

Economic

True value of the British countryside unrealised

New research from [The Prince's Countryside Fund](#) has revealed that, whilst we love the British countryside, few realise its scale and importance to the economy. Up to 93% of people surveyed valued the countryside for relaxation, fresh air and peace and quiet; however three quarters believed the monetary value to be less than £1 billion. Its actual worth is closer to £80 billion a year, with UK tourism alone contributing £14 billion.

Essex parish councils discuss rural broadband

Almost 100 parish councils came together to discuss the provision of [broadband](#) in rural Essex at the Essex Broadband Implementation Conference on 18th July. The conference, organised by Essex Association of Local Councils, the Rural Broadband Partnership and the Country, Land and Business Association, aimed to assess the demand for high speed broadband in villages and discuss proposals for a broadband network.

Limited broadband leaves rural areas socially excluded

The [Country Land and Business Association](#) has warned that limited broadband access in rural areas makes it nearly impossible for rural business and communities to communicate via social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. The warning comes after Ofcom published its first [interactive broadband map](#) last month, which highlights a growing digital divide between urban and rural areas.

Communities

Planning policy simplified to encourage sustainable growth

Over 1, 000 pages of [planning policy](#) have been streamlined to a 52 page draft framework that will safeguard the environment whilst meeting the need for sustainable growth. The draft 'National Planning Policy Framework' has been published for consultation by Planning Minister Greg Clark and sets out national priorities and rules, including protection for the natural and historic environment.

Making the most of Community Led Planning

New guidance for local authorities on how to make the most of Community Led Planning to enable communities to shape their future has been published by Action for Market Towns and [ACRE](#). 'Making the most of Community Led Planning: a best practice guide for local authorities' shows how local authorities can support communities throughout the development of their plan using best practice examples from across the country.

New barrier busting service to aid communities

Any citizen wishing to take social action and find community led solutions to local needs will have full backing from Whitehall, Minister for Decentralisation Greg Clark has announced. The new [barrier busting](#) service follows lessons learnt from the Big Society vanguards launched last year. Each vanguard wishing to take community led action came up against many barriers, but a year on with the help of civil servants and government to overcome the barriers many of their ideas have come to fruition.

Proposals for reformation of town and village greens registration

[Defra](#) has launched a consultation on proposals for reforming the town and village greens registration system. The proposals seek to reduce the burden on local authorities and landowners by improving the operation of the registration system, and aim to strike a better balance between protecting green spaces valued by the local community and securing the new homes, jobs and infrastructure the country needs. Interested parties are invited to submit their views on the proposals by 17th October 2011.

Queen Elizabeth II Fields Fund launched

[SITA Trust](#), in partnership with HRH Duke of Cambridge and the Fields in Trust, has launched the Queen Elizabeth II Fields Fund to help protect 2, 012 outdoor recreational spaces in communities across the country. Once an area has been designated a Queen Elizabeth II Field, an application can be made to the £1 million fund for improvements to the area.

Community controlled assets

Research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation looking into the benefits, successes and challenges for communities owning or managing local assets has been published [online](#). The report shows that a variety of organisations are involved in managing assets and argues that particular types of support are needed if the field is to flourish.

Rural pubs key to a healthy community

Rural communities are happier and healthier if their local pub offers more than just food and drink says a new report published by [Pub is the Hub](#). 'Pub is the Hub: Evaluating the Impact of Initiatives 2011' saw 100% of people polled agree that their pub scheme is vital to their community and most felt that it enabled them to meet people that they otherwise would not have.

Do you love where you live?

Essex County Council has launched a year-long 'Love Where You Live' campaign to encourage residents to organise and take part in their own local improvement events. These could be anything from a clear-up of the local area to something that benefits or celebrates the community. Residents can register their own events and receive a free support pack by visiting the '[Love Where You Live](#)' website.

St Peter's Way walking guide republished

Essex County Council has republished The St Peter's Way walking guide as a digital version, available to [download](#) for free from the website. The walking guide, originally conceived by Ramblers Association members Fred Mathews and Harry Bitten, details the 45 mile long countryside route from Chipping Ongar to Bradwell-on-Sea, allowing residents to discover the many villages, shops and pubs along the way.

Environment

Local communities urged to speak up for favorite nature areas

Defra, in partnership with the Environment Agency, the Forestry Commission and Natural England, has launched a competition to create 12 Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs), based on the recommendations of local communities. The NIAs will help to re-establish wildlife populations in urban and rural areas through bigger, interconnected networks of wildlife habitats ranging from 10,000 to 50,000 hectares in size. Defra is also seeking expressions of interest from local authorities for a [Biodiversity Off-setting pilot](#).

Sustainable community energy survey

The Community Innovation for Sustainable Energy (CISE) research team at the University of Sussex is looking for groups to take part in a [national survey](#) of sustainable community energy. The team would like to learn about the networking, energy and carbon performance of community groups and projects for energy, energy saving or sustainable energy generation. The survey is open until the end of August and can be completed [online](#).

Other news

RCCE award winners announced at AGM

Winners of the Village of the Year, Best Kept Village and Best Kept Churchyard competitions were announced at the RCCE AGM on 6th July. Stisted was awarded the prestigious 'Village of the Year' title, receiving the £500 first prize; The Church of St Mary & St Christopher, Panfield scooped first prize for the Best Kept Churchyard. There were five class winners for Best Kept Village who each received £150.

Dates for your diary

11 th August	'Flix in the Stix', Layer Marney Tower
22 nd September	Economic Action Group meeting, County Hall
27 th September	Essex Association of Local Councils AGM
20 th October	Full Essex Rural Partnership meeting, venue TBC
18 th January	Full Essex Rural Partnership & East of England Rural Forum – joint meeting

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