

Maintenance & Inspections Strategy: Public Rights of Way (PRoW)

2026

Contents

Maintenance & Inspections Strategy: Public Rights of Way.....	1
1. Introduction	1
2. Network Hierarchy	1
3. PRow Inspections.....	2
3.1 General Principles for completion of PRow Inspections	2
3.2 Safety Inspection Frequency	3
3.3 Ad Hoc Inspections	3
3.4 Items to be inspected and their Investigatory Levels	3
4. Defect & Observation Assessment	8
4.1 Consequence	8
4.2 Likelihood	8
4.3 Risk Factor Score.....	9
4.4 Defect & Observation Response Times	9
4.4.1 Response times for Defects:	10
4.4.2 Response times for Observations:	10
5. Guidance and Monitoring	11
5.1 Exceptions	11

5.2 Recording of Inspections, Defects & Observations	11
6. Performance Management	11
7. Key Roles and Competencies	12

Maintenance & Inspections Strategy: Public Rights of Way

1. Introduction

The Essex County Council (ECC) Public Rights of Way (PRoW) Maintenance and Inspections Strategy has been fundamentally reviewed with PRoW officers, the inspection team and other practitioners to take account of the recommendations and best practice set out in the October 2016 'Well-managed Highway Infrastructure: A Code of Practice'.

The Code of Practice is designed to promote the adoption of an integrated asset management approach to highway infrastructure based on the establishment of local levels of service through risk-based assessment.

This document supports the overarching ECC Highways Maintenance Policy. It sets out and describes the service levels relating to Essex County Council's risk-based approach to managing, organising, inspecting and maintaining the PRoW network for which it is responsible.

Alongside this strategy will be supporting documents that set down the process and procedures to be operated.

This strategy covers the following key areas:

- Network Hierarchy
- Inspections
- Defect & Observation Investigatory levels
- Items for Inspection
- Defect & Observation Assessments
- Response times

2. Network Hierarchy

In 2022 a functional route hierarchy was implemented across the Essex Public Rights of Way network. This organised the Public Rights of Way for which ECC Highways is responsible into three hierarchies:

- The Primary network (PW1)
- The Secondary network (PW2)
- The Tertiary network (PW3).

These route hierarchies create networks that better reflect the usage of the Public Rights of Way in Essex, which allow us to prioritise our maintenance and network decisions with greater accuracy and ensure a better flow and experience for the user.

Overleaf is a table outlining the rationale behind the makeup of each hierarchy.

Asset Use	Essex PRow Hierarchy	Category Name	Essex Description	Essex Example
High footfall	PW1	Primary network	ECC Public Rights of Way Promoted routes. High Usage PRowS linking to high value countryside and leisure opportunities.	The Essex Way or Footpath 42 Herongate and Ingrave, a PRow providing access to Thorndon Country Park
	PW2	Secondary Network	High and Medium usage PRowS that link local access urban footways, feed into local shopping centres, railway stations, bus stations, schools, hospitals, public gardens, sports centres, and other public spaces, etc.	Bridleway 30 Danbury, a route through Danbury Common or or Bridleway 24 Writtle, a well- used cycle path into the city
Low footfall	PW3	Tertiary Network	Routes associated with low usage through rural areas.	Footpath 54 Galleywood, a path alongside arable fields or or Bridleway 47 Stock, a quiet tree-lined track

3. PRow Inspections

3.1 General Principles for completion of PRow Inspections

The Council shall carry out inspections using trained personnel in the manner deemed appropriate for the particular inspection route. The safety of the PRow Officer will always be of paramount consideration in determining the method of inspection.

Inspections of PRow will consider the public rights associated with the route, identify Defects & Observations and record asset condition information where appropriate. In the event of severe weather, e.g. snow, or emergency conditions that affect business continuity, such as outbreaks of illness, the inspections may be suspended at the decision of senior management. This will also be the case where there is concern for spreading outbreaks of infectious disease among animals through the use of PRow, or when advised so to do by ECC Trading Standards responding to local, national or international concerns, advice and directives relating to required containment of outbreaks of infectious animal disease.

3.2 Safety Inspection Frequency

Safety inspections will be undertaken on an annual basis for PW1 Routes only. Thereafter, inspections of other routes and assets will be prioritised as resources permit to the remainder of the network. The inspections plan retains flexibility to account for holiday, sickness and unforeseen events.

3.3 Ad Hoc Inspections

In addition to routine safety inspections, the Council receives reports and enquiries from several sources regarding its PRow assets. The Council operates systems that allow these to be received either electronically or via traditional methods such as by letter or telephone call. It also operates a system to receive reports or enquiries of an emergency nature outside of normal working hours. Note, however, a report considered urgent by the customer cannot be reported online, as they are required to be reported by telephone to avoid risk posed by potential delay of other reporting methods.

An enquiry is not considered to be a defect or observation meeting the investigatory levels until it has been assessed by a member of the PRow Team or Highway Officer and until that time it remains a query from the public.

On receipt of the report the unconfirmed defect or observation will be triaged, based on the information received, and assigned one of the following two categories:

Urgent	Urgent enquiries will be assessed within 5 working days from the day received. *
Standard	Standard enquiries will be assessed within 56 working days from the day received, including site visit if required.*

**During periods of high demand such as after severe weather, it may not be possible to comply with these response times.*

3.4 Items to be inspected and their Investigatory Levels

The main purpose of inspections is to identify defects that are likely to be a potential hazard or inconvenience to the highway user. The inspection can also be used to identify observations that have an impact on the long-term serviceability and sustainability of the highway asset.

All items that meet the criteria listed below, that meet or exceed the investigatory levels receive a Risk Assessment score which will subsequently identify the site as either a defect or observation. In the event that a defect is identified, the defect will be assigned a priority for repair.

The items to be assessed during an inspection and the corresponding investigatory levels are set out below. PRowS that are not publicly maintainable* will be inspected but only roadside signage and obstruction defects will be recorded.

**Public rights of way that are not maintained at public expense are typically those shown on a definitive map but whose maintenance is not a highway authority duty, which can occur on land that has not been dedicated by the landowner as a highway maintainable at public expense or which has come into being as a result of presumed dedication.*

Item	Site Criteria	Investigatory Level	Notes
Surface	Line of path not marked on ground across arable crop and no visible waymarkers	Will be risk assessed	This would include crops not cut or sprayed off
	Surface ploughed and not marked after 14 days from first inspection	Will be risk assessed	
	Encroachment on width of path, but is still passable	Where recorded width, historic width or legal minimum is compromised	Encroachment from erosion, ploughing or fencing. This item is not for upgrowth or overgrowth.
	Linear ruts created by vehicular use	Deeper than 400mm for length of more than 30m, and leaving an available surface of less than 1.5m width	Parallel wheel ruts are accepted in unsurfaced vehicular highways
	A pothole or large depressions 200mm long and 200mm wide on natural or unbound surface and where there is no easy route around multiple similar defects	>200mm depth	
	A pothole >100mm long and >100mm wide on bituminous or other bound surface and where there is no easy route around multiple similar defects	>100mm depth	
	Animal activity causing a hazard and where there is no easy route around multiple similar defects	Will be risk assessed	
Steps	Missing sections	Will be risk assessed	
	Damaged or failing item causing a hazard to the user	Will be risk assessed	

Item	Site Criteria	Investigatory Level	Notes
*Bridge	Deck planks missing Damaged or failing item causing a hazard to the user Whole item missing	Will be risk assessed Will be risk assessed Will be risk assessed	Note that this is a missing legitimate structure, not where improvements are required to the network to install a bridge at a fording point or to install one that has never existed on the network or is not highway maintainable
Boardwalk	Damaged or failing item causing a hazard to the user Missing sections	Will be risk assessed Will be risk assessed	
Handrail (to either bridge or slope or steps)	Damaged or unstable item (unrestrained movement when pressure is applied) causing a hazard to the user Item missing	Will be risk assessed Will be risk assessed	For bridge handrails, ditch depth over 1m Handrails are not a usual accompaniment to steps or slope on PW3
Vegetation upgrowth	Grass growth Dense nettles, thistles or other nuisance upgrowth for a length of over 10m Growth of shrubby vegetation within highway boundary – brambles, blackthorn	Height >450mm Will be risk assessed Will be risk assessed	On PW1 only Nuisance growth must be within the boundary of the highway and obstructing passage. Nuisance growth must be within the boundary of the highway and obstructing passage.

Item	Site Criteria	Investigatory Level	Notes
Vegetation side growth	Vegetation growth from beside highway restricts passage	Will be risk assessed	Where known width, historic width or legal minimum is compromised
Trees within and Beside highway	Unstable tree with danger of collapse onto highway	Will be risk assessed	
Fallen tree	Fallen tree obstructing clear passage	Will be risk assessed	
Drainage	Blocked or collapsed ditches or drainage systems, including culverts that are causing flooding or surface damage to highway	Will be risk assessed	
Flooding	Usage prevented by standing water at least ten working days after last significant rainfall Water flowing across highway (other than a ford) so as to prevent use at least ten working days after last significant rainfall	Will be risk assessed Will be risk assessed	
Pedestrian guard rails and barriers	Missing item causing a hazard to the user Damaged or unstable item (unrestrained movement when pressure is applied)	Will be risk assessed Will be risk assessed	ECC responsibility
Bollards	Missing item causing a hazard to the user Damaged or unstable (unrestrained movement when pressure is applied)	Will be risk assessed Will be risk assessed	

Item	Site Criteria	Investigatory Level	Notes
Obstruction	Permanent or temporary obstruction in the highway so as to prevent passage	Will be risk assessed	Reservoir or ponds, fly tips, buildings, hay bales, silage or manure, machinery or vehicles, fencing or walls etc.
Fingerpost	Missing item Damaged or unstable item (unrestrained movement when pressure is applied) Item shows incorrect status	Will be risk assessed Will be risk assessed Will be risk assessed	
Waymark post	Missing item causing a hazard to the user Discs missing, faded or showing incorrect status or direction	At junction with other PRoW or where inspector assesses it is necessary to identify the network Will be risk assessed	Officer to rectify on site
Other hazards to the public	Anything else considered a hazard	Will be risk assessed	
Stile	Does not meet appropriate standard Unstable item causing a hazard to users	Will be risk assessed Will be risk assessed	
Gate	Does not meet appropriate standard Unstable item causing a hazard to users	Will be risk assessed Will be risk assessed	

**Inspection and Risk Assessment for Bridges*

Bridges >8m in length will be subject to routine safety inspections carried out by the Essex Highways Structures Team in accordance with the latest edition of the 'Maintenance and Inspections Strategy: Structures' published on the Essex Highways website.

4. Defect & Observation Assessment

Recorded locations that meet investigatory level are risk assessed during the inspection on a site-specific basis. This allows other considerations that the inspector feels relevant to be factored into the risk assessment and used to determine the appropriate response. The general process and methodology to be applied by the Inspector is set out below.

When a site meets investigatory level, it is risk assessed. The risk shall be assessed in two parts: consequence and likelihood.

4.1 Consequence

The PRow Officer will conduct an assessment which considers the most likely outcome if there is an interaction by a highway user with the site.

Examples of factors that a PRow Officer will consider are:

- The impact of the site upon people likely to use a PRow of this character including:
 - Whether it would be likely to present a significant safety risk
 - Circumstances that would increase the likely consequence of an interaction

The likely consequence of an interaction by a highway user will be quantified by the PRow Officer using their experience and judgement on a scale of 1 to 5:

1. Insignificant Impact
2. Minor Impact
3. Moderate Impact
4. Significant Impact
5. Major Impact

4.2 Likelihood

The likelihood of a highway user interacting with the site shall be quantified on a scale of 1 to 5. Considerations will include the following:

- Its location in the highway
- All users exercising their public rights on the highway
- Other factors within the knowledge of the inspector

1. Rare
2. Unlikely
3. Possible
4. Likely
5. Almost Certain

		Likelihood				
		Rare (1)	Unlikely (2)	Possible (3)	Likely (4)	Almost Certain (5)
Consequence	Insignificant (1)	1	2	3	4	5
	Minor (2)	2	4	6	8	10
	Moderate (3)	3	6	9	12	15
	Significant (4)	4	8	12	16	20
	Major (5)	5	10	15	20	25

4.3 Risk Factor Score

The risk factor is the product of likelihood score and consequence score assessments multiplied together. This will produce a range of scores from 1 to 25. It is this score that identifies the seriousness of the risk and consequently that identifies the appropriate level of response.

The level of response can be correlated with the risk factor scores via the risk matrix below.

Where defects or observations are caused by a third party, or are the responsibility of a third party, the details will be recorded and a risk assessment carried out, and the third party will be informed of their responsibilities in rectifying the matter.

4.4 Defect & Observation Response Times

Sites that are subject to risk assessment will be defined as follows;

Safety Defects will be sites having a risk evaluation score of 8 or more and be defined as follows:

- PR1 and PR2 safety defects are those sites that following risk assessment may pose a higher risk of causing harm or damage to the public and therefore require attention within a prescribed timescale as they represent an immediate or imminent safety hazard.
- PR3 safety defects are those sites that following risk assessment may pose a reduced level of risk compared to PR1 and PR2 defects and therefore do not require to be addressed within a prescribed timescale. PR3 defects will be considered for repair as part of a planned maintenance programme, to achieve appropriate risk management within resource scheduling that achieves

value for money.

Observations will be sites having a risk score of less than 8 and be defined as follows:

- Observations are those sites that, following risk assessment, are of low risk of causing harm or damage and are therefore considered only to impact long term serviceability and sustainability of the highway asset.

4.4.1 Response times for Defects:

Response time is defined as the time taken to deliver a make safe or permanent repair from the time the safety defect is identified by a PRow officer.

4.4.2 Response times for Observations:

No priority of repair will be given to sites identified as Observations, and these sites will only be considered for repair where they coincide with locations subject to broader scoped works identified through other Strategies or maintenance initiatives. For example, broad scoped maintenance schemes where work is programmed over time to achieve efficient resource scheduling.

Observations will be reviewed during safety inspections or in response to customer enquiries, and in the event that a revised risk evaluation score re-categorises a site as a defect, it will then follow the process set out in this Strategy relating to recorded defects.

		OPR Score 1-6	PR3 Score 8-12	PR2 Score 15-20	PR1 Score 25
Priority response	Primary PRow route	Only to be considered for repair where sites coincide with locations subject to broader scoped works identified through other Strategies or maintenance initiatives	Defect to be considered for repair as part of a planned maintenance programme	20 working days*	2 working days*
	Secondary PRow route			40 working days*	5 working days*
	Tertiary PRow route				10 working days*

** Where a defect may require follow up treatment to affect a permanent repair, this will be undertaken in accordance with the subsequent revised risk assessment score.*

Where defects and observations recorded are the responsibility of the landowner or occupier, PRow Officers will act in accordance with the 'Essex County Council Public Rights of Way Enforcement Concordat'.

5. Guidance and Monitoring

Every PRow Officer receives regular training to promote relevance and consistency as far as practicable. In addition, there is an audit regime in place to check the quality and consistency of defect and observation identification and recording.

5.1 Exceptions

There will be occasions where the PRow Officer will be faced with exceptional situations or when having completed the risk assessment, the PRow Officer feels a higher priority of response is warranted. In such situations the PRow Officer may use their discretion to increase the priority of response.

In these cases, the PRow Officer will record this increase in priority on the notes relevant to the site risk assessment record, summarising their reasoning. Supporting evidence in the form of extra photographs, etc., may be linked or attached to the site record within the asset management system.

5.2 Recording of Inspections, Defects & Observations

All inspections are to be electronically recorded with the following information.

- Date and time of inspection
- Identity of the lead Officer
- Type of inspection
- Identity of secondary Officer (if applicable)
- Notes of any issues or concerns noted by the Officer
- General photographs of the PRow that was inspected

Defects & Observations will be recorded with the following information.

- Date and time that the defect or observation was recorded
- Identity of the Officer
- Description of the defect or observation (including any measurements)
- Location of the defect or observation
- The assessment scores and risk factor score
- The defect priority category (PR1, PR2 or PR3) or designation as observation (OPR)
- Linked photographs where available and appropriate

6. Performance Management

In order to assess and manage the delivery of this Strategy, the following measures and indicators will be recorded and assessed:

- Monitoring and reporting each year the level of missed inspections, split by cause
- Monitoring and reporting each month the level of defects being recorded, split by priority category, as well as the level of observations being recorded.

The reports shall be maintained and presented as Inspection Performance Measures.

7. Key Roles and Competencies

There is a dedicated team whose main function is undertaking PRow Inspections in accordance with this Strategy. All members of the team will be assessed against the PRow Inspections Competency Framework to ensure they meet the minimum standards for their role.

The Competency Framework sets out the expected knowledge level against the relevant tasks or requirements for each role in the team.

This information is issued by:
Essex County Council

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