’, which implies mainly looking to the outside for solutions. The aim has been to attract external capital, technologies or institutions to local contexts to boost economies. Such recruitment remains an important strategy in rural and regional development, but it cannot work all the time if all counties and regions compete with each other for scarce resources. Local authorities or development agencies have to offer incentives to encourage businesses to relocate, such as land, infrastructure, tax breaks, and exemptions from regulations. All too often, the net effect is simply to move the drivers of economic growth around the country - from areas where businesses do not receive subsidies to those where they will.

An alternative pattern focuses on ‘endogenous’ approaches, which imply growing or originating from within. Here the priority is to focus on locally-available human, social and natural assets, and to ask: can anything be done differently that results in more productive use of these available resources? Such development tends to emerge from local communities and cultures and so reflects the needs of local people. This locally-based model for local economies and cultures seeks to identify, preserve and improve valuable assets. Every time someone buys something sourced from outside the economy, then money leaks out. Each time raw materials are exported, then value is added somewhere else. Each time natural resources are depleted or polluted, or cultures are harmed, the local assets base diminishes.

To balance such loss, assets must be created locally and/or money must flow in, such as

- a) when external people buy local products, such as food, timber, manufactured goods, tourist services, energy and information;
- b) when local people work outside and bring back or remit salaries and
- c) when communities receive pensions, benefits and grants from central government.

The approach of the Commission has been first to recognise the value of attracting in external resources to the county, and second to seek ways to build on the distinctive nature of local assets, capacities, skills and environments. Here we look primarily at what can be achieved within the county by its own people and institutions.

If this is successful, then businesses of all types will find it easier to attract customers and consumers. Such an approach would put Essex as a county on a path to sustainability.

Challenges for rural and coastal Essex

As the county approaches the second decade of the 21st century, large changes can be expected over the next one to two decades. These will have a substantial effect on the people, institutions and environments of Essex. Rural Essex stretches from the River Lea in the west to its long coastline in the east, and from the River Stour at the north to the River Thames in the south.

Essex is a predominantly rural and coastal county strongly affected by its proximity to London. The population at 2006 was approximately 1.66 million (including the two unitary authorities), living in some 695,000 households. The economy of Essex amounts to some £23 billion, comparable with that of Northern Ireland, greater than Alaska, and larger than the economies of 136 countries worldwide. It is close to continental Europe and the institutions and markets of the European Union. London provides many jobs for the people of the county, yet there are still areas of significant rural deprivation. Essex is a county with a rich rural, urban and industrial heritage, yet is being increasingly affected by the eastward spread of housing. QA Research (2009) indicates that many people classify where they live as rural, even though many technically live in urban fringe or small urban town settings. People like to believe they are in rural places, and clearly obtain satisfaction from this. This further indicates the value of rural Essex to its residents.

The government targets for new housing across the greater county are expected to put substantial pressure on natural resources, services and transport facilities in the county. The number of households is predicted to grow by 2029 by 30 per cent to 905,000 households, when the population will be 1.8 million. By 2025, the proportion of people over 65 years of age will have risen by 44 per cent, and those over 75 years by 53 per cent. Over the past 20 years, there has been a decline by 400,000 in the number of young people living in rural areas of the county.

Many of Essex's rural areas are top heavy with significant wealth and increasingly aged populations. The demographic shift towards an older population will put substantial pressure on both health and social services in the future. Though second homes are not generally a substantial problem for the county, the lack of affordable housing represents a major systemic problem. As the housing market has inflated in value, so young adults and families with young children have been priced out of many rural communities. Over

time, populations have become on average older. This trend will continue. The lack of affordable housing is threatening the existence of schools and economic vibrancy of rural economies. Though many people object to provision of new permanently affordable housing in or near their own communities, they often do not realise that such objections can threaten the viability of whole communities. In the same way, in-migrants to rural and coastal communities often move and no longer wish things to change. Yet without positive action, they will change anyway – schools and shops will close; businesses will not have opportunities to establish and grow.

Climate change in the form of sea level rise (up to one metre during the 21st century) will present very significant threat to Essex because of its 350 miles of coastline and the effect of isostatic change (the land is sinking faster than elsewhere in the UK). Doing nothing on the coast is not an option. The county is the site for the country's first managed retreat at Tollesbury, where the seawall was breached to create saltmarsh habitat and increase the land's absorptive capacity of the sea's energy. It also has the region's most successful managed retreat (Abbott's Hall) and the location for the largest planned one (Wallasea Island). The county has 75 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) covering 35,000 hectares, six national nature reserves, and one area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB), as well as many locally significant beautiful and historic landscapes. Almost all national and county reserves have been created in the past 40 years. Wildlife is rich in the county owing to the efforts of many voluntary and public agencies. The otter, for example, had died out in the county by the 1980s; in 2008 there were 86 sightings in the county's northerly rivers. Elsewhere water voles have returned, rare heath and acid grassland protected, and woodlands regenerated.

The county has some 4000 miles of public rights of way. Its farmers have long been substantial contributors to the country's breadbasket. Many farmers face special difficulties on the sub-urban fringe, even though this would appear to have brought them closer to some consumers and customers. Some 60 per cent of Essex farmers are now in some kind of environmental scheme. Even though fewer people are employed by farms than in the past, the whole farm and food sector remains an important part of the county economy. The majority of Essex farms have diverse enterprises, and a quarter already earn more from diversification than from agriculture itself (for example, from farm shops, livery, crafts, car boots, fishing).

Like elsewhere in the UK, there is a growing estrangement of the younger generation from the outdoors, and there is evidence that this affects both mental and physical health and cognitive capacity. The sedentary lifestyles of many adults is a growing burden on personal well-being and the health services of the region. Many children are predicted to pre-decease their parents because of the growing incidence of obesity and type II diabetes.

Though rural services have not been lost in many parts of rural and coastal Essex, critical thresholds are now being reached or passed. The rates of loss of shops, pubs, post offices and other services have not particularly increased in recent years, but many communities are reaching the point where only one such centre of community life or service remains. Some 40 per cent of rural parishes in Essex have no shop or post office, and 29 per cent have no GP surgery or community/public transport links to a GP. The loss of the final shop or pub represents a much greater loss of social value than the loss of the penultimate one. For every £10 earned in income, a post office generates £16.20 for its local economy, and each post office saves small businesses in its region £270,000 annually. There is an urgent need to protect and support these vital rural services.

Schools are not just places for the education of children. They contribute widely to the life and well-being of whole communities. For the past decade, there has been a presumption against closure of rural schools in recognition of their wider social significance. This has benefited families with young children. However, teenage children face difficulties with lack of places for social interaction and reliance on limited transport provision. According to QA Research (2009) most people in rural Essex believe that it is a good place for families, but 30 per cent disagree that it is a good place for teenagers.

There is a strong tradition of volunteering and support for charity across the county. Rural communities that are long-settled often enjoy a strong sense of community participation and common identity, but those characterised by recent incomers or commuters often find such a sense hard to develop and sustain.

The transport transition has seen a growing reliance on cars for mobility, which has left many social groups isolated with access to limited or even no public or community transport services. This is expected to get worse with the increasingly elderly population, many of whom will be unable to drive. Lack of access to transport is reckoned by health authorities to be one of the largest burdens on ill-health in rural areas, as well as limiting life opportunities.

The county of Essex is very well regarded by those living within its boundaries. There is a strong sense of place within communities, with distinct history and strong traditions. Yet the county has now obtained a national image not in keeping with local views. The county has not been strong in promoting itself on a national stage, and has not been able to counter a two-decade emergence of this new image. It is easy to overlook the natural, historical and cultural treasures of Essex. It is a secret getaway for many, not a fashionable destination, but full of strongly characterful and singular places. There is a strong and diverse culture in Essex with a mix of long-standing residents and recent arrivals.

Much of the county retains an immense wealth of historic landscape and archaeology, as well as a rich heritage of traditional vernacular buildings. Local building materials and the techniques employed to use them have bequeathed a very distinctive and widely recognised character to Essex settlements and countryside. English Heritage's Historic Characterisation maps bear testament to the wealth of Essex's historic environment.



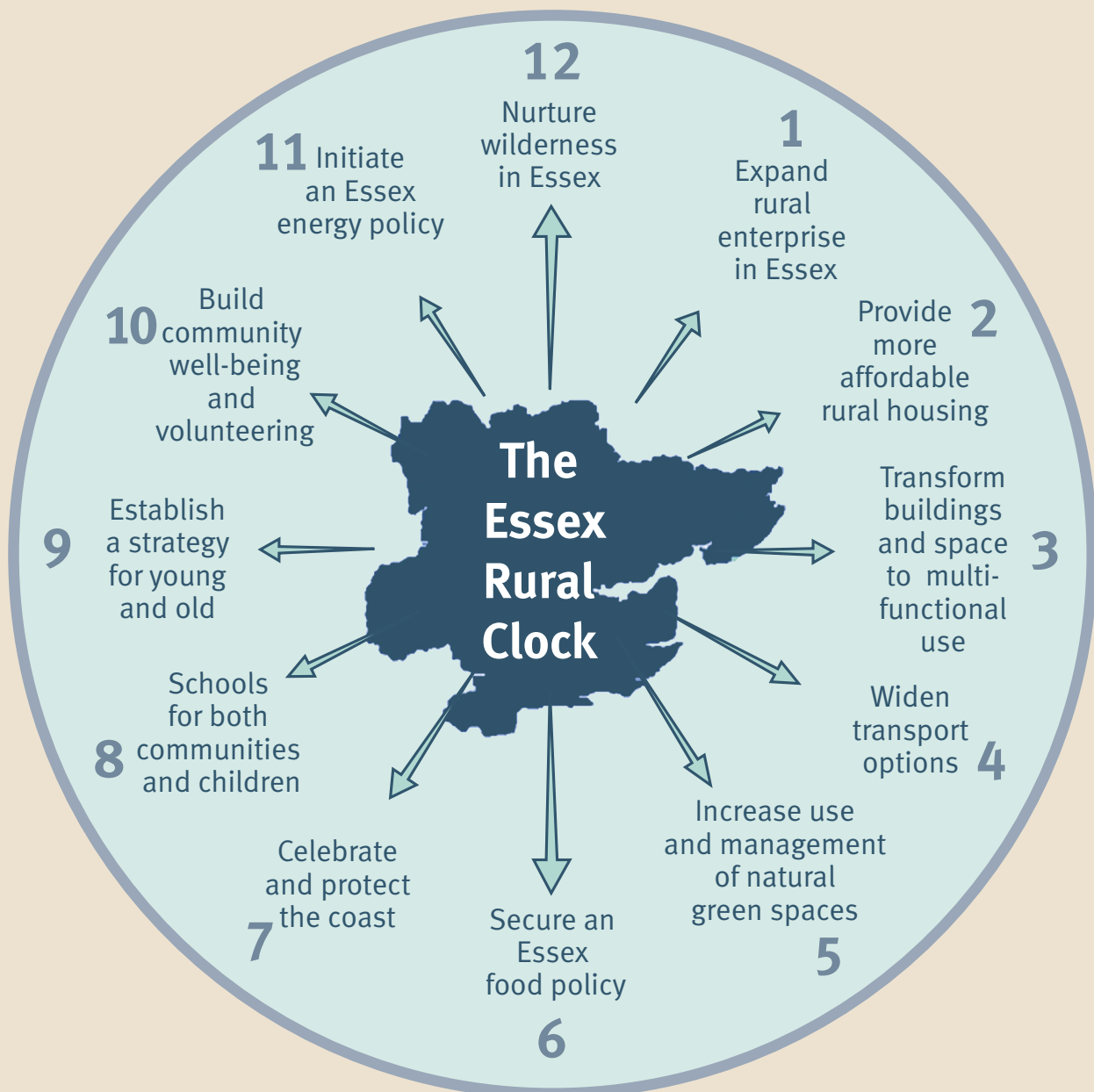
Essex's rural heritage is reflected in a variety of ways across the county; in place names, field patterns, building styles, layout of villages, highways, the people, their accents and customs. Historically, communities would be moulded by their surroundings and the work that they did which would, in turn, be reflected in their character and folklore. Essex is the location for the first Roman capital of England at Camulodonum as well as playing an important part in the histories of not only Great Britain but of other parts of the world as well. As England becomes an increasingly homogenous nation these differences need to be celebrated and conserved as much as possible. The Essex Design Guide seeks to do this for the built environment but the culture of Essex as a whole needs to be reinvigorated. Twenty years ago, comments by an Essex resident writing in a national newspaper disparagingly alluded to Essex man and Essex girl. This stereotype has stubbornly stuck and does no justice to the residents of 'real Essex'. A new Essex identity needs to be forged based on the qualities that personify Essex; innovation, enterprise, humility, humour and modesty. This new identity could be intertwined with Essex's maritime and agricultural past.

Essex is also a county of low crime rates. There are some 18-21 criminal offences per 100,000 population in each of Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk, all below the national average of 25-26. This does not, however, match the dominant internal and external perceptions of the county of Essex.

Across all of rural England, some 4.5 million people are employed in 500,000 rural businesses (offices, shops, schools, hospitals, manufacturing, farms, hotels, and other enterprises). In the early 2000s, 26,000 jobs were lost from agriculture and fishing; over the same period 275,000 new jobs were created in other rural sectors. The average wage in rural areas, though, is 10 per cent lower than for equivalent jobs in urban areas. Essex is known as an entrepreneurial county with high rates of business start-ups, but like all small businesses they need help and support to grow. Rural analyst, Neil Ward of the University of East Anglia, suggests that 'politicians have been slow to grasp the opportunities' of rural economic growth, partly because of a fear of preservationists but also because of the strong pull of development policies to urban areas. In mid-2008, the unfulfilled business potential was estimated in the whole of the UK to be some £300 billion per year.

The Essex Rural Clock

Building on what is recognised as special about Essex, and what problems are being faced in rural areas, the Commission makes 60 recommendations for 12 key areas in the Essex Rural Clock (see below).



The 12 themes on the clock face are linked by some common themes. We thus recognise the value of:

- The ability to live, work and take leisure in a rural area being available to all age groups, social classes and ethnic backgrounds.
- Public and commercial services being delivered at the most local level possible.
- Tackling climate change – an urgent priority.
- Rural communities work towards being sustainable in terms of social, economic and environmental practices and energy usage.
- Rural communities being empowered to find their own solutions to local issues and to capitalise on opportunities.
- The wild and natural character of Essex.

1. Expand rural enterprise in Essex

Make it easier to run a business in rural Essex

The economy of Essex is substantial on both national and international scales. It is a county with a strong entrepreneurial spirit and capacity with a mix of rural and urban enterprises. However, it needs to continue to support and build the economy in a sustainable fashion to ensure the continued provision of jobs, the attractiveness of products and services to external markets and the attractiveness of county assets to visitors.

Many rural areas, and especially farms, have redundant buildings that could be converted for alternative use. Rural businesses are in need of continued advice and support. There is a need to make better environmental and social arguments for rural development in the context of existing planning constraints. Rural businesses can help to reduce peak traffic flows as transport often goes in the opposite direction to flows at rush-hours. There is a need for additional support for rural shops through rate relief and loans/grants for alterations and improvements.

We recommend:

- The expansion of universal New Generation Access broadband via all available technologies.
- More business advice and support via Business Link East.
- More hands-on advice on farm diversification projects to improve farm-based business expansion and employment.
- Establishment of forums across the county to ensure that landowners, planners and entrepreneurs work towards the common goals of improving the local economy which enhance the asset base.

2. Provide more affordable rural housing

A ten fold increase is needed in affordable rural housing (ARH) provision in five years

Many rural communities are under threat from the lack of affordable housing. Young adults and families with young children are increasingly unable to live in their own communities or move close to the site of work. They thus have to move away or commute. This threatens community diversity and reduces the stock of skills and children able to attend local schools. Many local people, however, object to provision of affordable rural housing as they do not appreciate the wider benefits, erroneously believing their communities will stay the same if development is prevented. One survey showed that only 20 per cent of local people supported affordable rural housing before it was built, but that this rose to 75 per cent afterwards. QA Research (2009) indicate that 41 per cent of people believe that there should be more provision of affordable rural housing.

There is thus a need to build more affordable rural housing and also to promote the reasons better. Essex already has a number of successful affordable rural housing schemes, and several institutions (particularly the Rural Community Council of Essex (RCCE) provide support and advice. However, the total number of houses built in the past decade amounts to only a very few homes. There is a need to increase this provision substantially. There are 270 parishes and some 480 villages in Essex. Most if not all of these have a need for some affordable rural housing. There is evidence for substantial latent demand, yet existing Rural Housing Enablers and Housing Associations cannot meet this demand. Some 15 per cent of commuting journeys in the county are made by

key workers (especially carers and teachers) from towns to rural areas, as they cannot afford to live locally.

We recommend:

- The development of a county-wide action plan to increase the rate of provision of ARH ten-fold.
- ECC rolls out a publicity campaign aimed at parish councillors and district planning committee members to explain the benefits of affordable rural housing and its social and economic benefits.
- Every parish or cluster of parishes should conduct a housing needs survey using a proven and widely-accepted approach and then be responsible for identifying potential sites for affordable housing if local needs are found to exist.
- Investing in new Community Land Trusts (joint ventures between housing associations, local authorities and local people) as a mechanism to ensure community involvement, control and responsibility in ARH.
- ECC assesses its own estate to release land for the provision of affordable housing to Community Land Trusts.
- Increased high-quality public site provision for gypsy and traveller communities.

3. Transform existing rural space and buildings to multifunctional use

Encourage co-location of services including advice centres and Internet access community hubs as well as on-line shopping ordering points

Many rural communities already have private and public services provided in a largely mono-functional fashion. These include village hall, school, shop(s), post office, surgery, garage, mobile library and pub. Some are well-used by many local institutions or people, such as village halls; others are often single use and lie empty for long periods (for example, churches, local schools). Some services are brought to communities by a particular agency (for example, county library sending mobile library, PCT provision of surgery), yet these could provide a vehicle for the co-locating of several services at a single point of delivery. At the same time, many journeys are made by rural people to

access services in nearby towns and larger villages, and yet are increasingly stretched by lack of access to appropriate transport. Rural communities without opportunities to meet and congregate will die socially.

There is thus a need to investigate the opportunities for co-location or co-provision of multiple services on the back of formerly single use. This might include school or church space used by community groups, establishment of community shops in churches, co-locating of post offices in shops and pubs, and provision of multiple services via mobile libraries.

We recommend:

- Endorsement of the work being done by RCCE and parish councils to bring about multifunctional projects.
- The provision of support to community groups for the widening of use of existing buildings (for example, village halls, churches, libraries).
- Support for ECC services with multifunctional capacity (for example, mobile libraries with community policy advice).
- Mobile police units should combine with Citizens Advice Bureaux to offer services in rural communities.
- Provide ECC indemnity/insurance for local groups organising events.

4. Widen transport options

Rural areas need more than cars

Changing rural transport remains the most intractable of rural challenges owing to the cultural acceptance and dominance of the private motor car. Yet only 8 in 10 households in Essex own a car, and therefore many people rely on public transport for their mobility. As the same time, as the population continues to shift towards an elderly mix, more people in the future will not be able to drive, and will additionally have special transport needs. The young who are unable to drive or access a motor car are also strongly reliant on public transport. Patterns of transport use and availability are repeated nationally, and are not particular to Essex.

There is thus a need to innovate away from current patterns of transport use to create better blends of transport options for all. There is a need for specialist transport for the

vulnerable, provision of adequate public transport, linking of transport uses (for example, rail, bus, car, cycle), a need to keep large HGVs off small rural roads, a need to limit speeds on rural roads (for example, through use of Vehicle Activated Signs), and a need for innovations such as community car clubs and car pooling to reduce net car use. There is a need to ensure green infrastructure links settlements to encourage greater use of cycling and walking.

We recommend:

- A scheme for free or reduced bus transport for the 18s and under.
- More public support for rural bus provision, and assessment of re-routing options to encompass villages without bus provision.
- ECC through the RCCE should ensure better communication between transport providers for the development of hubs and interchanges to encourage links between car-bus-rail-bicycle-walking use.
- Encouragement of innovative community transport schemes for all ages (such as Tendring and Maldon) across the county.
- Improve the ‘roadscape’ by introducing speed-limiting measures to encourage more cycling, walking and horse-riding on the county’s lanes.
- Encourage more moped hire schemes for younger people (through RCCE).
- Encourage cycling and walking between rural centres by making footpaths and bridleways suitable for everyday, year-round use; introduce a network of ‘inter-village routes’ that are off-road but surfaced (and possibly lit) in such a way that makes cycling and walking possible all the time.
- Investigation of electric minibus services for commuters.
- Provide regular ferry services across all estuaries and along parts of the coast with good waiting and interchange facilities.

5. Increase use and management of natural green spaces

More people using green places and nature will produce a healthier population in Essex

Essex has a high quality natural environment in both rural and coastal areas. There are many nature reserves and country parks, large numbers of urban green spaces, and 4000 miles of public rights of way in the countryside. There are also many rare species and habitats. Most semi-natural habitats are already well-protected, and indeed have improved in recent years. In addition, there are novel efforts to link land types together for conservation and community purposes, such as Essex Wildlife Trust's Living Landscapes project. There is increasingly convincing scientific evidence (mainly developed at the University of Essex) to show that undertaking activities in green space leads to improvements in both mental and physical health. 'Green exercise' reduces stress and onset of inflammatory conditions (for example, strokes, type II diabetes, dementia). Whatever the activities (for example, walking alone, in groups or with the dog; fishing; golf; gardening; hunting; running; boating) there are health benefits. The green places of Essex can therefore be thought of as contributing to a 'natural' health service for the county. Insight into this process is an example of an endogenous pattern of knowledge and development for Essex.

However, the average amount of time spent outdoors is declining, and the falls are particularly sharp amongst children. Sedentary behaviour is becoming increasingly widespread. There is a need to increase access to and use of all green spaces (from urban to rural, farmed to coastal, nature reserves to non-designated habitats) to increase their use.

We recommend:

- An assessment of Essex's excellent network of public rights of way to create more circular routes, with more linked car parks and public transport routes and amenities, and work with landowners to create permissive circular routes where possible or via planning gain from diversification projects.
- Making available maps and guides for these routes in attractive publications displayed on-line and in the usual information points and also at GP surgeries, schools and colleges, leisure centres and private gyms across the county.

- Development of schemes to allow groups of young people to have access to areas of designated rural or farm land to manage nature, rights of way, and other projects on a time limited basis, thus giving children a sense of ownership and pride in their local land.
- Establish a new generation of community orchards to grow local and traditional fruit varieties in rural villages and market towns (by using the ECC tree-planting scheme).
- Development of a scheme for farmers to donate land on a temporary basis for allotments for both rural and urban dwellers. Districts should identify sites for larger scale allotment schemes.
- Ensure that county-owned woodland is accessible and adequately managed for all for leisure, education and health.

6. Secure an Essex food policy

Essex consumers and institutions who buy local benefit the local economy and land management, reduce food miles, and increase a sense of local pride, leading to healthier population

The food and farming sectors are vital parts of the Essex economy, history and culture. In recent years, there has been a trend towards the recognition of the multifunctional value of farming. Farms produce more than food by contributing to important environmental services (for example, flood water storage, biodiversity, aesthetic values). Some 70 per cent of Essex farms are diversified, and a quarter now earn more money from their diversified elements of the business than from agriculture itself. Some groups of Essex farms are contributing to tourist footfall and sales of local food (eg Dengie Food and Leisure Trail). Others are directly providing food to local schools (for example, Ashlyn's Farm). Essex farmers already run a very successful Essex Schools Food and Farming Day (sponsored by ECC) to improve the links between children and farming. At the same time, viable farming is needed to maintain the value of many natural habitats, such as grazing livestock on marshes. Locally produced food sold and eaten within Essex both reduces food miles (and environmental footprints) and increases the likelihood of consumers appreciating where their food originates. The provision of allotments and space for community gardens increases the production of food by households, thus further reducing environmental costs and increasing health through better diets.

There is a need within Essex for better links between consumers (children and adults) and farmers, and more purchase of local food. There is a need for more food tourism, provision of allotments, and increasing the cooking skills of children.

We recommend:

- The launch of an Essex food policy that will set out:
 - how local authorities and other public sector bodies can procure local food and thus support local businesses and farmland management;
 - how local produce can be best quality assured to remain attractive to Essex buyers;
 - how producers/sectors of the local food economy can obtain local accreditation;
 - a new network of county local food trails to encourage local people and tourists to visit local producers and their landscapes and buy direct.
- Continue support for many innovations that are already localising food and farming, such as the Essex Schools Food & Farming day, the Dengie Food and Leisure Trail, farmers' markets, community orchards and vegetable patches in schools.

7. Celebrate and protect the coast

The Essex coastline and estuaries are remote, tranquil and unique, and for too long have been the county's 'back yard' when they should be an impressive 'front garden'

Despite the 350 miles of coastline, the coastal areas and communities tend to be seen as the county's 'back garden'. They are no longer central to the life and well-being of the economy and people. Yet they remain a key asset with nationally-unique features. The coast, though, will come under increasing threat from climate change as sea levels rise and the land continues to sink (as it has for 10,000 years since the retreat of the last ice-age). The success of the coastal communities was long determined by capture (inshore and open sea) and culture (oyster, seafood) fisheries, supplemented by sales of wild produce (for example, wildfowl). Lately, internal tourism became vital for about a century. Both are now in decline, and some of the most significant pockets of poverty in the county are in coastal communities and former resort towns.

There is a need to ensure the viability of the remaining fishing enterprises on the coast and their transferability to younger generations. There is an urgent need for novel forms of investment and vision for coastal resort towns. Essex's 400 km of tidal defences are strong compared with many of those in the rest of the eastern region, but the post 1953 improvements will not be adequate in the face of predicted sea level rises this century. This will require a reassessment of current shoreline management plans that designate areas for holding the line, managed realignment, or no active intervention.

We recommend:

- A robust approach by ECC to the Shoreline Management Plan and response to the Marine Bill, involving local farmer syndicates where possible, so that valuable farmland and wildlife habitats will be protected by a combination of 'hold the line' and 'advance the line' approaches, working wherever possible with local syndicates of farmers.
- An assessment of the full value (not just economic) of the agricultural and other land behind seawalls, as once lost to managed retreat or over-topping it is hard and expensive to reclaim.
- Increased access to coastal paths for different users whilst ensuring a balance is struck between habitat conservation and amenity. Circular paths, car parks and public facilities need to be introduced to make enjoying the coast easier. Schemes should be developed with local landowners and farmers.
- Develop a recreation use plan for estuary and inshore areas, including for sea angling, wildfowling, sailing and wind surfing. The health benefits of these pursuits should be promoted to all age groups, particularly the young, many of whom are losing contact with the natural environment.
- Promote the natural and built environment of Essex to all tourists and visitors through tourist routes, food trails, farm shops, quality holiday lets, restaurants, wedding and event venues which are beginning to flourish but need to be encouraged to establish sustainable businesses.
- Assess the options for sea and river transport, including better foot-ferries on all estuaries and more freight transport by water, with a dedicated section of Essex transport policy devoted to enhancing and encouraging coastal ship-borne trade.

8. Schools for communities and children

Schools in rural areas form the bedrock of the community and are critical if rural Essex is to retain an intrinsically mixed population

There are 472 primary schools in Essex, of which 126 are designated as rural. Of these, 86 are church schools. Small schools are designated as those with less than 100 pupils, and currently number 41; there are just 3 very small schools with less than 50 pupils. Since 1998, there has been a county presumption against closure of rural schools, and only one school has been closed in the past 18 years. However, more are likely to come under threat from the demographic transition occurring in rural areas. One new house is assumed to increase the number of primary school age children in a community by 0.2.

Schools contribute to the cohesion and social fabric of rural communities – they are important not just for education. There is evidence that the presence of a primary school slows the ageing of a community; if the school closes, then the community rapidly ages. Local schools reduce road transport, and children walking to school are fitter and healthier. Some Essex schools are beginning to innovate with increasing outdoor play, and some with green education – where children spend time outdoors for normal lessons (for example, schools collaborating with Eastfeast). There is good evidence to show that outdoor play and education improves behaviour, cognitive capacity and children's health. Many schools are not used in non-school hours, and there are opportunities for varied use of existing space and resources.

There is thus a need to rethink schools as being providers of much more than curricula and educational achievements. They are important components of rural social life, and can make a significant difference to children's health and well-being. The natural environment around schools also provides an important opportunity for learning and engagement with the outdoors.

We recommend:

- ECC continue its policy not to close any more village primary schools.
- Encouragement of the county's rural primary schools to provide buildings, space and facilities for use by the local community (with assurance that hire charges and insurance obligations are not prohibitive).

- Establishment of a programme of green outdoor education in all rural and urban schools using a wide range of green spaces beyond school bounds.
- Encourage all schools to provide healthy food education to children, develop their own gardens and allotments, and buy local food for their school dinner provision.

9. Establish a strategy for young and old

Increase inter-generational connections within rural communities of Essex

The young and elderly are increasingly disconnected from the rest of their communities and from each other. As a result, understanding of needs has diminished, as has investment. Young people need space to congregate and engage with place and friends. The elderly need both places to meet and special care arrangements. The numbers of elderly in rural Essex will grow rapidly in the coming decades. According to QA Research (2009), more than 80 per cent of the people of Essex are fairly or very satisfied with their place, but the largest group of dissatisfied people is families with teenage children.

There is a need for some sectors of rural communities to appreciate that it is better to have children and youth congregating and playing within their communities rather than exclude them to towns and cities. Youth leaders are important role models for the youth, and can have a substantial impact on behaviour if they have the necessary resources and support. Investment in youth programmes reduces later expenditure required on anti-social behaviour and youth offending programmes. Giving young people responsibility for natural places (for example, through a rural guardian angel scheme) in return for space for their own activities will lead to greater responsibility and improved quality of rural environments. In a similar way, the experience and presence of the elderly should be built on, such as through dog walking or dog sitting schemes.

We recommend:

- The launch of an intergenerational scheme to support links between young and old (for example, between primary schools and care homes).
- Encouragement of parish councils to ensure all villages have space where local children can ‘free-range’, thus providing incentives to play, be active and socially-connect.
- Develop a county-wide healthy walking scheme for the elderly.
- Support dog-walking and dog-sitting schemes for the elderly.
- Develop computer training schemes delivered by the young for the elderly.

10. Build community well-being and volunteering

A strong part of well-being arises not only from personal health and family but also from community linkages, and all forms of volunteering are an important part of rural community life

A strong part of well-being arises not only from personal health and family but also from community linkages. Social capital is the term given to relations of trust, reciprocity, obligations and responsibility that tie people together in communities. Many institutions already exist in rural communities – including the Women’s Institute, British Legion, parent and toddler groups, dramatic societies, young farmers, youth clubs, scouts and guides, church support, film and community councils. Some rural communities have many social institutions per capita, others have few. Successful, vibrant and interactive communities can prevent people arriving at social care, and so provide direct value to public agencies.

Volunteering is an important part of community life as well as increasing personal self-esteem, and needs support and encouragement. One person designated as a village agent with access to external sources of information can provide great value to other villagers. In some communities, this function is played by the parish clerk. Time banks are one way to help people interact by trading time in return for activities and support. The regulatory burden is growing, and is reducing the pool of volunteers and community leaders. Many are today put off by the onerous Criminal Records Bureau checks that are now required for those working with the young and vulnerable. Community well-being is improved by a sense of security, and the lack of local police stations is lamented by many rural people. The advent of Police Community Support Officers offers opportunities to relocate police support into rural communities.

We recommend:

- The launch of a county-wide volunteering scheme (targeted especially at the elderly) to build and strengthen village institutions.
- A return to proper rural policing with every community in Essex having a designated officer with the appropriate skills and knowledge (one officer in charge of a small number of villages).
- All parish councils are encouraged to complete village design statements or parish plans to assess all aspects of community well-being.

- The establishment with Citizens Advice Bureaux of a training programme for parish clerks and elected councillors to become qualified advisers and village agents.
- An investigation of the wider regulatory burden on locations (for example, buildings and village halls) and on people (for example, volunteers), and identification of solutions to encourage more volunteering, particularly for youth, children and elderly.

11. Initiate an Essex energy policy

Increasing energy generation and conservation will reduce the carbon footprint of the economy of Essex, save consumers and businesses money, and contribute to rural jobs

Commercial power stations and offshore wind arrays in Essex provide energy for both the national grid and Essex residents, and this is generally not affected substantially by local policies (except planning for wind turbines). However, there is much that can be done to encourage greater household and industrial conservation of energy (and cost savings). It is, though, difficult to capture public attention around conservation of energy. However, advancement in technology is opening up the potential for micro-generation of energy from woodchips. Coppiced woodlands can provide the renewable resources that can be burned in woodchip boilers that can heat schools or other public buildings. There are no regional examples of community heat and power schemes, though they are common on the continent. In due course, it may be possible to consider generation of heat and power for homes and businesses from central micro-units.

Increasing energy generation and conservation will reduce the carbon footprint of the economy of Essex, save consumers and businesses money, and contribute to rural jobs. Where rural communities rely on fossil fuels for heating, there is a need for support to local fuel-oil rings to ensure bulk purchase of oil at lower prices. There are opportunities for significant leadership and large impacts on the sustainability of the whole county.

We recommend:

- Establishment of a micro-power generation scheme for schools and other public buildings, based on woodchip boilers using wood from Essex woodlands or on anaerobic digester power plants using food waste, farmyard manure, straw and/or other second generation fuels.

- Establishment by ECC of an independent energy advisory service to advise on the most efficient energy generation and conservation schemes in private homes and in public institutions.
- Support for establishment of fuel-oil rings within parishes or parish clusters to reduce the price of fuel.
- Establishment of a ‘solar-power for all by 2020’ scheme for Essex - all houses and private businesses in Essex to have solar power in the next decade.

12. Nurture wilderness in Essex

The wildernesses of Essex are unique and should be protected

The character of rural and coastal Essex is partly defined by its wild places and natural habitats. Essex has space for wilderness in which biodiversity and habitats are valued for intrinsic reasons as well as for social utility. Both rural and urban people in Essex indicate that the preservation of Essex’s natural areas and countryside is very important (72 per cent). More than 80 per cent believe these areas are important for future generations, and help to define the character of Essex . In general, people of Essex value their county for its quality of life, safety, and sense of peace, isolation and natural beauty.

We recommend:

- Continued support and protection of the landscapes, habitats and ecosystems of rural and coastal Essex that provide the country’s unique character and identity.
- Assessment of the economic value of the ecosystem services (for example, flood protection, pollination, carbon sequestration, amenity) provided by the natural and semi-natural habitats of Essex and thus an improved understanding of their value to the people and economy of the county.
- Collaboration with Essex Wildlife Trust and other conservation agencies to improve the biodiversity status of all flora and fauna of Essex (including species introductions and revitalization, habitat connectivity and resilience, conservation and protection).
- Promotion of the value of wild Essex and its biodiversity, tranquillity and rural character on a national stage as a national destination.



Conclusions

One of the key priorities of the Commission from the outset has been to highlight the fact that Essex is predominantly a rural county and as such is an attractive place to visit, a pleasant place to live and an area that needs to be protected – particularly the food producing coastal areas, from either excessive development or coastal or fluvial inundation.

The Commission was tasked with considering the following aspects of rural life in Essex:

- Access to services such as post offices, shops etc and statutory services;
- Transport;
- Availability and affordability of housing;
- Diversification of the economy and employment;
- Planning and environmental issues;
- Education and learning.

The Commission has made 60 recommendations for 12 key areas in the Essex Rural Clock. These would lead to improvements in the natural, social and human capital of Essex, leading to greater economic and environmental sustainability.

These 12 key areas are linked by common themes. The Commission thus recognises the value of the following principles in making Essex more sustainable and prosperous:

- The ability to live, work and take leisure in a rural area should be available to all age groups, social classes and ethnic backgrounds;
- Public and commercial services should be delivered at the most local level possible;
- Tackling climate change, both through adaptation and mitigation, is of paramount importance;
- Rural communities must work towards being sustainable in terms of social, economic and environmental practices and energy usage;
- Rural communities should be empowered to find their own solutions to local issues and to capitalise on opportunities;

- The natural resources of Essex and those aspects of the county which inspire and attract visitors are huge assets both to the local population and to the nation as a whole;
- The proximity of Essex to London and its retention of a powerful sense of its own identity both need to be celebrated and used for the benefit of the people of Essex.



Annex A: Members of the Commission

Chairman

Professor Jules Pretty OBE, University of Essex

Members

Simon Brice, Essex farmer

Canon John Brown DL, Diocese of Chelmsford

John Clayton, Chief Executive of Essex Chambers of Commerce

Elinor Goodman, journalist and former Channel Four political editor

Professor Germaine Greer, smallholder and commentator

Mary Maskell, rural campaigner from Great Bentley

Tom Oliver, Head of Rural Policy at CPRE

Tony Tuckwell, educationalist and author

Secretariat, Administrative and research support to the Essex Rural Commission was provided by Philip Wilson, Policy Analyst and Sophie Cheetham, Business Support Officer, both of the Policy, Community Planning and Regeneration team of Essex County Council.

Annex B: List of witnesses at open meetings

Angela Balcombe	–	Parish Council Liaison officer – Making the Links, ECC
Ann Bartleet	–	National Trust Board, CPRE and Chair of Thames Chase Trust
Nicola Baxter	–	Admissions and schools development officer, ECC
Tim Bellamy	–	Community Transport coordinator at the East of England Regional Assembly
Ed Bennett	–	Diversification consultant with Haven Gateway Partnership
Keith Brown and David Burch	–	Federation of Small Business
Ulrike Cariello	–	Hastoe Housing Association Limited
Keith Cheesman	–	Community wellbeing project manager, ECC

Nichola Currie –	Country Land and Business Association
Bob Dorr –	Chief Executive, First Essex Buses
Jim Egan –	Regional Director of FWAG (Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group)
David Eniffer –	Tendring Volunteer Centre
Emma Gilthorpe –	BT Group Director; Industry Policy & Regulation
Moira Groborz –	Affordable Housing Officer, Rural Community Council of Essex
John Hall –	Chief Executive, Essex Wildlife Trust
Kevin Jones –	Environment Strategy Manager, ECC
Rev Canon –	
Peter Hartley –	Diocesan Director of Education for the Anglican Diocese of Chelmsford
Mike Gogarty –	Strategic Health Director, ECC
John Hall –	Essex Wildlife Trust
Michael Hughes –	Whirledge and Nott
Tim Isaac –	Regional Surveyor, Country Land and Business Association
Mark Johnson –	Environment Agency
Neil Keylock –	School Organisation & Planning Manager, ECC
Jo Lavis –	Rural Affordable Housing specialist, Commission for Rural Communities
Richard Lloyd –	Chief Executive, Energy Saving Trust, East of England
Martin Lunn –	Essex & Suffolk Water
Chris Moore –	Affordable housing consultant
Russ Mynott –	Manager of Essex Citizens Advice Bureaux
Chris Perkins –	Essex Post Office project manager, ECC
Lord Petre –	Ingatestone Hall
John Pope –	Passenger Transport Group Manager, ECC Highways
Richard Rampton –	Easton College (Norwich) Rural Advice Centre
Kris Radley –	Community transport adviser, Rural Community Council for Essex
Nick Shuttleworth –	Chief Executive, Rural Community Council for Essex
Guy Smith –	Essex farmer
Phil Smith –	Rural Shops Alliance
Jane Snowden –	Colchester Volunteer Centre

Andrew St Joseph	– Managing Coastal Change
Brian Stacey	– Countryside Manager, ECC
Gary Stokes	– Ashlyns Farms Ltd
Ian Vipond	– Executive Director, Colchester Borough Council and Chairman of the Essex Planning Officers Association
Cameron Watt	– National Housing Association
Duncan Wheathall	– Essex Young Farmers
David Wood	– Rural Action East – a member of Action for Communities in Rural England (ACRE) working for regeneration in rural England

Annex C: Commentary on public evidence gathering sessions

4 November 2008

At its first session on 4 November 2008, the Commission met with members of the Essex Rural Partnership (ERP) and the East Essex Area Forum. In November, the ERP was at the start of the process of re-drafting the Essex Rural Strategy (new version due end of 2009). It was therefore important that the issues that they were identifying were presented to the Commission. The report of the Commission will give a clear steer to the ERP on where the priorities for the future strategy should lie.

19 November 2008

The second session on 19 November took place in Westminster where a wide range of witnesses gave evidence. Access to services, transport, highways and affordable housing were discussed. It became apparent that traditional, wire-based broadband distribution in rural areas was at best patchy and in many places non-existent. This has a very detrimental affect on businesses trying to set up in rural areas and, if the provisions of PPS7 were to be met, basic infrastructure such as broadband needed to be in place. Affordable housing needed to be more universally accepted in villages as at present, although people are generally in favour of more housing for younger people, the siting of such developments was frequently controversial and led to short sighted planning decisions. More discussion is needed with local communities in villages to explain that the term ‘affordable’ does not necessarily mean poor quality

and that reassurance should be given that in most cases, local people will be given priority of tenure. Issues around releasing land in a quickly evolving planning system were also considered. The Commission heard about the benefits of co-locating services in community buildings, whether they are village halls, churches, pubs or shops and many innovative suggestions were put forward. The concept of having a community hub where, for instance, supermarket deliveries could be ordered from and delivered to were considered with the benefits this would bring to an ageing, less mobile population. ECC's Post Office programme was explained to the Commission.

2 December 2008

The third session took place at Five Lakes Country Club on 2 December and was an opportunity to discuss the land based economy, food production, how to reduce food miles and to encourage the concept of 'honest and local food' whereby consumers could make informed choices when buying food. Issues around farm diversification, how to encourage enterprise in rural areas and the knock-on effect this would have on road and transport infrastructure were also looked at. Habitat conservation, innovative land management strategies and bio-fuel production were also considered.

20 January 2009

The pivotal role of primary schools, the church and volunteering were assessed in some detail at Ingatestone Hall on 20 January. It was clear that the distinction between 'formal' and 'informal' volunteering was being blurred and that although community spirit and good neighbourliness remained intrinsic values in village communities, health and safety legislation, rigorous insurance requirements for volunteer drivers, Criminal Record Bureau checks and an increasing need of government, at all levels, to measure, quantify and intervene was seen as having an adverse impact on communities. The importance of parish councils and the incoming concept of 'village agents' were also discussed. Primary schools often provide the mainstay of community life in villages and their continued presence and use was seen as critical. It was also noted that many of these schools were gifted by the local community to the local community and should be treated as such. The challenges of diversifying the usage of school buildings were also considered.

18 February 2009

Despite the high water levels brought about by the flooding in early February, the Commission was still able to convene a session on a Thames barge at Maldon on 18 February where the topics covered included flooding and coastal issues, sea level rise and drinking water resources. The countryside and nature have intrinsic physical and mental health benefits as well as being educational ‘playgrounds’ for children. Witnesses were able to explain how we can better access the countryside and use it for recreational use. It seems likely that as people’s requirements change, there will need to be a corresponding change in facilities. Public conveniences, litter bins and car parks will be needed to support revised circular walking routes. Although it is recognised that public rights of way in Essex are well maintained and marked, there could be scope for the system to be improved to better suit a variety of users; horse riders, walkers and cyclists alike. Improving the visitor/tourism offer was also touched on together with public transport provision to visitor attractions

Area Forum meetings

Throughout the winter months of 2008-09, Commissioners attended all four of the Area Forum meetings and were given the opportunity to discuss what the Commission was setting out to do and to receive comments.

Meeting with the key members of the Essex Rural Partnership

On 10 March, a special meeting was convened with four members of the Essex Rural Partnership: Nick Shuttleworth, Chief Executive of the Rural Community Council of Essex, Councillor Mick Page, Chris Allen of EEDA and Suzanne Harris, Development Manager, Rural Community Council of Essex. The Commission recognises that delivery of the recommendations it makes will rely on a variety of organisations, many of them members of the ERP. At this meeting the ERP was given the opportunity to explain to the Commission what the Partnership was capable of delivering, its track record and its aspirations for the future. As mentioned, the ERP is in the process of re-drafting the Essex Rural Strategy which will be informed by the recommendations made by the Commission. A mechanism whereby the recommendations from the Commission can be fed into the strategy was established in as much as the drafting committee of the strategy will include the Secretariat to the Commission.

Written submissions of evidence

Evidence has been submitted by organisations and individuals. Further details can be obtained from the Secretariat.



For further information please contact:

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The information contained in this document can also be made available in alternative formats: large print, braille, audio tape or disk. We can also translate this information into other languages.

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