

ESSEX RURAL FUND

Country LIVING

As you enjoy one of our rural villages, perhaps during a drive around the county, it might be easy to assume that these country idylls are perfect places to live, but there is a lot of hard work required to make these communities thrive in the way they do. Anne Fitzgerald explains

DESPITE being wrongly perceived by many as an urban area of industry and nightlife, the stark truth is that Essex is a rural county. A total of 72% of Essex land is devoted to agriculture, around a quarter of the county's population lives in rural communities and its coastline is the longest of any county in England.

Living in the countryside is something many of us enjoy. Our villages in Essex are among the loveliest in the country and the beautiful landscape and more peaceful environment make our rural areas very attractive places to be. But for some, the rural lifestyle can be far from idyllic and people in such communities can face the problems of isolation, poor access to services and a lack of amenities.





'Many Essex villages present a picture of tranquillity which masks the poor access to services and isolation experienced by many rural people today'

There may be no public transport, the village shop might have closed, the local pub may be no more and often there is nowhere for people to meet. Older people, those with young families and busy commuters can all lose the sense of

belonging in a rural community. As a result, long-cherished strengths that have held our villages together, including a sense of identity and contact between residents, can be threatened.

A desire to tackle these challenges and

give help and support to rural communities led to the launch of the Essex Rural Fund by the independent charity, Rural Community Council of Essex (RCCE). The fund, which is managed by the independent ►



charitable trust, Essex Community Foundation (ECF), was set up by RCCE in 2009 as part of its 80th birthday celebrations. It provides support to community organisations and charities that are making a difference to the lives of people in rural areas of Essex by funding projects such as village halls, transport services, play schemes and community shops run by residents.

Nick Shuttleworth, executive director of RCCE, comments: 'Many Essex villages present a picture of tranquillity which masks the poor access to services and isolation experienced by many rural people today. In many of our rural communities provision of local services is declining, affordable housing is almost impossible to obtain and community-based activities are totally reliant on volunteers.'

'Voluntary organisations and the people who give their time to run them are the lifeblood of communities, especially rural ones. Villages have always done a lot for themselves and some enterprising communities have even set up their own shops and transport services. The Essex Rural Fund specifically supports community groups and charities working in rural areas of the county and has enabled us to develop a long-term strategy to support rural initiatives through which local people can keep the hearts of their communities beating.'

'We strive to provide a voice for rural communities, representing their interests to government at local, regional and national level. Our mission is to provide local communities with the skills, resources and expertise necessary to achieve a thriving and sustainable future.'

A great example of a thriving community shop is the one established by the Bradwell Community Shop Association. In 2014 the future of the shop was secured by the purchase of the premises on behalf of the community. Both the shop and Post Office provide essential services for local people and visitors. The shop, which was given widespread support, including a £3,500 grant from ECF through the Bradwell Wind Farm Community Fund, has become the true heart of the village and provides a real focus for local life.

To help tackle the problems affecting older people in rural parts of Essex, a new initiative, Community Agents Essex, has been established in a partnership between the Rural Community Council of Essex, British Red Cross, Age UK Essex and Essex Neighbourhood Watch. The



ESSEX RURAL FUND

of health awareness and exercise.

The *Essex Life* Charitable Fund, established with ECF, has given support to the Uttlesford Buffy Bus to help meet the costs for fuel and insurance. The playbus helps develop friendships and contact between parents and carers living in rural areas, something which may have been taken for granted in the past, but can be harder to achieve in modern times with the faster pace of life and with more transient communities.

Home Start, a charity working with families under stress, has been given support for its work in the Uttlesford area through the Essex Rural Fund too. Volunteers, who all have parenting experience, visit families for a couple of hours a week and aim to give both emotional and practical help.

Bob Reitemeier, chief executive of ECF, adds: 'Voluntary organisations working in rural areas help provide the building blocks for strong communities. Through our grant-making we can help those who are who are giving such vital support in rural areas, making a great difference to the quality of life for people of all ages.'

So the next time you see a manicured village green surrounded by a collection of chocolate box country cottages, remember that a lot of hard work is going on behind the scenes to make sure these beautiful villages remain idyllic places to live. ■

The Essex Rural Fund was established by the Rural Community Council of Essex (RCCE) specifically to support community groups and charities working in rural areas of the county. RCCE is a charity that has been working with rural communities in Essex since 1929 and aims to help create a better future for Essex villages. For more information about the Essex Rural Fund and Essex Community Foundation, visit www.essexcommunityfoundation.org.uk



"The aim is to promote health and independence, reduce social isolation, find practical solutions to daily living and provide confidential and trusted information"

scheme has also been supported with grants from ECF.

The aim is to promote health and independence, reduce social isolation, find practical solutions to daily living and provide confidential and trusted information. It is particularly targeted at people who are likely to need health or social care, or a combination of the two, in the near future.

A team of 36 agents, supported by volunteers, are working across Essex and in the first five months of the scheme a total of 1,000 visits were made to older people in their own homes. It is hoped that around 6,000 clients will be visited each year.

For families with young children, living in countryside areas can also mean isolation and a lack of local facilities. One perfect solution is to bring mobile

services to rural areas lacking provision.

Uttlesford Buffy Bus, a brightly-coloured double decker playbus, provides activities for children under five in rural and urban communities where there is a lack of support services. The fully equipped playbus is a welcome sight as it travels around 15 locations in the Uttlesford area, enabling isolated families to come together, socialise, play and learn in a safe and stimulating environment.

The play sessions strengthen parenting skills and link with the Early Years Foundation Stage requirements to educate children, including those with special educational needs and disabilities. Summer holiday activities are held throughout the Uttlesford District, allowing children to be active and energetic in a safe area outside the playbus, promoting the importance