

Rural White Paper for the East of England

# Vibrant Rural Communities

*Unlocking the Potential of the East of England's Rural Areas*

## Summary



East of England Rural Forum

September 2010

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## Unlocking the Potential of the East of England's Rural Areas

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### Introduction

The East of England Rural Forum (EERF) is a voluntary group which exists to debate, champion and promote rural issues and solutions. Its membership includes representatives from councils, business and community interests across the East of England. The Forum developed this paper to synthesise the multitude of issues which it has debated in recent years into an overarching vision for rural areas.

Most of the issues faced by rural areas are not unique in their nature but the way in which they are expressed or the solutions which are needed, are often different to those in urban areas.

The paper is however, not only focused on the needs of rural areas, it also explains how rural areas can play a larger role in the life of the East of England. Rural areas are dynamic, progressive and contain vibrant communities. As the country emerges from recession many of the lessons from rural areas have relevance across the country and the paper therefore explains how, with the right support, rural areas can become models of dynamic, progressive and engaged communities.

**A key issue which underlies the whole paper is the need for rural areas to support balanced and sustainable growth.** Balanced in the sense that rural areas should support a healthy demographic mix, provide opportunity for people to live and work locally in good quality homes and jobs and enhancing the environment not using it as a reason to stop all development.

Given the range of issues with which any paper of this nature has to deal, it is always dangerous to highlight particular issues. However, in developing the paper, three issues were repeatedly raised in different contexts and by different people, namely the need for:

- **digital inclusion** so that rural areas benefit from the opportunities presented by the web to address skills, employment, access to services and social issues;
- **rural economic growth** so that rural areas can match the ongoing increase in the rural population with new sustainable jobs in high value sectors;
- **a positive approach to demographic change** by ensuring that housing, services and economic opportunity allow people of all ages, backgrounds and skills to thrive in rural communities.

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## Rural East of England

The Rural East of England is incredibly diverse from the open skies and sparse coastal populations along the North Sea coast, through rich river valleys and historic market towns to the urban fringe areas of Essex and Hertfordshire. All of these areas are distinctive, rich in history but also progressive and continue to change as society changes.

In recent years, rural areas have seen a faster growth in knowledge based businesses than urban areas, have higher rates of self employment but have also seen a big increase in two way commuting with those in higher paid roles living in rural areas but working elsewhere and many lower paid rural workers living in towns and commuting to the countryside to work.

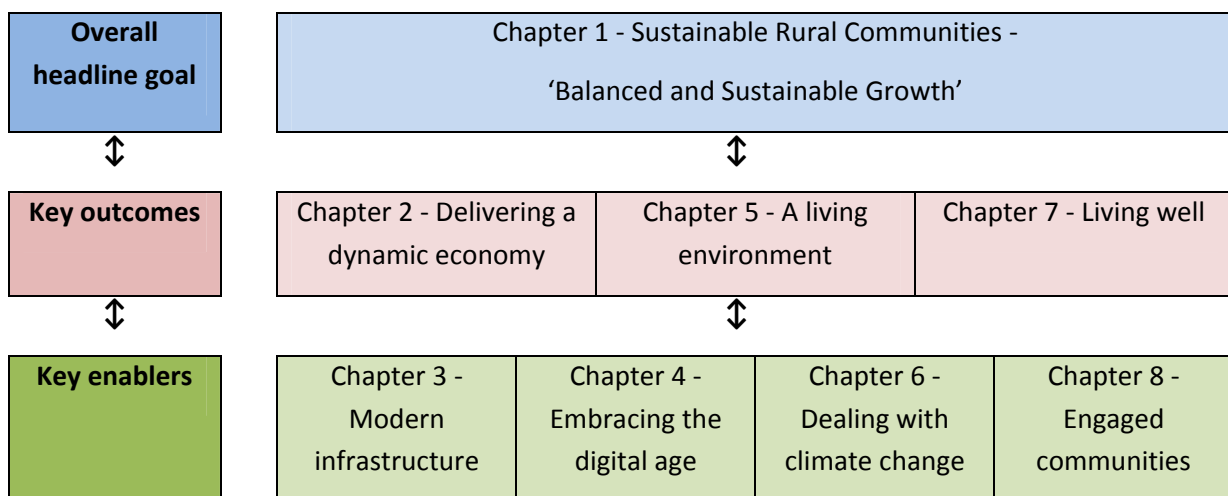
The East of England is one of the fastest growing parts of the country with the most rural counties of Norfolk and Suffolk seeing some of the biggest percentage increases in population. This, coupled with an increase in second homes, has put real pressure on the supply of affordable housing, with some coastal areas now having average house prices which are 10 times local average earnings.

As the rural economy has changed many rural residents have moved into new careers but there are still many pockets of income deprivation and areas with low qualification levels. Across all rural areas, there are people who are disadvantaged but the dispersed nature and larger spread of wealth in rural communities means that rural deprivation is underreported in official data.

The East of England has a predominantly farmed landscape, with 75% of the region's land farmed and a further 7% in forestry. Whilst the region's farms are larger and more commercial than in many other areas, they are also amongst the most likely to be in environmental schemes. The region is also blessed with an internationally significant concentration of agri-food research centres. The East of England has a distinctive and diverse bio-diversity and also has an extensive stock of historic market towns and country properties. As an attractive and accessible area, the East of England has also seen an increase in countryside tourism and future projections indicate that this will continue.

## Structure of the Paper

The paper is structured into a series of chapters which deals with the following rural issues:



The rest of this summary paper deals with the headline issues identified in each chapter.

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### Chapter 1 - Sustainable Rural Communities

As the cross cutting theme of the paper, the need for sustainable rural communities is at the heart of the Forum's vision for rural East of England. As a rapidly growing region, the East of England is likely to see continued growth of the economy and population but the Rural Forum is concerned that most plans for this growth assume that economic growth will be concentrated in urban areas. Against a backdrop of continued rural population growth, at rates faster than that seen in urban areas, this can only mean more commuting, less community cohesion and a lack of sustainability.

**For rural communities to be sustainable they must have affordable housing, good employment and access to services.** We have to reverse the trend, particularly in more accessible rural areas, for towns and villages to become wealthy dormitories for urbanites. We also have to embrace the need for smaller rural settlements to grow so that they can sustain services and community activities.

Addressing these challenges requires improvements in the planning system coupled to changes in public opinion so that rural areas are seen as viable locations for high value job creation in knowledge intensive businesses as well as modest housing growth. We need to build on the cultural and environmental advantages of rural areas to attract new investors and ensure that rural areas can meet the aspirations for a skilled workforce and the modern services which employers seek.

**Recommendation 1** - Development policy and the planning system must place more emphasis on achieving sustainable rural communities by facilitating the growth of rural villages and market towns so that they fulfil their long term potential.

### Chapter 2 - Delivering a Dynamic Economy

The economic mix of rural communities is now very close to that of the wider economy, although self employment, home working and smaller business are all more prevalent in rural areas, with this even more pronounced in remote rural areas. Policies to support SMEs are thus essential to rural economic success. **Many recent studies have shown that rural areas have a large unmet economic potential but highlight that planning and economic policy has to change to realise this potential.**

Whilst the growth of rural knowledge based businesses has been faster than in urban areas, the growth of these businesses is constrained by a lack of qualified local employees and poor broadband infrastructure. The number of unqualified adults, at 35% of the rural workforce, is well above the urban average of 28% and is a major constraint on growth in a knowledge based economy.

Parts of the rural economy, notably tourism and the food sector, have done comparatively well during the recession and it is essential that this momentum is maintained as well as supporting continued economic diversification so that rural areas provide more and better jobs.

**Recommendation 2** - Economic development policy must focus on creating rural jobs at a faster rate than the increase in the rural population of working age, with a target to grow the East of England rural economy at 3% per annum compared to the last RES target of 2.3% for the whole economy

**Recommendation 3** - Resources need to target promoting the skills and aspirations of the young and unskilled in rural areas so that they can fully engage in the growth agenda

**Recommendation 4** - Funding allocations for training must recognise the need to increase flexibility of provision in rural areas and aim to close the gap in skills performance in remote rural areas

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### Chapter 3 - Modern Infrastructure

Rural areas need new modern buildings for people to live, work and provide services. Many businesses have low environmental impact and most are suitable for rural areas. However, planning policy favouring large economic developments in urban areas leads to an increase in commuting and increased environmental impact. **The Forum believes that sustainable rural communities must have buildings, communication and green infrastructure to support economic growth.**

Affordable housing is essential in all rural communities to ensure that those who work there can also afford to live in their community. Recent planning policy has failed to address the gap between demand and supply and rural workers are now effectively priced out of many rural areas in the East of England. Unless this is addressed rural communities will fail to be sustainable.

As well as new build, innovative approaches to the renovation and reuse of existing buildings for housing, business or community use are essential, using planning, taxation and regulatory policy to promote change. Modern infrastructure must also accommodate the changing needs of society as the population ages or technology advances so that rural infrastructure meets future needs.

**Recommendation 5** - Economic development policy must encourage the creation of more rural workspace to facilitate an increase in rural jobs

**Recommendation 6** - The government should review the VAT treatment of refurbishment to encourage more rural properties to be brought back into commercial, community or residential use

**Recommendation 7** - The provisions of the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 should be used to designate all rural settlements as 'protected' to increase the supply of rural affordable housing in perpetuity

### Chapter 4 - Embracing the Digital Age

Rural East of England suffers from some of the worst levels of access to digital infrastructure of any area in England. As more public services go online (now estimated at over 90%) and business use of digital technology increases, a failure to address this issue will leave rural areas significantly disadvantaged. Evidence shows that access to the internet improves children's educational attainment, increases business productivity and reduces delivery costs.

Federation of Small Businesses research shows that by 2012, an estimated £1 in every £5 will come from online commerce and that all businesses need access to at least 8Mbps now. Current targets for digital roll out will deliver too little too late for rural areas; **current forecasts show many rural areas failing to achieve even the current low target speed of 2Mbps by 2017.** Other countries with large rural areas have already solved these problems through a mix of delivery technologies, incentives and regulation to ensure that rural areas are not digitally excluded.

**Recommendation 8** - Effective broadband should be seen as an essential utility in rural areas and Government should work with rural communities to ensure all areas have access to a minimum 10Mbps by 2013

**Recommendation 9** - Broadband delivery must be future proofed by using all available technologies so that today's roll out recognises tomorrow's changing user needs and applies new technology to provide universal next generation broadband

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### Chapter 5 - A Living Environment

Rural East of England has a diverse and attractive natural heritage with the Broads, AONBs and a range of SSSIs and other landscape designations. The region's natural environment however faces challenges from development, climate change and land use change or intensification. Sea level rise and flooding are also serious problems in a low lying region with 8% of the regions properties at risk.

The region's natural environment and strong cultural and built heritage supports a thriving tourism sector and makes the region an attractive place to live and work. The role of the natural environment in promoting mental and physical health is also increasingly recognised, as well as providing opportunities for volunteering and skills development.

The future management of the environment will have to focus more attention on growing problems such as sustainable water management and the impacts of climate change. The Ecosystem Services methodology potentially allows rural land management to take this broader more holistic view and supports innovative cross sectoral action. **Future environmental challenges will, however, require new management regimes, innovation and partnership between business, community and public sectors to address new challenges.**

**Recommendation 10** - Research and development should be undertaken into new models of sustainable rural land and water management systems

**Recommendation 11** - Environmental management schemes should be developed so that they deliver greater community engagement and increased social and environmental outcomes

### Chapter 6 - Dealing with Climate Change

The East of England is particularly exposed to the potential consequences of climate change as both the UK's lowest lying region and also its driest, with rural areas firmly in the frontline of the impacts. Water management, both in terms of flooding and securing supplies, will need more attention and a changing climate will affect biodiversity and the crops and livestock which can be raised. **Rural areas have a major role to play in mitigating climate change through the positive management of the landscape and biological systems.** From soils to trees to crops and products derived from crops, the rural economy has the potential to lock up carbon and thus help to address climate change.

In common with the whole country, rural areas will need to embrace low carbon models of development through focusing on efficiency to reduce energy demand in the home or workplace and reducing the need to travel to access jobs or services. The themes proposed in chapters 1 and 2, by delivering more local jobs to match the increase in rural population, have a key role to play in reducing the carbon intensity of the region by reducing commuting. By producing low carbon products such as wood or by producing renewable energy, rural areas have the potential to help the whole country move to a lower carbon economy.

**Recommendation 12** - The East of England Climate Change Action Plan should promote innovative ways for rural communities to mitigate carbon emissions by changing behaviour, by reducing the need for transport and through low carbon models of development

**Recommendation 13** - The delivery of the East of England plan for climate change adaptation should promote innovative ways in which rural communities can prepare for climate change impacts

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### Chapter 7 - Living Well

Living well is a broad concept which requires people to have access to the social and physical infrastructure of earlier chapters (e.g. jobs, skills, housing). It is also important that they are in good health, feel safe in their communities and have access to services.

Rural services have been under pressure for many years because of the combination of cost pressures, increasing critical mass needed to sustain many private or public services and the greater tendency for rural people to access services remotely or whilst commuting to work. **Although rural service needs are similar to those of urban areas, they often require different delivery methods.** For commercial services (e.g. shops) and public services (e.g. post offices), it is essential that service delivery is innovative (e.g. community ownership) and that economic policy increases rural employment so that rural people access services where they live.

Whilst rural areas are safer than urban areas, the perception of rising crime is a problem but evidence suggests neighbourhood policing helps to reduce this view. The health and social care challenges in rural areas are exacerbated by demographic changes and a natural tendency to present for treatment or support later if you have to travel to services. Addressing these issues demands innovative solutions and support for either online or physical access to centralised facilities.

**Recommendation 14** - New creative solutions are needed to provide constructive activities for rural young people (particularly 14-17 year olds), to help them fulfil their potential

**Recommendation 15** - The provision of rural services in villages and market towns should be increased through multi-agency approaches, whilst recognising that in some circumstances it is better to provide transport to access centralised specialist provision (e.g. complex health needs)

**Recommendation 16** - Preventative health care in rural areas must take account of the different needs of rural communities

### Chapter 8 - Engaged Communities

Many of the ideas proposed in this paper cannot be delivered by government or business alone but require the active participation and support of an engaged community. Whilst rural community participation has declined in line with wider trends, rural communities still support a very wide range of groups and recent years have seen a big growth in community ownership models and projects.

The key challenge is to ensure that community action is focused on positive engagement which proposes, develops and supports rural development, which can benefit the whole community and does not only occur in anticipation of opposition to proposed developments or service changes.

Community engagement also needs to find ways to reach out to everyone rather than only engaging those who are already involved. To engage the young it is essential that community groups and the public sector utilise modern communication channels to reach out to them.

**Recommendation 17** - The East of England Rural Forum should work with youth organisations to encourage debate and ideas on rural issues as they affect young people

**Recommendation 18** – Community led planning needs to be strengthened so that it can deliver more holistic local statements of need which can be used to inform Local Development Frameworks

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### Conclusions

The range of issues set out in this paper reflects the complexity of rural communities across the East of England. Rural areas are diverse in their communities, economies, demography, landscape and biodiversity. Three issues, however, stood out from all the topics covered in the consultation process used to develop this paper; all of which have resonance across the chapters above:

1. **Digital inclusion** - rural areas are enthusiastic to embrace the opportunities provided by the digital revolution but this is being jeopardised by the growing digital divide between urban and rural areas. Current plans for the delivery of high speed broadband are seen as too little too late by everyone who has been consulted and are significantly behind the plans in other developed countries. Addressing this would help to strengthen the economy, deliver social inclusion and reduce the need to travel to access services whilst reducing service delivery costs.
2. **Rural economic growth** - rural areas have enormous potential to increase their economic contribution. Achieving this would provide benefits for rural people and communities, the wider economy and help to protect the environment.
3. **Demographic change** - rural areas are seeing significant demographic change with particular issues around both the under-representation of young people (and young families) and the rapid growth of the older population. This is creating social imbalance. Young people in particular are having to leave rural communities in response to lack of affordable housing and urban centred employment opportunities and training provision. Solving this would create more vibrant and sustainable communities and lead to a virtuous circle for the rural economy and community by retaining intelligent and innovative young people who can drive forward positive change and provide services to the growing elderly population.

Tackling these three areas should be central to any plans to deliver this Rural White Paper but this in no way downplays the importance of the other detailed areas covered in the paper. This paper began by arguing that **balanced and sustainable growth is essential to the future of our rural areas** - balanced in the sense of the mutually supportive relationship between urban and rural but also in the sense of ensuring that the development of rural areas balances growth in population with economic growth, community services and respect for the environment.

In developing this paper, the Forum has been struck by the great number of people who are passionate about creating jobs in rural areas so that more people can live and work in their rural communities and in doing so sustain local services.

Rural communities want to be more involved in helping to shape the environment, economy and facilities where they live. Engaging the whole population in this process can be difficult and with some groups, for example the young, it will be essential to try new methods of engagement such as social networking. Rural communities must also play an active role in shaping policy at the district, county and sub-national levels to ensure that planning and investment meets rural needs.

No single group or sector alone can deliver the changes needed. The Forum therefore looks forward to working with rural communities, public and private sectors across the east of England to deliver the ideas and recommendations set out within this paper.

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## Further Information

This summary is an abridged version of the full paper which was prepared during late 2009 and early 2010. While this summary includes all the recommendations, the full version provides considerably more background information, references and data to support the conclusions reached and is available from [www.eerf.org.uk](http://www.eerf.org.uk).

The process to develop this paper included a series of consultations to ensure the conclusions represented the views of rural communities across the East of England. This process included:

- A draft issues paper circulated for comment in January 2010;
- A formal consultation event held at Shuttleworth College, Bedfordshire on 3rd March 2010;
- A written consultation during March and April 2010.

The output of all of these consultations, to which over 100 people and organisations responded, has been used to guide the focus and issues which this paper has sought to address. The paper also builds on policy position papers and minutes from the Rural Forum since 2006.

At the consultation event, participants were asked to rank 30 potential issues in relation to the development of the East of England's rural areas. The top issues identified by this process were:

- 1st • Recognising broadband as an essential utility for rural areas
- 2nd = • Providing affordable housing in rural areas
  - Promoting sustainable water resource management
- 3rd = • Ensuring the planning system promotes rural economic growth / rural employment growth / providing more rural workspace & technology to support rural industries & jobs including home working
  - Engaging young people in local community activities
  - Improving links between Councils, local democracy structures & community action

The results of this ranking process are presented in the full version of this paper

## Acknowledgements

The Forum is indebted to the many individuals and organisations across the East of England who give their time freely to the Forum and who contributed to the consultation papers and events which led to this paper. Without their input this paper could not have been produced.

If you would like further information about the East of England Rural Forum go to [www.eerf.org.uk](http://www.eerf.org.uk) or contact:

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Tel: 01473 345346, E-mail: [enquiries@eerf.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@eerf.org.uk).

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