



MINUTES

Held via Teams

Tuesday, 13th May 2025

Present members:

Cllr Katherine Evans
 Vernon Glashier
 Martyn
 Janet Arthur
 Lucy White
 Lousie Fuller
 Rowena
 John Victory
 John Bucanan
 Jeff Fletcher

LA Officers present:

Shirley Anglin (SA) – The Chair

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1	<p>Chairman's Welcome</p> <p>To start the meeting, Shirley welcomed attendees and introduced Lucy White from the British Horse Society. Lucy is considering joining the Local Access Forum (LAF) and was invited to attend the meeting to observe and gain a better understanding before deciding about long-term involvement. Shirley also introduced Tim Simpson from Essex County Council (ECC), who would be speaking later in the meeting about the Green Infrastructure Strategy.</p> <p>Shirley then addressed the matter of the Chairperson role, noting that nominations were being sought following Katherine's previous decision to step down. However, Katherine had since agreed to stand again and confirmed her willingness to serve as Chair for the next one to two years. She also expressed a desire to appoint one or two Vice-Chairs to support her in the role. Shirley formally handed over the Chair to Katherine and invited nominations for the Vice-Chair position. No volunteers or nominations were received at that time, and Shirley encouraged all members to give the matter further thought.</p> <p>Katherine proceeded to review the minutes of the previous meeting, asking if there were any comments or factual corrections. No objections were raised, and the minutes were approved unanimously by all present.</p>	

2	<p>Green Infrastructure Strategy</p> <p>Katherine noted that most of the key topics were already covered in the agenda, including the Green Infrastructure Strategy, which has been discussed in various forms over the years. She referenced previous efforts by Malcolm, a former member, to compile a comprehensive list of accessible green spaces in Essex. Tim Simpson then delivered a presentation on the Green Infrastructure Strategy. He introduced himself as the Interim Head of Climate Adaptation and Mitigation for Essex, with a primary role as Green Infrastructure and Drainage Manager. He explained that the strategy, published in 2020, aims to enhance the quality and accessibility of green spaces across Essex—from city centres to coastal and rural areas. The strategy is built around seven key objectives, focusing on place-making, public use, and funding mechanisms. It identifies 30 priority projects to improve green infrastructure, including promoting active travel routes, strengthening green space networks, and ensuring connectivity between them. A significant part of the work involves engaging with developers during the planning process to integrate green infrastructure into new developments. Essex also has Green Infrastructure Standards to guide planners and developers, and the team has responded to over 300 planning applications. Their work has been recognised through accreditation from Building With Nature and contributions to Natural England trials.</p> <p>Tim highlighted several case studies, including Oakwood Pond, where restoration efforts improved accessibility and inclusivity; Basildon Hospital, where green spaces were created to support public health; and St Michael's Parkland in Harwich, which used woodland grants to enhance biodiversity and public access. He also mentioned Miranda Walk, a project aimed at improving green spaces along active travel routes, which has fostered community pride and ownership. Tim acknowledged key challenges, particularly around funding and long-term stewardship. Many green spaces are on private land, which presents access and legal challenges. He stressed the importance of working with communities and local authorities to secure support and funding. A review of the Green Infrastructure Strategy is underway, with a revised version expected in 2026.</p> <p>John Buchanan thanked Tim for the presentation and raised concerns about the lack of engagement with the LAF on planning matters. He cited a recent appeal decision approving 281 houses adjacent to a local wildlife site and asked whether the Green Infrastructure team could provide input on such applications. Tim explained that while the team is not a statutory consultee, they do try to influence planning through local plans and are open to being contacted directly at Green.Infrastructure@essex.gov.uk. He acknowledged resource limitations but welcomed collaboration and flagged sites of concern.</p> <p>Katherine asked whether the strategy and standards were statutory or advisory. Tim confirmed they are currently guidance-based, though efforts are being made to strengthen their influence. Katherine also raised concerns about proposed legislation that could reduce environmental protections. Tim noted that the Planning Reform Bill could have both negative and positive impacts, including potential funding for accessible green space. Regarding devolution, Tim said that functions like his may be consolidated under broader nature recovery and climate action roles within a new Greater Essex strategic authority.</p> <p>Katherine asked whether the Green Infrastructure team works with parish councils in addition to districts and boroughs. Tim confirmed that they do, although the</p>	
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large number of parishes across Essex makes individual engagement challenging. He highlighted work with groups like EALC and referenced a recent visit to the launch of Sustainable Uttlesford, where a group of parishes is delivering sustainability outcomes related to both energy and green space. He also mentioned small-scale nature planning projects with parishes that aim to demonstrate scalable actions.

Katherine inquired about the status of the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS), to which Tim responded that Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) payments were paused in March, though other elements of ELMS are ongoing. He noted the frustration this has caused among landowners and stakeholders, but added that the government has indicated SFI payments should resume in the summer.

Rowena raised the issue of Middlewick Ranges, a site in Colchester with significant ecological value that is under threat from a proposed development of 1,000 houses. Despite meeting criteria for designation as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Natural England has been slow to act. Although the site was initially removed from the local plan, it has since been reinstated, and a new buyer has emerged. Rowena expressed concern about the environmental and infrastructure impacts of the development. Tim acknowledged the situation and expressed support for protecting Middlewick Ranges, stating that in worst-case scenarios, the goal is to mitigate as much as possible.

Janet asked how the success of green infrastructure corridors is monitored, particularly in terms of wildlife movement. Tim explained that due to limited budgets, long-term monitoring is not always feasible. Instead, they use species movement data to identify where stepping stones are needed to create effective corridors. John Buchanan raised the issue of access targets within the Green Infrastructure Strategy, which were not prominently featured in the presentation. Tim clarified that Natural England is leading on this work, which focuses on ensuring accessible green space within walking distance of built-up areas. John noted the overlap with the Forum's work on footpaths and suggested that these targets could support efforts to maintain access. Tim agreed and confirmed that accessibility is a key consideration.

Katherine thanked Tim for his presentation and confirmed that Shirley would receive the slides. John Buchanan expressed concern about the lack of engagement from some forums and the missed opportunities to discuss promising projects. Vernon shared his frustration, while Shirley reflected on the early stages of the strategy, noting that even then, there was no clear funding plan. She also mentioned that while districts have their own strategies, it's unclear whether they have the resources to implement them.

John Buchanan emphasized that the issue is less about funding and more about influencing policy and being able to comment on planning decisions. He cited an example in Maldon where ECC-owned green land is being sold for housing, despite the council's own green infrastructure goals. Katherine echoed this frustration, noting that developers often avoid enhancing green networks by staying within the red line boundaries of developments. Vernon questioned whether people truly value green spaces, but Rowena countered with the example of the strong community campaign to save Middlewick Ranges, particularly among lower-income residents.

	<p>John Buchanan added that while new developments may include green areas, they often lack functional spaces like football fields. Katherine noted that Section 106 funding is sometimes allocated for sports facilities, but the lack of available land limits its usefulness. Rowena raised concerns about the overuse of tarmacked “green routes,” which, while inclusive, can compromise the natural character of green spaces. Katherine and Trailnet representatives discussed the pros and cons of different surface materials, with Trailnet advocating for granite-pressed surfaces over tarmac, except in areas prone to flooding. Shirley added that while tarmac may have a longer lifespan, aggregate surfaces are often more cost-effective and natural in appearance.</p>	
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<p>3</p>	<p>GIS Mapping</p> <p>The next agenda item focused on GIS Mapping. John Buchanan introduced the topic, noting its relevance to the Green Infrastructure Strategy. He explained that the infrastructure team has developed a mapping application that identifies green spaces and footpath density, using algorithms to measure access times—such as the commonly referenced 15-minute access target. John had spoken with Jane Houghton, who leads on this work and is funded by Natural England. He proposed inviting her to present at the November meeting to explain the mapping logic and definitions of green space. This was met with agreement from attendees.</p> <p>Katherine suggested planning a site visit for August, with John proposing a wind farm or similar development site to explore the implications of new infrastructure. Rowena suggested visiting Middlewick Ranges. John thanked Shirley for facilitating dialogue with Tim Simpson, noting that raising awareness with key stakeholders could lead to more consideration of access issues. Katherine observed that people access was more prominently mentioned in this meeting than in the past.</p> <p>Vernon expressed scepticism about the tangible outcomes of such groups, questioning whether they result in real-world improvements like new paths. Katherine linked this to earlier efforts by Malcolm to map accessible green spaces, which included Flitch Way and country parks. Shirley noted the challenge of integrating country parks into the Rights of Way (ROW) map, as it is a highways-focused map. Katherine suggested that such mapping might be better placed under the Green Infrastructure umbrella. Shirley added that devolution could help unify access-related functions across councils.</p> <p>The discussion turned to how different regions approach access. Katherine noted that Norfolk’s LAF is more embedded due to the importance of tourism, whereas Essex tends to prioritise business and development. Shirley mentioned that sustainable transport funding is often aimed at commuting rather than leisure. Trailnet representatives noted that funding is concentrated in areas like Colchester and Chelmsford and tends to focus on cycling for work, not leisure. Rowena and others argued that encouraging leisure walking and cycling is key to building long-term habits.</p> <p>Concerns were raised about the effectiveness of some active travel initiatives, such as “school streets” that lack connecting routes. Katherine highlighted the importance of feeding into local plans, referencing the valuable input previously provided by Sue Dobson. Janet noted that a member who reviewed local plans had recently resigned, and the group would need to advertise for a replacement. Lucy from the British Horse Society confirmed they have an access field officer for the East of England and try to engage early in planning processes. Katherine and Janet agreed that sharing local plan reviews would be helpful for the LAF, and Janet committed to raising this at the next committee meeting.</p>	
<p>4</p>	<p>Rights of Way Improvement Plan</p> <p>A Working group was formed to provide feedback to ECC on the current ROWIP and what would be desirable to see in the ROWIP draft review.</p>	

5	<p>ECC Report</p> <p>The meeting moved on to the Essex County Council (ECC) report, presented by Shirley. Attendees were invited to comment on the report. John Victory noted that the most significant item was the issue involving Network Rail, while the other points were relatively straightforward. Katherine remarked that progress seemed to be ongoing but highlighted accessibility concerns, referencing a case where she had suggested a slope instead of steps, which was rejected due to the original design specifications. Shirley clarified that changes like this fall under the Transport and Works Act Order, meaning objections had to be raised during the inquiry stage, and there is no current scope to alter the footpath or impose changes on the landowner.</p> <p>Katherine brought up a list of Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs), including the Longfield Solar Farm, where the LAF is now recognised as part of the liaison group. She also mentioned the A12 widening project, which has significant implications for Feering. Despite earlier efforts, the project appears to have stalled. Shirley noted that while the Public Rights of Way (PROW) team is making progress with new bridges to reconnect the network, the overall scheme remains uncertain. Katherine added that the current slip road design is non-compliant and problematic.</p> <p>The discussion also touched on the Lower Thames Crossing, which remains unfunded, and the Norwich–Tilbury pylons project. Katherine noted a lack of recent updates, while Shirley confirmed that although documentation is being prepared and meetings have taken place, funding is still not guaranteed. Katherine concluded by expressing a preference for pylons over housing developments, as the latter would result in the permanent loss of countryside.</p>	
6	<p>Essex NSIPs</p> <p>ECC works ongoing to support PROW management plans during the construction. No update on public consultations.</p>	
7	<p>ELAF Webpages and Access Guides</p> <p>The meeting proceeded to the topic of ELAF webpages and access guides. Katherine inquired about the status of the coastal path access guides, and Shirley confirmed they had been published on the Essex Highways website. Rowena noted a design issue where the section headers (e.g., “Goldhanger to Heybridge Basin”) were not clickable links, instead directing users to the bottom of the page. Shirley agreed to raise this with the communications team (Action for Shirley). Katherine suggested issuing a press release to promote the guides, which Rowena supported, noting that slides should be uploaded first.</p> <p>Discussion then turned to future access guide projects. Rowena mentioned potential routes in the south of the county, including South Woodham Ferrers to Battlesbridge, though Shirley noted that while some clearance work had been done, the route was not yet walkable. Other possible routes included Benfleet to Leigh-on-Sea and Wallasea Island. Rowena also highlighted the Burnham to Bradwell stretch, which is mostly accessible aside from a short flight of steps at St Peter’s.</p> <p>John Victory raised concerns about breaches in the seawall and responsibility for repairs. Shirley clarified that ECC is only responsible for the surface of the seawall, not the structure itself, which falls to the landowner. ECC can provide materials for surfacing but cannot fund structural repairs unless they own the land. She added that the Environment Agency typically only intervenes when property</p>	

	<p>is at risk. If a breach occurs and no rollback route is identified, a formal variation to the England Coast Path order is required to reroute the path.</p> <p>Rowena asked whether a map exists showing which parts of the coastal path are publicly or privately owned. Shirley said there used to be a public-facing map with such information, and Katherine mentioned the Essex Property Access Map, which includes ownership details for district and borough councils.</p>	
8	<p>Byway Working Group Update</p> <p>Vernon provided an update from the Byway Working Group. Updates were given on the progress of the capital schemes, on TRO considerations, areas on flytip watch and solutions to this issue and on the Enforcement cases such as Byway 34 Navestock.</p> <p>Winter closures of byways were lifted and all barriers/gates have been opened.</p>	
9	<p>Regional LAF</p> <p>Katherine also reminded members that the invitation to the Regional LAF meeting in July is open to chairs and vice-chairs and asked members to share any items they'd like raised.</p>	
10	<p>Site Visit - August</p> <p>Katherine proposed exploring a coastal path stretch and suggested that Roy and Rowena could identify a suitable section. Vernon mentioned Wallasea Island, prompting Katherine to ask about access. Shirley confirmed that it is now an RSPB site with many accessible routes and that it is possible to drive across.</p> <p>Katherine asked about the east side of Burnham. Shirley responded positively, noting that Vernon and John had previously looked into it. However, she pointed out that steps around a sluice could pose a problem for Rowena. Rowena expressed interest in that stretch, saying it is short and could be completed quickly, with Burnham's facilities nearby.</p> <p>Katherine suggested that Rowena liaise with Roy and possibly Shirley to identify a feasible section. She also asked Lucy to coordinate with Rowena regarding Layer de la Haye or Middlewick. Rowena said she was unfamiliar with the area visited recently but knew the northern section, which is slated for development. She noted that some areas have deep sand and that she would need to explore further before confirming suitability. She expressed interest in the Layer de la Haye suggestion and proposed reviewing Lucy's route first before considering alternatives.</p> <p>Lucy asked what the group hoped to achieve—whether a looped route was preferred. Katherine shared past experiences, including a loop in Witham and a sea wall walk starting at Heybridge. She emphasized the importance of selecting a route that Rowena could complete, with the possibility of writing it up as an accessibility guide.</p> <p>Rowena suggested Gosbecks as a potential site. Lucy agreed it was a viable option. Rowena noted that while recent site visits have focused on accessibility, future visits could address other issues. She acknowledged that Gosbecks has some accessibility challenges but is a fantastic site overall.</p> <p>Katherine encouraged the group to liaise and finalize a location.</p>	

Any Other Business (AOB)

Rowena raised the issue of Aaron Ashwood, Active Environments Officer for Colchester City Council, who had intended to join the meeting but did not receive an invitation. She asked whether extended invitations could be considered for guests like him.

Shirley suggested adding Aaron to the distribution list so he could participate when available. She noted that there was no reason he couldn't become a member of the Local Access Forum. Katherine agreed and proposed including him in agenda emails so he could contribute if interested. She clarified that he wouldn't need to receive all correspondence but could be sent agendas and minutes.

Shirley also announced that Sam Idison had resigned as the landowner representative. He recommended a local landowner who is also a parish clerk as a potential replacement. Shirley has contacted her, and although she couldn't attend this meeting, she is keen to join the next one.

Katherine brought the meeting to a close.