



Essex Rural Strategy

The Essex Rural Partnership

Partnership priorities for the future of Rural Essex

Launched July 2005

Essex Rural Strategy

The Essex Rural Partnership

**Prepared by Essex County Council on
behalf of the Essex Rural Partnership**



Essex County Council

Essex Rural Strategy

Contents

Section	Page
1.0 Introduction	6
2.0 Why a Review?	6
3.0 The Essex Rural Partnership	8
4.0 Progress in implementing the existing Strategy	9
5.0 Changing context at national, regional and local level	10
6.0 Profile of Rural Essex	18
7.0 Vision	24
8.0 Identified key delivery priorities	25
9.0 Delivery	31
10.0 Restructuring the Essex Rural Partnership	32

Essex Rural Strategy

A Partnership Approach

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The first Essex Rural Strategy was published in 1998. Many of the issues raised in that Strategy are still valid. However, events such as the Foot and Mouth outbreak, changes in national rural policy and pressures for substantial new development have significantly changed the context. This review is intended to highlight the current priorities for rural renaissance up to 2010. It identifies potential project areas that will benefit from partnership involvement and, through an associated Action Plan (to be produced), shows how and when these will be delivered. The Strategy was the subject of an extensive consultation exercise with partners and other interested organisations from September to mid-November 2004. Identified priorities reflect the responses received. The consultation has also highlighted the need to review the structure of the ERP itself.

1.2 The Essex Rural Partnership (ERP) replaced previous partnership groupings in 2002. It covers the area sometimes referred to as 'Greater Essex'. This includes the current county of Essex and also the Unitary Authorities of Southend on Sea and Thurrock. However, in the interests of brevity and to reflect the partnership's title, the term 'Essex' is used in this document to refer to the entire area.

1.3 This refreshing of the Essex Rural Strategy has provided the opportunity for partners to review overall priorities, consider how they can align their activities more effectively to address these priorities and identify new partnership projects that will result in the ERP having an added value. Rural issues do not stop at administrative boundaries and it is important that partners deal imaginatively with the opportunities for cross-border working.

2.0 Why a review?

2.1 From the river Lea in the west to the sea in the east; from the river Stour in the north to the Thames in the south, Essex is a predominantly rural area. Its small villages, ancient woodlands and extensive coastline all contribute to a character that make it a good place to live. Although farming now employs only a tiny proportion of the workforce the landscape of Essex is dominated by agricultural production. Reflecting the decline in farm employment, the majority of village households find employment in the service sector or manufacturing, usually working in urban centres. Nevertheless, villages remain distinct communities and contain many of the area's most historic and attractive buildings.

2.2 Despite the predominance of agriculture as a land use, Essex has a number of significant urban centres, especially in the south of the sub-region. In consequence, the Strategy must recognise the different issues and priorities throughout the area that are emerging as a result of pressures internal and external to rural areas. For example, the Environment section of the Thames

Gateway South Essex Strategic Framework identifies the need to develop and manage rural assets also to benefit the urban population. This is especially important given the substantial expansion in population that will take place to implement the *Sustainable Communities Plan*. It aims for a positive approach to environmental management that balances and enhances built development. Some proposed actions are to restore and increase the accessibility of the marshes, create a 'Green Grid' bringing the natural environment closer to communities and to develop new cycle ways.

2.3 The continuing change in the economic base of rural areas, their environmental value, the needs of people who live in them and the external pressures placed upon them all point to the benefit of a unified strategy for future regeneration, development and conservation. This was recognised in 1995, at which time an Essex Rural Strategy Steering Group was established for the county. The Group brought together a wide range of organisations, including delivery agencies and interest groups, to work with the local authorities in developing a co-ordinated approach. The result was the publication of the first Essex Rural Strategy in October 1998.

2.4 The first Strategy provided a very comprehensive analysis of rural issues and opportunities for the future and proposed a correspondingly comprehensive set of actions. Despite progress in implementing the Strategy, most of the challenges and issues raised in the original document remain valid. This points to the need to work even more effectively in order to maintain the current position. Sustainable improvements will require greater effort still.

2.5 More recently, other events have occurred that emphasise the need for a revision of the strategy for rural Essex. In particular, the unforeseen devastation caused by the Foot and Mouth epidemic, Government proposals for substantial new housing development, the re-structuring of national delivery arrangements and a revision of the Government's rural and planning policy all create a changing context in which the strategy must operate.

2.6 This review is intended to highlight the priorities for rural renaissance. It is a relatively short document that concentrates on the changing circumstances and opportunities since 1998. It is forward looking and focuses on key priorities for the Essex Rural Partnership up to 2010. The Strategy identifies key regeneration opportunities that can only be achieved by the partners working together. This will ensure that the Rural Partnership is really adding value. It is not intended to identify every activity undertaken by the partners that has a bearing upon rural areas.

2.7 Specifically, the purpose of the Strategy and the associated Action Plan is to:

1. Ensure that the partners are pursuing an agreed vision by giving direction and demonstrating the ability of partners to work together to achieve rural renaissance.
2. Obtain the commitment of partners to the delivery of projects and services that address priority issues.
3. Identify priorities for improved joint action and co-ordination that add value to

the activities of individual partners and achieve real outcomes for rural Essex.

4. Raise the profile of rural Essex and demonstrate its significance, in particular, locally and regionally, ensuring the recognition of its interests in appropriate contexts.
5. Provide the rural dimension for the Essex community strategy (*'Shaping the Future'*).
6. Inform priorities for the East of England Development Agency (EEDA) funding and other funds that will support the well-being of rural Essex.
7. Respond to the emerging changes to delivery mechanisms at regional level.

3.0 The Essex Rural Partnership

3.1 The first Essex Rural Strategy was developed by the Essex Rural Strategy Steering Group (ERSSG). However, the Foot and Mouth crisis during 2001 suggested the need for a wider partnership with an emphasis on delivery. The resultant Essex Rural Renewal Forum (which included members of the ERSSG) was intended to undertake short term actions in order to address immediate threats to the rural economy resulting from the disease.

3.2 In July 2002 agreement was reached to merge the Forum and the ERSSG to guide rural renaissance. The new organisation was designated the "**Essex Rural Partnership**". The response to the consultation showed broad agreement as to the role of the ERP. As a result of comments received, the amended terms of reference are:

- *To provide a forum for bringing together in partnership the main stakeholders with responsibility and interests in the rural areas of Essex, to agree a shared vision, and to identify policies, proposals and recommendations for action across a wide range of rural activities.*
- *To provide a framework for integrated actions by the partners taking an holistic approach that recognises the interdependence of countryside and town.*
- *To share and increase knowledge about rural issues and raise the profile of rural Essex*
- *To identify and draw resources in to Essex for the benefit of rural areas from regional, national and European sources.*
- *to contribute to regional and national and European policy developments, management plan initiatives, and statutory plans, providing a collective voice for rural Essex*
- *To act as a co-ordination point for receiving and disseminating information relating to rural economic, environmental and community issues.*
- *To ensure linkage with other mechanisms in Essex including the Essex Prosperity Forum, Essex Local Government Association and Local Strategic Partnerships.*
- *To advise and champion the concept and practice of rural proofing of mainstream funding of key organisations.*

3.3 The ERP constitutes the key partnership within Essex to achieve rural renaissance, responsible for social, economic and environmental well-being. The consultation recognised the need to make the ERP more effective and to adapt it to changing circumstances, especially in the light of the Haskins Review and the national Rural Strategy 2004. In order better to engage regionally (with the Regional Rural Affairs Forum for example), it may be appropriate to develop a new structure for the Partnership. This is discussed further in Section 10 below.

3.4 Local authorities are required to bring together delivery agencies and other partners to develop unitary, district and county community strategies to ensure the development of a shared vision, common objectives and a co-ordinated approach to service delivery. These strategies concentrate on very high level policy, typically focusing on thematic policies that deal, for example, with leisure. The ERP and the Essex Rural Strategy will complement the community strategy process. They provide the rural, spatial dimension, articulating the priorities of those who live, work or take leisure in the countryside. Co-ordination is ensured by the joint representation of many organisations on the ERP and the county and local community strategic partnerships.

4.0 Progress in implementing the existing Strategy

4.1 The ERP has had a largely a strategic function, helping to focus the agenda for rural affairs in Essex, in consultation with its members. However, it was originally brought together to provide positive, practical solutions to rural problems, and it has established three Working Groups (“Hubs”) to facilitate the delivery of activities.

- **The Economy and Employment Hub - ‘WayMark-Essex’ (WME)** - is hosted and supported by Writtle College.
- **The Community Hub** is hosted and supported by the Rural Community Council of Essex
- **The Environment and Conservation Hub** is hosted and supported by Essex County Council’s Waste, Recycling and Environment Service Group.

4.2 In support of rural renaissance, the East of England Development Agency (EEDA) has funded the Essex Rural Renaissance Fund for the last two financial years (£590,000 for 2004/5) to help to finance projects that benefit the economy, community or environment of rural areas. Decisions on the allocation of this funding are made by a panel representing a cross section of organisations working in and for rural communities, businesses and environment.

4.3 Amongst the projects that have been supported are:

- Rural Gateway - A transport scheme to provide the elderly and frail living in rural Tendring to access vital services.
- Bridges to Education - A scheme that helps people from rural areas recovering from mental illness to access education services.

- Martello Tower in Jaywick – Restoration and conversion for use as commercial units, a gallery and for community use.
- Chigwell Row Recreation - This project has renovated and enhanced the public access sports facilities in the area by resurfacing, replacing fencing, nets and play equipment.
- Langham Community Shop - Funds towards the purchase of suitable container to house the shop.
- Various village hall groups have received grants for improvements to their buildings with the aim of continuing existing community activities, providing facilities that will allow the whole community to benefit and perhaps increase usage through improved amenities.
- Restoration of an access bridge that will allow continued management of a remote coastal nature reserve.
- Earls Colne Heritage Museum - Funds were made available to assist with the equipment needed to set up a small community museum.
- Helpline for rural businesses managed by Business Link for Essex.
- Food Market in partnership with Produce of Essex and EEDA
- Village Design Statements, Parish Plans and other community surveys.
- Disabled access to community buildings.
- Village newsletters, web sites and notice boards.
- Website to highlight topical issues and events and house a grants database to facilitate self help.

4.4 In addition to the activities undertaken by the Hubs, members of the ERP have also been furthering the rural strategy through their mainstream activities. Such activities range from supporting public transport in rural areas to providing advice on the conservation of historic buildings or to promoting rural events.

4.5 2005-06 will be the last year in which EEDA makes available the Essex Rural Renaissance Fund. However, this does not mean that funding specifically focusing on Essex rural projects will disappear. There will need to be a smooth transition in order to ensure that rural areas are not disadvantaged and receive an appropriate level of support. There will continue to be opportunities arising from other funding sources that will need to be identified, sought (by developing quality bids) and secured to support Essex rural projects.

5.0 Changing context at national, regional and local level.

5.1 The Government set out its vision of a living, working, protected and vibrant countryside in the **Rural White Paper** (2000) effectively providing the basis for a national strategy. In the following year the devastating outbreak of Foot and Mouth highlighted the interdependency of urban and rural communities and businesses. It affected not only farmers and agricultural processing but also the tourism industry, which, surprisingly, suffered the greatest economic impact.

5.2 Although the Foot and Mouth outbreak was eventually controlled, the countryside continues to undergo changes that either offer opportunities or constitute threats. The mid-term reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) announced in June 2003 breaks the link between support payments and

production. Instead it requires farmers to maintain land in good agricultural and environmental condition linked to Agri-Environment Entry Level and Higher Tier schemes. Set-aside has been retained and made more flexible so that it can be used more effectively to achieve environmental objectives and support is offered for the production of energy crops. Generally, the reformed CAP provides greater support for farm management that uses creative thinking and partnership projects to manage land for food production, amenity and conservation purposes and delivers environmental benefits.

5.3 The 2001 census shows that substantial numbers of people continue to move from urban areas into the countryside, villages and rural towns. Nevertheless, rural services are still in decline. As regards the rural economy, the structure of rural employment and business continues to shift away from traditional rural enterprises to the service and other sectors. More than 80% of the rural workforce is employed in distribution, wholesale, retail, hotels, catering, public administration, health, education, manufacturing, property and business/financial services.

5.4 Within this context the Government undertook **a review of the Rural White Paper's policies** complemented by **a parallel review of rural delivery mechanisms**. The latter was carried out by Lord Haskins and published in November 2003. It emphasises the devolution of delivery to regional and local levels, citing the key roles of the local authorities and rural community councils.

5.5 Part of the Government's response to Lord Haskins' report was an immediate review of rural funding schemes. This reported in July 2004 with a series of recommendations that aim to:

- Create simpler, more accessible funding schemes for Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) clients;
- Improve customer support through more proactive and professional advisory services, with more decision making devolved to the regional and local level;
- Improve investment decisions and reduce the number of funding schemes to make resource allocation choices easier, more transparent and priorities clearer to both customers and the public.

The new system should make it easier to inform potential beneficiaries of the available funding support and encourage the take up of opportunities.

5.6 In July 2004 the review culminated in a new national '**Rural Strategy 2004**'. This establishes the Government's priorities as:

1. **Economic and Social Regeneration** – supporting enterprise across rural England, but targeting greater resources at areas of greatest need.
2. **Social Justice for All** – tackling rural social exclusion wherever it occurs and providing fair access to services and opportunities for all rural people.
3. **Enhancing the Value of our Countryside** – protecting the natural

environment for this and future generations.

5.7 The strategy sets out proposals for the reform of rural delivery mechanisms:

a) The multitude of funding schemes will be reduced to three:

- Rural Regeneration
- Agriculture and Food Industry Regeneration
- Natural Resource Protection

b) The Business Link service will be improved to meet rural needs and a fundamental review will be undertaken of the role of the five statutory, producer levy-funded organisations covering the various agricultural sectors (meat, milk, cereals, potatoes and horticulture).

c) Defra will assume full responsibility for rural and environmental policy functions and will devolve delivery. There will be a transition to an Integrated Agency (see f) and the potential of local authorities to deliver locally will be tested.

d) There will be better mainstreaming of the Government's response to rural socio-economic needs, and better targeting of deprivation in rural areas that are lagging, through the devolution of decision-making to regions and of funding to Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). Regional Rural Affairs Forums will be encouraged to provide a strong regional voice and key stakeholders such as local authorities will be included in the regional decision making process. In the East of England, the Forum has drawn up a Regional Rural Delivery Framework that aims to establish delivery processes that align regional rural priorities with mainstream strategies, plans and activities.

e) Regional decision making on the delivery of social and economic regeneration will be devolved to RDAs, working in close partnership with local authorities and others. This will help address regional variations in a more sophisticated way but must be undertaken within a strong performance management framework. To provide challenge and fresh thinking on rural solutions, the Countryside Agency will be refocused as a New Countryside Agency – a small expert body providing expert advice to government and advocacy on behalf of rural people and businesses.

f) English Nature, the landscape, access and recreation part of the Countryside Agency, and the environmental functions of the Rural Development Service will be brought together into an Integrated Agency with a remit across England's rural, urban and marine environment.

g) All delivery bodies are to seek to work in partnership to achieve sustainable outcomes regardless of their primary economic, social or environmental remit.

5.8 The new Rural Strategy 2004 is welcomed. It should succeed in delivering more locally directed, better co-ordinated, less confusing and well targeted support for rural residents and businesses. Clearly, regional and sub-regional organisations must be pro-active in establishing their contribution to the proposed new arrangements.

5.9 The new **Planning Policy Statement 7 (PPS7) provides national guidance on planning policy in rural areas**. It is based on the principles of sustainable development, taking a positive approach to ensure that rural society and economy are as healthy as the environment. The PPS establishes some key principles for development in rural areas:

- Decisions on applications should be based on sustainable development principles.
- Good quality, well sited development within towns and villages should be permitted where it benefits the local economy and/or community; benefits the local environment and fits other planning policies.
- Accessibility should be a key consideration in all development decisions.
- To protect the countryside, new building should not generally be allowed in the open countryside or outside areas allocated for development.
- Preference should be given to the re-use of brownfield sites where available and where they are able to be developed sustainably.
- All development should be well designed, in scale and sensitive to locally distinctive character.

5.10 This positive approach to planning policy is welcomed. Planning policy and its application is key to the regeneration of rural areas. It unlocks not only the ability to make physical changes but, in some cases, the eligibility for grant funding. Whilst a balance must be achieved, often there is a tendency to maintain the status quo. This is not helpful to the need for change, which may have to be radical in some locations.

5.11 Small and medium sized enterprises in parts of Essex (Tendring, Maldon, Castle Point, Southend on Sea and Thurrock) are eligible for funding under the DTI's Selective Finance for Investment (this is likely to be effected by the Rural Strategy 2004 – see 5.6 above). To qualify the project must involve expenditure on fixed assets, such as property, plant and machinery and demonstrate a regional or national benefit. Funding is only available to projects which otherwise would not be able to go ahead. Although not essential, job creation is desirable, to demonstrate the overall quality of the project, in which case, workforce skills levels will be an essential consideration.

5.12 Further support is available to the area of Tendring District through Article 4 of Defra's Public Service Agreement. This identifies the north east of Essex as an area meriting special assistance. Although this does not make any additional funding available, it effectively moves projects submitted from the area to a higher priority when seeking external funding.

5.13 Regionally, the key areas of policy are the Regional Economic Strategy, Regional Spatial Strategy and Regional Environment Strategy. The East of England Development Agency is establishing a centre of excellence for rural and urban renaissance to disseminate good practice around the region.

5.14 The **Regional Economic Strategy** (RES) sets the direction for the sustainable economic development of the East of England to around 2021. The vision for the region is:

‘a leading economy, founded on our world-class knowledge base and the creativity and enterprise of our people, in order to improve the quality of life of all who live and work here.’

5.15 The goals that have been identified for the RES are as follows:

- Goal 1: a skills base that can support a world class economy
- Goal 2: growing competitiveness, productivity and entrepreneurship
- Goal 3: global leadership in developing and realising innovation in science, technology and research
- Goal 4: high quality places to work and live
- Goal 5: social inclusion and broad participation in the regional economy
- Goal 6: making the most from the development of international gateways and national and regional transport corridors
- Goal 7: a leading information society
- Goal 8: an exemplar in environmental technologies and efficient resource use.

5.16 In order to bring rural support into the mainstream of regional policy and prevent it being marginalized, no separate rural goal or policy is included within the RES. Instead, it has been subject to rural proofing.

5.17 **Draft East of England Plan** (Regional Spatial Strategy 14 – RSS14) - sets out a draft spatial strategy to guide development in the East of England for at least the next 20 years – housing, economic development, the environment, transport, sport and recreation, waste development, mineral extraction etc. One of the key influences has been the Government’s *Sustainable Communities Plan*. The Plan sets out a long-term programme of action for delivering sustainable communities in both urban and rural areas. Its aims include tackling housing supply issues in the South East and East of England through accelerating the rate of supply and increasing the amount of affordable housing. The Plan identifies four ‘growth areas’ of which three (Thames Gateway, the London- Stansted-Cambridge corridor and Milton Keynes-South Midlands) lie partially within the East of England. In addition, the government wants to see an additional runway built at Stansted by the beginning of the next decade. The Plan has been the subject of public consultation from December 2004 and will be subject to an examination in public during 2005.

5.18 The Government’s proposals have very significant consequences for Essex and the scale of future development remains to be settled. Currently, some Essex councils and partner organisations are resisting excessive amounts of new

development, which the sub-region does not have the infrastructure capacity to support and which would require building on parts of its important countryside assets. The impact would be felt most in the precious green spaces within south Essex and the attractive landscape of the M11 corridor.

5.19 Selected objectives of the draft East of England Plan are summarised as:

- Achieve a more sustainable balance between workers and jobs, generally reducing the need to travel;
- Improve access to employment and services for the disadvantaged;
- Enhance cultural diversity recognising varied sub-regional needs;
- Sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres;
- Better utilise brownfield sites for new development
- Provide sufficient affordable housing;
- Protect and enhance the natural, built and historic environment;
- Minimise the demand for and use of resources;
- Minimise the risk of flooding.

5.20 The **Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004** has introduced a new planning system for England. Structure and Local Plans will no longer be produced. Instead the East of England Plan will have a statutory basis and will be prepared by the Regional Assembly. At a local level, unitary and district councils will prepare Local Development Documents. County Councils will provide advice to the Regional Assembly, which for Essex will focus in particular on the planning strategy and its delivery for sub-regions. The draft East of England Plan identifies Thames Gateway South Essex, London-Stansted-Peterborough Corridor and the Haven Gateway as sub-regions in part or whole in Essex. As with the RES, the draft Plan has no specifically rural section but 'mainstream' policies will be rural proofed.

5.21 For the first time, the East of England has a **Regional Environment Strategy**, which has been produced by the East of England Regional Assembly (EERA) and the East of England Environment Forum (EEEF). This recognises that the environment is fundamental to the region's quality of life and has strategic aims that can be summarised as follows:

- Accommodating growth whilst protecting and enhancing the environment
- Making travel more sustainable
- Adjusting to climate change, recognising threats and opportunities
- Reducing demands on resources and reducing pollution
- Encouraging the growth of renewable energy and the environmental economy
- Delivering more sustainable agriculture and enhancing biodiversity
- Conserving and enhancing landscape and townscape character and the historic environment

5.22 Again, whilst not specifically identifying rural areas, there are clearly very strong policy implications.

5.23 Agricultural waste is not covered by national waste management controls. However, in order to comply with European Directives, new regulations are being proposed. These will apply the same controls to farming that already apply to all other sectors. The overall aim is to improve standards of waste storage, handling, transport recovery and disposal in order to protect the environment and human health. The consequence will be that more agricultural waste will need to be handled away from farms, with implications for transportation and waste management.

5.24 The Government's Sustainable Farming and Food Strategy was published in December 2002. It sets out a national vision for the future of the food and farming sectors but leaves implementation to be developed through regional Delivery Plans. That for the East of England has been created by a partnership led by EEDA. The programme of actions that will be addressed by the partnership covers six main areas of work:

1. Education and Skills

- Skills sets available in rural businesses often require up-dating.
- There is an out-migration of young people but food and farming businesses find it difficult to recruit technical and managerial staff.
- There is a desire to re-connect consumers with the source of their food and improve understanding of the links between diet and health.

2. Rural Economy

- Encouragement of farm diversification, and developing new products and services.

3. Business Support

- Development of focused support that meets the diverse needs of businesses in this sector.

4. Innovation

- Development of stronger links between researchers and business managers to benefit from the regional concentration of R&D.

5. Agri-environment

- Increase the quantity and quality of environmental protection initiatives, emphasising the Entry Level Scheme, water management and co-ordinated action by groups of farms.

6. Rural Communities

- Facilitate provision of affordable housing so that those who work in farming and food can afford houses within the local community.

5.25 As already described, each Essex local authority is in the process of developing and implementing a local community strategy. For the administrative county (Essex County Council area), there is an Essex Community Strategy (*Shaping the Future of Essex*) providing the overall

strategic framework within which organizations and agencies will operate. The key aspects of the strategy's vision are:

- Active, diverse, safe and sustainable communities for all;
- People who can lead active and independent lives with fewer health inequalities
- An innovative and sustainable economy with skilled employees
- Sustainable transport and a reduced need to travel
- Accessible, responsive and reliable public, private and voluntary services
- Diverse and high-quality environment in which resources are conserved
- Better access to a range of leisure and learning opportunities.

5.26 As with other strategies, rural areas are not dealt with separately but are predominantly covered by generic policies. However, policies have been framed with reference to the needs of the rural community, economy and environment. Nevertheless, there are a number of aims that deal specifically with rural issues.

- Make sure housing developments plan for a mix of price levels and a broad, diverse community, providing community facilities especially in rural areas.
- Help people in rural areas to develop their skills to cope with the changes to employment opportunities in the countryside, including farm diversification.
- Expand IT use around the area extending the availability of broadband, particularly in the countryside, to support the development of rural businesses.
- Work to provide regular, reliable public transport, affordable by and accessible to everyone, with particular attention to the needs of young people, older people and rural communities
- Press for new developments to use up as little as possible of the countryside or of green spaces in towns

5.27 This Essex Rural Strategy provides the spatial dimension to the 'Shaping the Future' vision as it applies to rural areas. The priorities for the Essex Rural Strategy that are identified in section 8. below, reflect the overall community strategy and the more specific aims listed above.

5.28 In addition to '*Shaping the Future*', there are local community strategies for each part of Essex. These will provide an extra dimension for delivery projects that have a strong local element. In such cases, rural delivery projects will need to support the achievement of the local community agenda. It is important that all community strategies are subject to rural proofing, guidance on which has been published by the Countryside Agency as, '*Local Strategic Partnership and Community Strategy rural checklist*'.

5.29 In south Essex, the TGSE has its own strategic framework (*Delivering the Future*) that identifies the priority actions that are needed to deliver the sub-regional vision. Broadly, action and investment will be required to:

- Support the sustainable urban regeneration of **Basildon**
- Support the renaissance of **Southend**
- Achieve the vision for **Thurrock**
- Improve and enhance the sustainability of **Castle Point**
- Develop **Rochford** as an area for leisure, recreation and tourism activity

The Environment section of the strategic framework takes a positive approach to enhancing the rural and riverside parts of the sub-region in support of the overall strategy. See paragraph. 2.2 above.

5.30 Clearly the future context in which the Essex Rural Strategy will operate is very complex. Delivery arrangements are in a state of flux, agricultural support has undergone a change of emphasis, planning policy advice has become more positive and pressures for further development are significant in some parts of Essex. As referred to above, rural Essex is by no means uniform with regard to the way in which the context will impinge upon it. Neither is it homogenous in terms of the policy response. The priorities listed in Section 8 below will need to be interpreted in relation to local circumstances. However, in whatever manifestation they appear, it is important that environmental issues are given due weight and are recognised as offering positive opportunities to enhance the quality of life in the area. The future of Essex must be truly sustainable, which can only result from an objective balance between economic growth, social well-being, environmental conservation and resource management.

6.0 Profile of rural Essex

6.1 Essex, undoubtedly, is an area of great diversity. Certainly, in terms of land area, it is **predominantly rural with 72% of the land area used for agriculture**. The relationship between countryside and town is complex and symbiotic so that rural development may depend upon opportunities that arise in towns (and vice-versa). Consequently, this strategy does not attempt to delineate 'rural' Essex.

6.2 In attempting to draw a profile of rural Essex difficulties are immediately apparent. Published statistics do not generally distinguish between urban and rural areas but utilise local authority boundaries. This merging of urban and rural disguises trends that are happening in each. However, the 2001 Census is well on the way to full publication, providing data down to small units. **One priority for further work on developing the strategy must be an analysis of the Census in comparison, where possible, with that undertaken in 1991.** This will provide clearer definition of some of the points raised in this strategy.

6.3 Community

6.3.1 Most Essex villages exude an air of prosperity. For many rural residents appearance and reality are at one. However, **prosperity and well-being depend,**

at least in part, upon access to opportunities - shops, hospitals, schools, employment, recreational facilities etc. Such opportunities can either lie relatively close at hand, as in the urban situation or require significant journeys either by private or public transport. **Increasingly, declining usage and rising thresholds of provision are removing basic services from villages.** This trend has resulted in a, predominantly rural, phenomenon by which affluence and deprivation may exist side-by-side in the same communities. Nationally, during the 1990's about one third of rural residents had at least one spell when their incomes fell below half of mean income. Social exclusion in rural areas is often experienced by the elderly and sick, by young people, because of the lack of suitable employment and access to leisure facilities, and by physically and mentally disabled people. It may also be experienced by ethnic minorities and women. In the case of the latter, exclusion may result from lack of access to private transport and inadequate child care provision. To address these problems better access is required, especially to affordable housing, family support and to suitable employment opportunities.

6.3.2 The 2000 Countryside Agency survey of parish services showed that, **in Essex, 40% of parishes were without a Post Office.** Even more, **67%, lacked a general store,** whilst **63% did not have a public house.** There were **79% of parishes without a Doctors' surgery** but only **19% without a village hall.** For 2004, an update shows that around 12% of rural households are more than 4 kilometres from a doctors' surgery; 22% more than 4 kilometres from a supermarket and 29% from a bank or building society. In order better to deal with the loss of services, more research is required on trends and underlying causes.

6.3.3 **Parishes without these basic facilities are especially disadvantaged as even the simplest requirement necessitates a journey to another settlement.** Essex has many very small settlements, sometimes with only a few houses, that present a real problem to service in conventional ways. The improving availability of Broadband (which will probably reach such settlements last) may, in the longer term, facilitate information provision and the use of Internet shopping. Even in households with access to a car, there may well be family members (teenagers, mothers with children, the elderly) who are not personally mobile. Whilst the East of England region has the highest mean car ownership per household in rural areas (1.88 vehicles) compared to other English regions there remain **16.5% of rural households that do not own a car or van.**

6.3.4 Loss of services and facilities has not been confined to minor settlements. Smaller Essex market towns, in common with many nationwide, have experienced a loss of shops and other services. Factors responsible include the development of large out-of-town retail centres, offering choice and cost advantages, and the increasing willingness/ability of consumers to travel further to shop. Declining profits and, consequently, re-investment together with empty retail units can further damage the appeal of local centres and start a spiral of decline. However, market towns remain important to rural areas as key centres for retailing, leisure, services, transport links and information. It is important that they are supported and encouraged to improve the offer that they make to potential users.

6.3.5 Nationally, there have been numerous successful projects that have been based upon identifying local strengths (such as environmental quality or specialist retailers) and developing the 'product' by diversifying the appeal of the centre

(developing an annual programme of events for example) together with improved town centre management, co-operation amongst retailers and targeted marketing. Despite the decline in regional funding for the Market Towns Initiative the benefits to the towns of working together was recognised. Consequently, the original four towns covered by the initiative (Harwich, Walton, Brightlingsea and Manningtree/Mistley/Lawford) together with Maldon, Burnham, Saffron Walden and Rochford (and others may follow) have established an Essex network to compare good practice.

6.3.6 Despite the lack of services, rural areas continue to be popular as places to live. Between 1981 and 2001, the rural population in the East of England as a whole increased by 17.8% to 2.35 million. In contrast to towns, rural areas offer green surroundings, space, peace and quiet. Consequently, rural house prices tend to be higher than those in urban areas. Median house prices for rural East of England rose by 24% during 2001/02 to £123,654, and were slightly above the median for rural England in 2002 (£121,468). Undoubtedly, **house price inflation since then will have taken rural prices far out of the reach of many young people brought up in the countryside. At the same time, the rural population is ageing.** In the East of England, 43.9% of the rural population are aged 45 and over compared to 38.8% of the urban population.

6.3.7 Two useful sources of information about rural deprivation are the Index of Deprivation 2000 and the, revised, Index of Deprivation 2004. However, even these are limited in their ability to identify hidden deprivation in rural areas where the disadvantaged are not easily distinguishable at a Ward (or Super Output Area in the 2004 edition) level from the prosperous. The main index of multiple deprivation is not a useful measure in rural areas because of the dispersed nature of rural poverty. However, **the measure of 'Access to Services' in the 2000 Index and of 'Access to Housing and Services' in the 2004 Index show virtually all of rural Essex within England's most deprived categories.** For other measures, rural Tendring registers high deprivation scores for health and, to a lesser extent, employment and housing. Parts of rural Maldon and Rochford score badly for education, income and housing.

6.3.8 Many people living in the countryside have a negative perception of crime as an issue for rural areas. To some extent this may be due to the profile given to rural crime in local and national media. Although there are some countryside specific crimes such as theft of livestock and farm equipment and damage to wildlife, statistically, rural areas have lower crime rates than urban areas. However, it is conceivable that this reflects levels of reporting rather than actual crime. The British Crime Survey shows a reduction in most crimes measured between 1995 and 1999. For violence, burglary and vehicle-related theft, there were falls in both rural and urban areas. Burglary and vehicle-related theft have also fallen in both types of area since 1990. The fall in crime (1995-1999) in rural areas was similar to or faster than in urban areas.

6.3.9 Regardless of, generally, falling crime levels and lower levels of fear of crime than those recorded for urban dwellers, rural areas do have crime problems that need to be addressed. Five out of nine police divisions in Essex qualify for Government funding for rural policing. Essex Police use these funds to increase visibility and accessibility to policing services. Recent initiatives have include a

mobile police office, enhanced office support for officers dealing with rural areas and improved cross boundary co-operation with other forces.

6.3.10 Despite some of the difficulties experienced by people who live in rural areas, the sense of community can remain strong. The spirit of volunteering remains alive and this can prove a valuable resource. The Local Government Association inquiry *Achieving Rural Revival* (February 2003) recognised both the strengths and issues, '...the voluntary and community sector plays a major role in the life and well-being of rural communities but is overstretched and under resourced...it is crucial that these initiatives [to support the sector] are co-ordinated to increase rural community capacity building...'. In a more recent report produced by the Home Office (*Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure – September 2003*) key issues for rural volunteering were identified:

- Dispersion and accessibility;
- Small communities with a lack of 'critical mass' of volunteers;
- Generally higher costs of physical and service infrastructure per head of population;
- Higher levels of self-help/community delivery of services required or expected in order to make services viable;
- Evidence showing low levels of networking between groups and communities and some resistance to 'outside' support;
- Low take up of training and ICT.

In order to ensure that the important role of voluntary and community organisations is fully realised, the Rural Strategy will need to support them wherever possible.

6.3.11 The Government's ***Sustainable Communities Plan*** proposes very significant levels of new housing development that will have to be accommodated, at least in part, in rural Essex. There is a real danger that these proposed new developments will lack adequate employment to achieve anything approaching sustainability. The challenge will be to provide an appropriate range and quantity of jobs to deter commuting and provide further opportunities for existing residents.

6.3.12 The growth of Stansted, certainly if an additional runway is constructed, also poses a threat to the present character of north and west Essex. In addition to the housing that will be required to support airport and airport related employment, new transport infrastructure and the disturbance of aircraft over-flying, inevitably, will degrade enjoyment of the countryside.

6.4 Economy

6.4.1 Employment in agriculture and fishing has been in long-term decline and now represents only 1.3% of jobs in Essex. In 2001 there were 3,886 agricultural holdings in Essex. The industry that has shaped Essex in so many ways is going through enormous changes with many farmers diversifying; the common option being a change in use of farm buildings, be it for storage, office space, holiday lets or to accommodate an alternate business of their own. At the same time, other,

former commercial properties within villages (such as shops, public houses or workshops) are often given permission to convert to residential use. With planning constraints on the development of new sites for commercial use, this can lead to a steady decline in the possibility of diversifying village economies.

6.4.2 The reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, which came into operation from January 2005, decouples subsidy from the production of agricultural produce. As a result, farmers will be better able to produce what the market requires without consideration for the levels of subsidy. It should reduce the environmental impact of farming by removing the incentive created by subsidies to use intense and un-sustainable production methods. The positive aspect will be to link subsidy to compliance with environmental and other standards. It is possible that the reforms will also result in a further, undesirable, decline in farm employment. The environmental impacts of CAP reform are considered further under section 6.5.4 below.

6.4.3 With the decline in agriculture, the service sector has become the most dominant rural industry. Tourism is especially prominent as a new source of rural employment. In the East of England, the distribution, hotels and restaurant sector constitutes just over a quarter of all rural employment.

6.4.4 Rural locations, increasingly, are attracting a diverse range of businesses, comparable with more urban locations. This trend can only be enhanced by the increasing use of eCommerce and electronic communications. **In 2001, there were 406 businesses per 10,000 of the population in the rural East of England, an increase from 396 in 2000.** Of these, 86.1% were micro and small businesses with less than 9 employees. These represent a wide mixture of business sectors including high value businesses that can place importance on 'quality of life' because they require little more than access to electronic communication facilities.

6.4.5 One unique asset that the north of the county enjoys is its location on a major strategic European route. The E30 Moscow to Cork highway follows the A120 through Essex. Through Harwich this provides excellent links to continental Europe and westwards into central England. It has the potential to attract businesses, such as those associated with tourism or logistics, for which such connections are important.

6.4.6 Skills levels are an issue across Essex and the region. In 2003, of those of working age in the region's rural districts, **nearly 42.5% had obtained NVQ level 3 or higher qualifications. This is lower than any other region.** The proportion is higher in accessible rural districts (44.5%) than remote rural districts (40.5%).

6.5 Environment

6.5.1 Although less diverse in its underlying structure than some counties, nevertheless, Essex has developed a varied series of habitats based upon, chalk, clay, glacial deposits, alluvium, loams, sands and gravels. This variety is augmented by the incursion of the sea into shallow valleys to form wide estuaries. Imposed upon these landscapes have been various traditional management regimes that have given the area a distinct character. The early enclosure of much of Essex through piecemeal assarts resulted in a small scale landscape of irregular hedged fields with significant tree cover. Since the 1950's this traditional landscape

has been modified to create larger fields more suited to mechanical cultivation. Nevertheless, **Essex retains a significant natural inheritance with old hedgerows, green lanes and areas of ancient woodland that are home to many species of flora and fauna.**

6.5.2 The coast, in particular, is noted for its nature conservation value, enjoying international recognition. Mudflats and saltings provide habitats for huge numbers of wildfowl that are in passage or over-wintering. Species such as redshank, ringed plover, shelduck and brent geese are relatively common. Other than birds, the coastal fringe supports saltmarsh plants and invertebrates that, nationally, are considered to be scarce. Managed realignment of the coastline to recreate intertidal habitats may be both of benefit to biodiversity and to the tourism economy. This latter will depend upon the development of low impact, sustainable, tourism products aimed at specialist markets.

6.5.3 The relative fertility of the land and the coast, together with its proximity to continental Europe resulted in a fairly dense occupation from the earliest times. **Consequently, much archaeological heritage lies just beneath the surface while standing structures such as country houses, churches, farmsteads and cottages add much to the area's character.**

6.5.4 As referred to above, the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy will undoubtedly have environmental implications. However, the critical factor will be how farms react to the new regime and that will take some time to become apparent. In December 2003 an independent report prepared for Defra (*The Potential Environmental Impacts of the CAP Reform Agreement*) identified potential environmental consequences of which the following are most relevant to Essex:

Environmental opportunities:

- A reduction in use of artificial fertilisers and pesticides leading to improvements in water quality and biodiversity.
- An increase in fallow land leading to: a reduction in soil erosion and compaction and pollution of watercourses; increased biodiversity; and reduced damage to archaeological features. (Depends on the management of fallow land).
- Cuts in livestock numbers will reduce greenhouse gas emissions; improve air quality and reduce acidification by reducing ammonia emissions; reduce soil erosion and pollution of water courses by nitrates, slurry and sheep dip;
- Increased incentives for farmers to enter land into agri-environment schemes and increased funding helping to: reduce impacts on soil, air and water; improve habitat management and biodiversity; protect and manage landscape features such as hedgerows and protect archaeological remains. Also potentially increased incentive for the development of scrub and woodland subject to the development of supporting rules and adequate funding.

Environmental threats:

- Specialisation and concentration in some sectors, especially cereals and dairying, leading to localised adverse impacts such as: increases in water pollution; increases in greenhouse gas emissions; soil erosion, compaction and contamination; and increased levels of ammonia and acidification; also loss and degradation of habitats with further declines in biodiversity; and loss and degradation of landscape features.
- Reductions in the labour force and an increase in contract farming leading to: loss of countryside skills and management practices; and loss of local knowledge and stewardship.
- Reduced incentive to enter land into agri-environment and woodland schemes due to insufficient payments resulting in a possible loss of environmental benefits.
- The Single Farm Payment can be transferred or traded. There is uncertainty as to the implications for the environment

6.5.5 In ensuring the continuing economic prosperity of rural areas, addressing problems of deprivation and accommodating future growth, it will be vital to manage change. The character of Essex is not only an important concern to the tourism industry but helps to determine the quality of life of its residents. By doing so, it makes Essex an attractive place in which to live and work, contributing to the sustainability of its economic success. Farming and other primary production has shaped the landscape in the past. Even if primary production becomes a less extensive user of land, the need for management of the landscape will remain.

6.5.6 **Climate change is undoubtedly a threat to Essex.** Every effort must be made to mitigate the risks by reducing the production of greenhouse gases, encouraging energy efficiency and permitting the development of appropriately sited alternative energy production facilities. Even so, climate change is already happening. Increased storm frequency and rises in sea level are inevitable. This poses an increasing risk to Essex coastal communities. Inland, climate change is likely to place stress on natural ecosystems and may result in increased prevalence of pests affecting agricultural crops and human health, in addition to an increased risk of fluvial flooding.

6.5.7 In March 2004, the County Council hosted an important conference on climate change, which identified, comprehensively, the potential impacts. Based on the findings of the conference, a Climate Change Action Plan for Essex is in preparation, led by the Essex Partnership. This identifies responses to the threats such as improved flood defences, sea defence re-alignment, more efficient use and storage of water and improved strategic planning. The ERP has an important role to play in implementing the Action Plan.

7.0 Vision

7.1 To achieve ownership the Strategy must have a vision and priorities that are shared and supported by its partners, together with an underlying vision for the future. The refreshed vision for the Rural Strategy is as follows:

"To create an environmentally and economically sustainable future for rural Essex based upon:

- local diversity and identity, conserving and enhancing the natural, built and historic environment;***
- thriving, economically diverse and inclusive communities that provide a good quality of life for all;***
- increasing bio-diversity and managing the impact of climate change;***
- increasing accessibility to the countryside"***

7.2 In order to achieve this, the Essex Rural Partnership members must work together and integrate their activities. This will require a balance to be struck between new development, whether of housing, employment or infrastructure and the necessity to maintain and enhance environmental quality for the longer term health and prosperity of Essex.

7.3 Five key measures of success for the Rural Strategy will be:
(*The numbers following refer to the 'purpose of the strategy' Paragraph 2.7)*

1. That the partners establish and successfully operate joint projects to deliver the priority actions that have been identified. (3, 4, 7)
2. That local strategic partnerships at the county, unitary and district level are aware of rural issues and priorities and that published community strategies support the Rural Strategy and have actions that recognise the particular circumstances of rural areas. (1, 2, 3, 4, 5)
3. That a balanced spread of 'Quality of Life' indicators (developed by the Central Local (Government) Information Partnership (CLIP) Task Force on Sustainable Development) move in a positive direction. (3, 4)
4. That opportunities such as external funding sources and the European route E30 are recognised and optimised. (1, 2, 5, 6)
5. That planning and other policies achieve a positive attitude to, and outcome for, rural renaissance. (1, 4)

8.0 Identified key delivery priorities

8.1 In March 2004 the annual conference of the Essex Rural Partnership provided the opportunity to consult members on current priorities. Given the difficulties, objectively, of measuring rural trends, to which reference has already been made, the pooled knowledge of rural 'experts' provides an effective alternative. Priorities were identified through the means of three workshops based on the themes of the Hubs - Community, Environment and Economy. Subsequently, priorities have been modified in the light of responses received as a result of the consultation.

Delivery Priorities and Associated Actions

8.2 In order further to refine the priorities identified above, more specific areas of work that need to be undertaken by the partner organisations have been compiled

with the advice of the Hub representatives, supplemented by consultation responses.

1. Improving access to services

Those living in rural areas should not be disadvantaged in respect of access to essential services and facilities.

- a. Support and promote increased access to ICT, especially Broadband, for community and business users.
- b. Assist in developing the use of eCommerce by enterprises based in rural areas by providing access to information and training.
- c. Develop a model of multi-purpose or innovative provision suitable for the delivery of essential services in more isolated rural areas
- d. Develop a method of monitoring access to essential services in rural areas, i.e. applying the Countryside Agency's Rural Service Standard across Essex.
- e. Support the retention of retail and service provision in market towns and key service centres through diversification, raising quality, concentrating on strengths and promoting co-operation between businesses/providers.
- f. Recognise the special needs of excluded groups.

2. Improving availability and accessibility of transport to and from rural areas

Transport to and from rural areas should be available and easy to use.

- a. Ensure there is independent professional support for communities to help them develop local transport projects to meet local needs
- b. Support initiatives which consider and involve partnership-working
- c. Support innovative and sustainable transport solutions, e.g. travel share initiatives
- d. Support community-led transport needs surveys, and projects addressing the needs which are identified.
- e. Maintain rural roads.
- f. Recognise the special needs of excluded groups.

3a. Promoting Essex 1 - General

Present a positive message about Essex and its rural areas as the place to work, live and visit.

- a. Promote the benefits of bringing business and the associated jobs and wealth into rural areas.
- b. Promote the market towns of rural Essex as "service hubs" for their surrounding areas.



6. Improving infrastructure

A holistic approach to planning for rural regeneration; economic and community.

- a. Increase awareness of planning procedures for businesses in rural areas.
- b. Support the diversification of farms and other rural businesses and the appropriate re-use of farm buildings that are not temporary in their form of construction.
- c. Provide assistance for businesses seeking premises in rural locations through encouraging the provision of premises and land for a variety of business purposes.
- d. Promote benefits of affordable housing in rural locations throughout all levels of local government.
- e. Encourage the use of sustainable construction techniques in rural areas through raising awareness of planners and developers.
- f. Manage water so that supplies are adequate to meet needs and that flood risks are minimised.
- g. Endeavour to reduce the fear of crime in rural areas and to maintain the fall in actual crime through policing appropriate to the locality and through community engagement/involvement.

7. Responding to climate change

Reduce greenhouse gas emission and adapt to a changing environment.

- a. Support the implementation of the Climate Change Action Plan for Essex
- b. Promote and encourage resource efficiency and environmental good practice amongst Essex business.
- c. Promote a sustainable approach to infrastructure development particularly with regard to flood risk management.
- d. Develop an education and awareness programme to inform the people of Essex about climate change issues.
- e. Encourage the farming of carbon dioxide neutral fuel crops where this will not negatively affect other environmental assets.

8. Attracting new sources of funding

Increase the value of funds that are available to support improvements to the quality of life in rural Essex.

- a. Develop an understanding amongst all support agencies about the funding streams available to them and work together to disseminate this information.
- b. Create a one stop shop for funding information.
- c. Ensure that the relevant partner organisations can secure adequate long-term funding to achieve the objectives set out in this strategy

- d. Plan for a smooth transition to other funding streams once the Essex Rural Renaissance Fund finishes at the end of 2005-06.

9. Actively encouraging community involvement

We must encourage more people, especially 'hard to reach groups' to become more involved in their local communities.

- a. Support community businesses through existing specialist support provision working hand in hand with community based support organisations.
- b. Ensure there is effective long-term professional support for community development on an Essex-wide basis
- c. Ensure the outcomes of local community participation initiatives will be recognised in the preparation of (statutory) community strategies and local development frameworks
- d. Design a specific programme of training to promote the concept of 'Community Leadership'
- e. Support more Parish Councils, especially those representing smaller communities, in seeking Quality Status

10. Conservation and enhancement of the built, natural and historic environment

Improve the quality of life of rural residents, attract visitors and increase environmental sustainability by improvements to our built, natural and historic heritage.

- a. Support landowners and farmers in maximising the environmental opportunities offered by the Common Agricultural Policy reforms.
- b. Support measures to increase bio-diversity.
- c. Support the retention of landscape features of environmental or historic value.
- d. Conserve the environment of rural settlements ensuring that new development is sympathetic to local scale and character.
- e. Help to identify new uses for historic buildings.
- f. Reduce the level of light pollution.
- g. Support measures to protect and conserve the historic environment.

11. Increasing the availability of affordable housing

We must increase the availability of affordable housing to enable young people to continue living in their local community. The provision of affordable housing is a critical factor in supporting rural employment, communities and enterprise.

- a. Promote the benefits of affordable housing, highlighting benefits to community and local business.

- b. Ensure there is independent professional support for communities, helping them to identify local housing need in their village and form partnerships with key agencies to develop affordable housing schemes
- c. Ensure there is a sustained commitment to meeting local housing needs in villages from strategic authorities, when attention and resources are inevitably focussed on the new growth areas
- d. Promote the growth of sustainable communities across Essex including appropriate development in the Green Belt to meet local needs
- e. Promote innovative projects that meet local needs, e.g. buildings which provide affordable housing and other key services or facilities (e.g. affordable flats above a room(s) for public use)

12. Ensuring that the Planning system is responsive to the needs of rural regeneration

Ensure that sustainable and appropriate development is facilitated in order to maintain rural vitality.

- a. Improve liaison between planning tiers by developing an ongoing informal forum, through the Essex Planning Officers' Association.
- b. Develop a model to ensure effective long-term community involvement in the local planning system in the context of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004.
- c. Support the use of sustainable construction techniques.
- d. Support the diversification of farms and other rural businesses and the appropriate re-use of farm buildings that are not temporary in their form of construction.
- e. Discourage the conversion of commercial premises in villages to residential use.

13. Education and awareness of the rural environment

Encourage better understanding of rural issues and the value of the countryside.

- a. Work in partnership to raise awareness of the Essex countryside and environment.
- b. Supporting the activities of volunteer groups and encouraging community participation wherever possible.

14. Exerting influence on policy and ensuring a co-ordinated approach to rural delivery.

Raise awareness of rural Essex, encourage a positive policy framework and improve delivery.

- a. Develop improved links with the Regional Rural Affairs Forum, East of England Development Agency, East of England Regional Assembly,

- GO-East and other appropriate organisations; utilising them to actively promote Essex priorities.
- b. Respond to appropriate consultation opportunities on regional and local policy documents.
- c. Encourage improved flows of information and co-operative ventures between partners.
- d. Focus on and monitor a small number of joint projects that will add value to the Partnership.

15. Undertaking research and analysis to inform policy and delivery.

Improve understanding of rural issues and opportunities.

- a. Identify data on rural Essex that will inform policy and delivery, including information produced by the new, national Rural Evidence Research Centre.
- b. Develop a programme of research, analysis and dissemination (including resources) to improve policy and delivery.

9.0 Delivery

9.1 Section 8. above lists the key priorities and associated actions that have been identified by the partner organisations. In moving the Strategy forward, the commitment of the Essex Rural Partnership members is vital. Other organisations that are not included within the partnership may also have a role to play and the partners would welcome their contribution.

9.2 The Essex Rural Partnership will really add value if it can bring together partners to pool resources and expertise and to develop joint projects that otherwise would not be realised. The priority actions that have been identified cover the broad spectrum of the partners' activities. Consequently, all of the partners should be able to identify activities to which they can contribute. In particular, they are asked to review their operations in the light of the opportunities for co-operation that arise through the partnership. This should help to focus on new and innovative projects that build upon the opportunities offered by the Partnership itself. Subsequently, the identified projects will need to be worked up into a detailed specification as an Action Plan. This will identify:

- the purpose of the project and the intended beneficiaries
- the fit between the project and the identified Essex Rural Strategy priorities
- the benefits of the project in terms of Community Strategies
- the added value of the project (its benefit as a multi-partner initiative that would not otherwise happen)
- the area of Essex to be covered
- local partners/other organisations that should be consulted and involved in the project
- a process for involving potential beneficiaries in the design and operation of

- the project
- outcomes, how they will be measured and targets
- timescale
- partner organisations that will take forward the project, including a lead partner
- the resources required and from where they might be obtained

10. Restructuring the Essex Rural Partnership to achieve effective delivery

10.1 The extensive consultation process that has led to this final version of the Essex Rural Strategy also highlighted a number of strengths and weaknesses in the Partnership structure. These can be summarised as follows:

10.2 The Essex Rural Partnership

Identified strengths

- broad representation of interests and delivery agencies;
- good forum to allow an exchange of views;
- opportunity:
 - to provide a collective voice
 - to draw in resources
 - to raise the profile of rural Essex
 - to co-ordinate delivery

Identified weaknesses

- Lack of direction;
- Administration and guidance of Partnership is insufficiently resourced;
- Variable commitment from the partners;
- Poor communication to organisations outside of the Partnership.

10.3 The Hubs

Identified strengths

- Provide greater focus on important themes;
- Successful in identifying funding opportunities and administering funding for projects.

Identified weaknesses

- Poor communication between Hubs and the wider Partnership;

- Ineffective in co-ordinating delivery;
- The management of Hubs is inadequately resourced.

10.4 In order to retain the strengths of the Partnership, whilst addressing the weaknesses, it is proposed that some changes be made to the structure and membership. At the same time, and as outlined in section 5 above, the context both nationally and regionally is undergoing a process of change. This offers the Partnership opportunities to achieve a higher profile within the region through representation on the East of England Rural Affairs Forum. Working with GO-East, EEDA and other regional organisations, there is the opportunity both to influence and to implement the Regional Rural Delivery Framework. Finally, there is the possibility better to co-ordinate funding opportunities in order to draw further resources into the area and to influence the use of mainstream funds. However, in becoming more aware of the regional agenda, the Partnership must not neglect its roots which are set in individual rural communities. Consequently, the Partnership must achieve effective communication with local councils and stakeholders throughout rural Essex.

10.5 Having set the priorities for the partners, this final version of the Essex Rural Strategy provides the framework for further discussion on the future structure. The new structure will be agreed and established during 2005.

The information contained in this report is available in large print, Braille, audio tape or disk. You can contact us for a copy in an alternative format or if you have any queries on its contents:

By telephone:

Keith Blackburn on 01245 437558

By post:

Planning Service Group (KB)
Essex County Council Freepost CL 3636
Chelmsford
Essex
CM1 1QH

By email:

Keith.Blackburn@essexcc.gov.uk

Published in July 2005.

Printed on environmentally responsible paper.