

Report by John Buchanan to the Chelmsford Association AGM, July 2008

A few words about my background. I have been involved in community issues for about 20 years in Billericay, can remember the consultations etc. on the Billericay Local Plan which was adopted in 1988. I am a founder member of Billericay Town Council, which was formed in 1997 out of the government's local government reviews when the first round of unitary authorities were created. I was the vice-chairman of Billericay TC for the last 2 years, I decided that being EALC Chairman would keep me busy so I have left that to others now. In 2002-4 served as a co-opted member on Ramsden Bellhouse PC. Have been on the EALC on then off then on again, rejoining in July 2006, and was then elected vice-chairman in November 2006, much to my surprise. It was a great honour to take over as Chairman last November from Peter Baggott, who is still working really hard for the Association, but at least has one less thing to do, with me taking on the Chairmanship.

There are no well defined activities for a Vice-Chairman, so in that role I started looking for things that I could poke my nose into, where parish councils weren't being adequately represented or where there was a gap. It happened that a couple of regional posts were looking for someone to fill them, so, through EEAPTC (formerly known as BENSCH) I got myself into the East of England Rural Forum as the representative of Essex & Hertfordshire, (replacing Charles Braithwaite) and our EERA representative John Williams managed to get me onto the East of England Regional Assembly's Housing & Sustainable Communities Panel (that's a mouthful!) replacing Keith Williams. On that Panel I am recognised as a "Community Stakeholder" representing all 1800 of the parish & town councils of the East of England!

I am still on a learning curve. I think there are plenty of opportunities for the parish & town councils of Essex to play more significant roles in the way things are done, and that various doors are going to be open if we try pushing at them. Let me try and mention some of the reasons why I think this:

At national level, since the Rural White Paper of 2000 which established the concept of Quality Parish Councils, there has been an acceptance in Whitehall that town & parish councils represent real local democracy, and can be an effective way for local people to determine, define and deliver the needs of their communities. That acceptance has not always made it down to the principal authorities. More of that later.

In Essex, we are leading the way in establishing Quality Councils. The wind is still in our favour with national government. At the recent NALC annual conference, Hazel Blears, Secretary of State for Communities & Local Government said that Quality Councils will be well placed to fulfil the criteria to be granted the power of well-being under the new LG&PIH Act. Just by being at the conference she demonstrated her commitment to our sector. There are still parish councillors who say "we don't see what good it will do us to be a Quality Council". I despair of that attitude. I hope there is no-one like that in this Borough. If such attitudes were widespread and reached the ear of government the wind

would definitely change direction as regards the involvement of parish & town councils in local service delivery, and there is a thing called the "Third Sector" waiting in the wings to take over.

I briefly mentioned the LG&PIH Act. There are quite a few things in there which have impact on town & parish councils. On the cosmetic side you can change your name. If you want to, you can be a neighbourhood, a village or a community council. My view is that if you have strong brand image with your current name, you shouldn't change, but new councils, particularly in urban areas, have a greater choice. There is the power of well-being. No-one seems to know what that is. I have heard it described as the ability to deliver any service which your community really wants and needs, and more significantly are willing to pay for through the council tax, without the limitations currently imposed by Section 137.

But also, and less publicised in all the hype running up to the Act, is something called the "duty to involve".

Which brings me back to how we in parish & town councils interact with our principal authorities. The LG&PIH Act requires each principal authority whether county, district or unitary to form Local Strategic Partnership and for that LSP to produce a Sustainable Community Strategy, which form the overarching strategy for life in the authority area, and to which even the Local Development Framework is subservient.

Now Joy has been banging on for at least 2 years at Executive as to how important it is for the parish & town councils to get involved in the relevant LSP, and influence the content of the Sustainable Community Strategy.

LSPs include representation from the health trusts, the Police, the Fire service, and the voluntary sector (now known as the Third Sector). If we as parish & town councils are to be influential we must be involved, and that means getting into the LSP and the SCS process in each district. I am still trying to find out how we are doing across the county. At the moment I don't know. I do know how we're getting on with the County Council which has formed its LSP called the "Essex Partnership" and is working very hard on its SCS called the "Essex Strategy". I have a seat on the "Essex Partnership Forum" which is the high level body within the "Essex Partnership" influencing the "Essex Strategy". This Partnership has produced the second edition of the Local Area Agreement, which is the document which explains how the objectives of the strategy will be achieved. This has just been signed off by ministers.

During the consultation process the EALC identified the group of national performance indicators and the associated targets which we consider are relevant to parish and town councils, and we have the fantastic opportunity to become involved in working with the County Council and others to deliver solutions. A completely new group, called the Sustainable Essex Partnership has been established with its inaugural meeting on 10th June). EALC has been recognised as a member of this Partnership, but it is still unclear how we can get our views included into the action plans. There are 9 separate teams created or to be created to work on delivering the LAA targets.

In February Lord Hanningfield and I signed a "Concordat" valid for 2 years describing all the excellent ways in which we as the parish councils of Essex, and the county council will work together for the good our communities. Representatives of all the Quality Councils in Essex were present at the House of Lords for the signing ceremony.

This new Sustainable Essex Partnership is a chance for us to show that parish & town councils in Essex can really be part of integrated local government in the county.

Essex County Council has gone even further in its efforts to work with the parish & town councils in Essex. 3 years ago it established the "Making the Links" partnership, and set up a small team in County Hall to help parish & town councils with anything which involved working between a parish council and the county council. They recognised that it has been known for a parish council to find it difficult to get the attention of the right person in the county council to address a particular local issue, or even to work out who the right person might be. The team will take any enquiry from a parish council and help sort things out.

I exhort you to take this seriously. I recommend every parish & town council in Essex to put an item on its agenda to list all the aspects of its activities which require something from the county council, identify any areas where there have been problems, like long delays, lack of response, etc., and then get in touch with the "Making the Links" office. Let's make this work.

Finally, I would like to explore some new possibilities. We talk about the "Parish Sector", but we don't behave like a cohesive entity. I told you that I attend Regional meetings, Rural Partnership, and Housing & Sustainable Communities Panel. Supposedly I represent the "Parish Sector". In Essex we have over 270 parishes. In the region we have about 1800. This Sector does not have any coherent published policy on anything I can identify. When I attend such meetings, I can't speak for the sector on a subject such as, for example, housing development on exception sites in the Green Belt. I don't know what position to take, although that is clearly something which parish councils should be involved in, and have a position on. In that subject, parish councils should be the best placed to identify the housing need, know which sites could be developed with least harm to the environment, and work with the principal authority's housing department to ensure that the residential qualification for occupation is defined tightly to the parish, not just anyone off the housing list of the whole district. At least that's what I think, but I have no right to express that as the view of the sector, because there is no process to set policy on this on any other subject.

Now it might be that this is just my learning curve, and actually there is a policy somewhere, just I haven't found it. If so I apologise. Joy will have to take me out and educate me.

Or maybe not. Maybe we need, starting in Essex, to work out what we think about the top issues which central government are pushing our way, and then propagate our policies through our involvements with LSPs, SCSs and all those things. It could be an adventure.

Once again, thank you for inviting us. Let's talk.