



EERF

East of England Rural Forum

Name
Bldg
Street
Town postcode

Dear name

East of England Rural Forum

On the behalf of the East of England Rural Forum, may I congratulate you on your recent election as an MP representing one of our constituencies.

As you plan how best to represent your constituents in the current challenging financial conditions, it is vital that the concerns of rural businesses and communities are recognised and form part of the overall recovery and investment strategy for our region.

The East of England has few major cities and is predominantly a rural region where market towns and surrounding rural hinterland provide homes for nearly 40% of the region's population.

The rural population is both growing and changing its demographic makeup. Rural areas have fewer young families and more retired people than urban areas. This growing and aging population is putting pressure on services and housing affordability is a major issue.

The rural economy has been changing quickly and has seen a faster growth in knowledge based businesses than urban areas: rural areas now have an economic mix similar to urban. However, the economy of more remote rural areas is performing more poorly, qualifications levels are well below regional averages and the economy is more reliant on tourism and the food and farming sector.

The Rural Forum works to ensure these issues are recognised and understood and that policy and planning for our region takes full account of them. We proactively engage with all relevant bodies and contribute to discussions and setting of policy for our region. I enclose a short overview of how we work and what we have achieved.

We are currently producing a Rural Strategy Paper, "*Vibrant Rural Communities - Unlocking the Potential of the East of England's Rural Areas*". This will be launched in September and I shall send you a copy when finalised.

It sets out the key issues affecting the East of England's rural areas and proposes actions which need to be taken to improve their sustainability.

Three areas are highlighted which have impacts across all rural areas:

- **Digital inclusion** is critical to the future of rural areas. Access to high speed broadband is fundamental to growing the rural economy and enabling rural inhabitants to access services;
- **Rural economic growth** needs to occur at a faster rate than the regional economy to reverse the trend to ever greater levels of out commuting which have been seen in recent years. This will drive social, economic and environmental sustainability and provide a future for young people within their rural community;
- **Demographic change** requires active interventions to retain young families through improving their economic opportunities and by tackling the shortage of affordable rural housing whilst ensuring rural services meet the needs of older people.

When your schedule permits, I would welcome the opportunity to discuss in more detail the issues affecting rural communities and businesses and discuss ideas to increase the economic and social wellbeing of our rural communities.

I look forward to your support in the future and to welcome you at the launch of our strategy paper on 8th September in Cambridge. You will receive a formal invitation nearer the time

Yours sincerely,

Pat Holtom
Chair EERF

Introduction

The **East of England Rural Forum** (EERF) is an independent body which draws its membership from local and regional groups and organizations and which provides a forum for debate. It is mirrored by similar groups in other regions and meets regularly with Government Ministers and the other regional forums to promote the case for rural areas.

Overall Aims of Rural Forum

The East of England is rural in nature from the location of businesses, to its landscape and where many people live. Through engagement with citizens, communities and businesses, we identify those rural issues of importance, where changes and improvements would have maximum benefit.

We seek

- Consistent rural mainstreaming underpinned by universal implementation of effective rural proofing
- A commitment to equality of opportunity for both rural and urban areas
- Recognition that rural is a cross-cutting theme in all strategies, policies and investment programmes
- Support for nomination of rural champions (elected members and officials) at senior positions in regional bodies such as Homes and Communities Agency, Business Link, NHS, LAs and EEDA
- Support for farming and food production and rural businesses
- Protection of the natural environment
- Engagement of and support for local communities to act for improvements in their quality of life

We provide an informed rural voice founded on wide experience and knowledge to setting the future direction of our region. We have published Policy Position Papers on Rural Development, Water Resources, Skills and Learning, Planning and Food Production. More information and copies of these papers are available on our web site, www.eerf.org.uk or from our secretariat, Rural Action East¹.

Membership

Membership is open to organizations with a keen interest and involvement in rural affairs and is intended to reflect regional interests and geography across the three pillars of sustainable development - environment, economy and community. The Forum's activities are managed by an elected Steering Group.

Finances

Members give their time freely and contribute a wide range of skills, experience and local knowledge. This voluntary activity means that the Forum is very good value for money. Its main expenditure is on meetings and development of rural policy papers. We receive a small grant from Defra to support our work. (£25,000 in 2009/10).

¹ Rural Action East on 01473 345346 or enquiries@eerf.org.uk

Role of East of England Rural Forum

REPRESENTATION & COMMUNICATION

- Independent body based on a broad range of members (organizations) with a strong local knowledge of, and interest in, rural affairs. Typically members come from business, land-owners, local government, farming, third sector and public bodies
- Providing the rural voice within and on behalf of our region, communicating knowledge and understanding of rural concerns and ideas for improvements at all levels from local, through regional to national
- Providing regional knowledge and concerns to national policy drafting and review
- Providing two-way regional connection for Commission for Rural Communities (CRC)
- Developing, supporting and maintaining direct links to Government Offices, RDAs, Assemblies/Leader Boards, Local Strategic Partnerships, LAA Boards, county Rural Forums and county Rural Community Councils

LEADERSHIP & INFLUENCE

- Providing visible and proactive leadership at all levels by capturing and articulating the voice of “grass roots” rural stakeholders.
- Providing rural expertise for national boards/committees such as RDPE Monitoring, Homes & Communities Agency, Affordable Rural Housing, Rural Services Network, Defra Dept Strategic Objective, “*Strong rural voice*”
- Meeting with Chairmen from other Rural Forums to form a national “think tank” on rural issues
- Arranging rural conferences and events to explore rural issues and develop appropriate responses.
- Facilitating a route for rural organisations and communities to engage with public bodies
- Working with public bodies to scrutinise the delivery of services to rural communities
- Commenting on relevant national and regional draft policies and strategies
- Understanding the needs of our region through local knowledge and best practice, so as to develop consensus on policy issues

POLICY MAKING – RURAL PROOFING

- Lobbying for effective rural proofing and acting as champions for local rural mainstreaming of regional, sub-regional, local policy
- Supporting and applying rural proofing with involvement of rural communities and organizations and providing a set of key questions for the process
 - how effectively is this working?
 - where are the problems?
 - support for rural issues through LAAs and LSPs
 - capture and report best practice
- Carrying out and/or commissioning specific work and research for regional rural bodies/committees

PROGRAMME DELIVERY

- Monitor and review rural proofing of sub-regional/local delivery programmes
- Develop local consensus on the impact of delivery so as to:
 - Capture local evidence on the reality of rural delivery
 - Identify areas needing improvement
 - Draft reports on outcomes for local, regional and national bodies

Examples of Benefits & Impacts

- Recognised and respected as an independent, multi-sector, rural stakeholder voice in the region able to “*tell it like it is*” regarding whether government policy is delivering for rural people and areas or not
- Drafting of rural policy statements as input to development of policy and investment programmes, challenging regional stakeholders to support rural and urban equitably
- Contributions to and commenting on regional strategies – economic, spatial, social
- Good source of case studies and local models as solutions for effective service delivery
- Gathering of information and creation of evidence base regarding rural communities and the impact of policy
- Regular meetings with Minister for Rural Affairs and Defra officials regarding rural priorities, impact of national policy and solutions for rural problems
- Annual conferences and regular events which raise profile of rural affairs and develop regional priorities
- Support for provision of rural affordable housing and funding of enablers
- Work with migrant workers and with RDAs to establish local networks and web site to engender consistent levels of good practice across the region
- Input to drafting of RDPE Regional Implementation Plan and support for delivery
- Excellent working practices with Commission for Rural Communities through the Regional Director framework and the regular input of regional “intelligence” to CRC
- Creation of genuine partnerships between a number of different rural organisations working within region