Essex County Council

TEXT-ONLY DRAFT

Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP) 2026.

Introduction.

Section 60 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 required every local highway authority to prepare and publish a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP) setting out the authority's strategy for improving access throughout the Rights of Way network in its area.

'Rights of Way' are defined as all those footpaths, bridleways, restricted byways and byways included within the authority's Definitive Map and Statement - collectively referred to as Public Rights of Way (PRoW) - as well as legally established cycle tracks.

Essex County Council published its first RoWIP in 2009; this document is a new RoWIP for 2026, rather than a review of the 2009 document, recognising the changes in the political, legislative and policy landscape over the intervening years.

Format.

A brief summary of the relevant demographic within the Essex County area is presented, alongside an assessment of the current extent of available rights of way and open access land.

An update on new legislation, policy and strategy documents is presented.

Objectives and proposed actions are listed, within a framework of seven 'themes'.

Outcomes against the 2009 RoWIP are tabulated in appendix 1. Objective references run consecutively from the 2009 RoWIP.

Setting the Scene.

What exactly are Public Rights of Way?

PRoW are highways mainly used by non-motorised traffic. Their existence and route are demonstrated by the Definitive Map and Statement. They enjoy protection against obstruction and encroachment under the terms of the Highways Act 1980 which imposes several duties on the County Council in its capacity as the local highway authority, as well as providing it with certain powers through which to fulfil those duties.

The classes of PRoW are:

- Public Footpath: restricted to use by pedestrians with or without any 'usual accompaniments' such as pushchairs, dogs or wheelchairs. Not to be confused with 'footways' which are the edges of vehicular roads but restricted to pedestrian-only traffic.
- Public Bridleway: allow pedestrian access as above but also provide the right to ride or lead a horse and to ride or push a bicycle. Legally, cyclists should give way to other users.
- Restricted Byway: access as per a public bridleway above with the addition of the right to drive a non-motorised vehicle (animal-drawn carriage).
- Byway (also known as a Byway Open to All Traffic or 'BOAT'): Open to all classes of traffic including motorised vehicles however their primary use is non-motorised and they are maintained accordingly. Motorised vehicles using a byway must be 'road legal' i.e. with valid road fund licence, insurance and MOT.
- Cycleways. Technically not PRoW but considered under the 'rights of way' banner. Usually in urban settings, cycleways are former public footpaths dedicated by a Cycle Track Conversion Order to also legitimise use by pedal cyclists.

The vast majority of PRoW are historic routes in use since time immemorial. They can, however, still be created through a variety of legal mechanisms and can similarly be diverted or extinguished. 'Forgotten ways' can also be claimed and added to the Definitive Map and Statement if the claim, following investigation, is successful. Hence the network is to a certain degree in a constant state of flux. The current Essex County PRoW network is one of the largest managed by a single organisation, possibly the largest. Current lengths of routes are tabulated below and compared to the 2009 figures. The massive percentage increase in restricted byways is as a result of routes successfully claimed by the public.

Classification	**Dec 2025 Kilometres**	**2009 Kilometres**	**% change**
Footpath	5337.44	5274.31	+1.20
Bridleway	822.76	776.09	+6.01
Restricted Byway	16.09	0.68	+2266.18
Byway	237.44	238.81	-0.57
Total	6413.73	6289.89	+1.97

The Business Approach.

The RoWIP should be read and applied in the context of a 'business as usual' approach in that Essex County Council as the local highway authority embraces and adheres to its legislative duties with regard to PRoW. Most notably, the Highways Act 1980 imposes a duty to assert, protect and maintain the network and to keep the Definitive Map and Statement under continuous review. As in any working environment, the 'business as usual' approach encompasses continuous improvement, maximising efficiency and effectiveness wherever possible within the legislative and policy framework.

Perhaps the most significant relevant development since the 2009 RoWIP is that the highways function in Essex has been delivered, as of April 2012, via an integrated partnership contract under the banner of *Essex Highways*. The current contract expires on 31st March 2027 but the County Council is procuring a new contract to run from 1st April 2027 for a period of 7 years.

Under this contract the PRoW service has been delivered by Essex Highways under the strategic guidance of Essex County Council.

With regard to the future, this has to be considered within the context of devolution and local government review proposals. This RoWIP again works on the 'business as usual' premiss whereby any succeeding authority or contractor may adopt the plan as written or may decide to produce their own.

<u>New Legislation, Guidance & National Policy.</u>

- Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009.

Amongst a vast array of measures irrelevant to Rights of Way, this act lays the legislative foundation of the continuous England Coast Path (now named the King Charles III England Coast Path). Although Natural England were tasked with implementation, much of the proposed route is on existing PRoW. Essex Highways is tasked with the establishment works, including of those sections which are not PRoW, and subsequent maintenance. With Essex having in excess of 350 miles of coastline, this is a significant undertaking.

- Equality Act 2010.

This major piece of legislation protects the public from discrimination on the grounds of numerous protected characteristics. In PRoW terms this refers primarily to disability, or any form of impaired mobility, and maternity (using a pushchair).

It was followed up with guidance from DEFRA on *Authorising structures (gaps, gates & stiles) on rights of way* (October 2010). The principal impact of this guidance was the emphasis of gates over stiles, particularly when addressing application from landholders to place new structures across PRoW. Overall, the effect of the Act and Guidance was to renew the focus on accessibility – e.g. to always seek the least restrictive option when it comes to structures - and to provide highway authorities with the necessary tools to improve it.

This in turn led on to a review of the relevant British Standard, which was subsequently revised and republished: *BS 5709:2018 Gaps, gates and stiles – Specification.* This document added a more practical framework to the 2010 DEFRA Guidance and explicitly states "stiles shall only be used for new structures when exceptional circumstances require them". It does not, however, define "exceptional circumstances" and as yet no relevant case law has been established. It did, however, provide new templates for accessible structures and a detailed least-restrictive hierarchy.

- Deregulation Act 2015.

Intended to introduce numerous procedural changes aimed at simplifying and expediting local government processes, including several involving PRoW. The vast majority of those provisions have yet to come into force. This has led to the proposed cut-off date for the recording of pre-1949 ways being amended from 2026 to 2031, with plans announced by central government to abolish it entirely.

- Presumptions Guidance 2023.

In August 2023 DEFRA published *Government guidance on diversion or extinguishment of public rights of way that pass through private dwellings, their curtilages and gardens, farmyards and industrial or commercial premises*.

The effect of the guidance is to enable local authorities, when making a Public Path Order, to give greater consideration to the intrusive nature of certain rights of way and the privacy and security of landholders. The guidance concludes: "In making its decision as to whether the existing path should be diverted or extinguished, an authority should consider in particular the impact of the existing path on the property owner and/or occupier against the benefit that having the right of way through the land brings to the public, taking account of this guidance".

- National Planning Policy Framework 2024.

Published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in December 2024, this document provides key guidance to local planners and policy-makers. Frequent reference to the promotion of walking and cycling is made under the headings of 'Promoting healthy and safe communities' and 'Promoting sustainable transport'. Specifically, para. 105 states:

> "Planning policies and decisions should protect and enhance public rights of way and access, including taking opportunities to provide better facilities for users, for example by adding links to existing rights of way networks including National Trails".

- Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) 2025.

Published by DEFRA in December 2025. Chapter 5 'Access to Nature' is very relevant to Rights of Way, with 6 Key Commitments (86-91) all centred around increased access to and time spent in the natural and heritage environment.

<u>Local Policy Context.</u>

As well as the national impacts detailed above, the RoWIP is prepared in accordance with a range of local policies and strategies, notably:

- Essex Local Transport Plan 4 (current draft).
- Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy 2020.
- Active Essex *Fit for the Future* Strategy 2021-2031.
- Maintenance & Inspections Strategy: Public Rights of Way (PRoW) 2026.
- Essex Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022-2026.
- Water Strategy for Essex 2024.
- Essex Highways Strategy for Managing its Green Estate 2024.
- Essex Local Nature Recovery Strategy 2025.
- Essex Cycling Strategy 2025.
- ECC Biodiversity Action Plan 2025

<u>The Role of Rights of Way.</u>

Fundamentally, the Rights of Way network supports:

- Outdoor leisure activity.

- Access to nature and heritage assets.
- Tourism.
- Everyday sustainable travel.
- Health and wellbeing.

Demographics.

At the 2021 Census the population of Essex County (excluding the unitary authority areas Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea) was 1,503,521 and estimated to be growing by 10,000 per annum.

Including the unitaries (Thurrock approx. 176,000; Southend-on-Sea approx. 180,700) the total for 'Greater Essex' was approx. 1,860,221.

Of the 12 local authority areas of Essex County, Maldon was the least populous (66,200) and the least densely populated (193/km^2) while Colchester was the most populous (192,700) and Basildon the most densely populated (1,760/km^2). The average population density across the county is approx. 450/km^2.

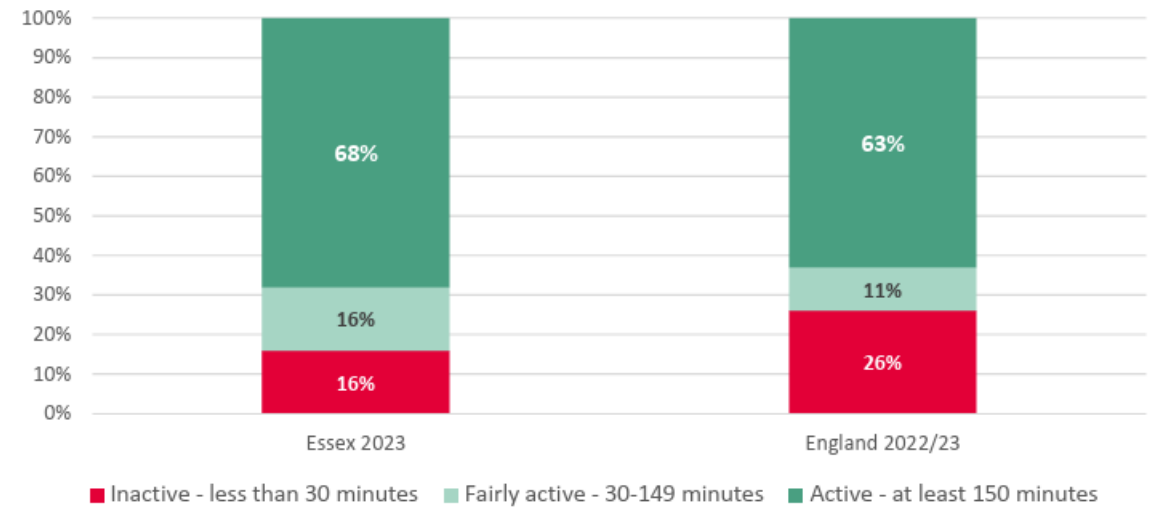
At the 2021 census, across Essex County approx. 320,000 of the population were aged 65+, some 21.2%. That figure was 19% in 2009.

Similarly, approx. 329,000 (21.9%) were under 18, leaving approx. 854,500 (56.9%) between the ages of 18 and 64.

Health Demographics.

The Essex Resident Survey of 2023 suggested that Essex County residents are more active than the national average, with 68% classed as 'active' (at least 150 minutes of physical activity per week) compared to the England average of 63%.

Chart HW8: Levels of Physical Activity a week



Source: Essex Residents Survey 2023; Active Lives Survey Nov '22- '23. Please note that data for Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea is not available.

Conversely, 65.3% of adults in Greater Essex were estimated as overweight or obese in 2021/2022 (Greater Essex Trends: Health and Wellbeing) compared to 63.8% across England as a whole.

The Essex Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy (JHWS) 2022-2026 targets an outcome of "improved levels of physical activity amongst adults by helping them find ways to integrate physical activity into their daily lives". The preceding JHWS documents had all identified "increasing physical activity" as a key priority.

The Active Essex *Fit for the Future* Strategy 2021-2031 recognises walking, running and cycling amongst its 'Foundations for Success' with the added benefit of often involving group activity, helping to address loneliness and social isolation, also a stated outcome of the JHWS.

The JHWS also highlights childhood obesity as an issue in Essex, with 21% of 4/5 year olds classified as overweight in 2022/23, increasing to over a third (34.2%) in 10/11 year olds, a 13.3% increase over the 15 years since 2007/08. The national equivalent statistics are 20% for 4/5 year olds and 31% for 10/11 year olds (source: House of Lords Library). The Strategy goes on to identify the target of having "enabled children, young people and their families to be more physically active". Furthermore, the Active Essex Strategy makes frequent reference to enabling children to walk and cycle to and from school as a key contributory factor towards high activity levels and the resultant health benefits.

RoWIP Objectives.

The 2009 RoWIP (p.28) listed ten 'objectives', divided between six headings. Seven 'themes' were then introduced under which were listed 'interventions' (effectively actions).

In this document that hierarchy and terminology is simplified, focusing on 'objectives', 'actions' and 'targets' although within the same overarching themes.

To avoid confusion, references are numbered consecutively from the previous RoWIP.

Themes.

The seven themes are:

A. Education, information and promotion.
B. Produce an up-to-date and publicly available digitised Definitive Map for the whole of Essex.
C. A well signed and maintained network.
D. A more continuous network.
E. Provide an accessible network that meets the requirements of all users.
F. Make better use of sustainable practices, including specific regard to seasonal variation and promotion of biodiversity/abundance.
G. Reduce anti-social behaviour on Rights of Way.

THEME A: Education, information and promotion.

The establishment of Visit Essex as the official tourism organisation for Greater Essex has removed much of that specific responsibility from the PRoW service, although the Essex Highways Communications team maintains a brief to publicise 'good news' stories and to maintain a positive profile.

The availability and proliferation of online resources has meant there is less need for the small information booklets previously produced and circulated by the PRoW team., although digital versions of some are still made available online. The service also promotes a number of trail routes and publicises a monthly walk through Essex Life magazine.

The importance of PRoW to health were placed in hard focus by the Covid-19 pandemic, when PRoW were the primary means whereby the public could exercise, particularly during lockdown episodes. The ongoing Essex JHWS, of which ECC is a partner, further highlights the benefits of physical activity while the Active Essex *Fit for the Future* Strategy 2021-2031 extends this to cover the mental health benefits and the relevance towards addressing issues such as childhood obesity.

Ref	Objective	Detail	Actions	Timeframe
A11	Information on non-PRoW routes	Improve promoted connectivity with non-PRoW routes.	Promote and continue to improve the inclusion of cycle tracks, footways and remote footways on the Highways Interactive Map. Include the Active Travel Network and Footway Hierarchy. Also supports theme D.	Year 1
A12	National Trails	Add the Essex stretches of the King Charles III England Coast Path to the Interactive Map.	Year 1 add the open stretches. Add others as they are officially opened.	Year 1 and as required
		Promotion.	Actively promote the opening of new stretches as they become available. Work in partnership with Visit Essex, Natural England and stakeholders.	As they become available.
A13	Promoted routes	Improve condition and promotion of promoted routes.	Focus additional maintenance resources on identified EH promoted PRoW routes. Includes: regular inspection; refresh of waymarking where necessary. Encourage involvement of volunteers.	Year 1-2
			Proactive promotion. Improve links with Visit Essex.	Years 1-3
			Consider new promoted routes and/or adoption of existing routes identified by other organisations.	Research Year 2
			Proactively seek to contribute to others' promotions e.g. the Ramblers, EBA, RCCE, LDWA.	As opportunity arises

			Re-badge 'Essex Walks' to reflect multi-user, e.g. Flitch Way	Year 1
A14	Promote PRoW as sustainable transport	The importance of PRoW to health were placed in hard focus by the Covid-19 pandemic, when PRoW were the primary means whereby the public could exercise. This also links to use as sustainable transport.	Establish greater inter-agency links, both internally and externally, with, for example: Planning and Development Management; Minerals & Waste; NHS; Visit Essex; Sustrans; Environment & Climate Change working groups.	Finish prep year 3 Implement year 4 onward

THEME B: Produce an up-to-date and publicly available digitised Definitive Map for the whole of Essex.

The postponement and stated government intention (DEFRA EIP) to abandon the cut-off date - after which any routes thought to have been rights of way in the past but not included in the Definitive Map & Statement could no longer be claimed - significantly changes the emphasis of this Theme.

The lack of a sudden influx of claimed paths and potential additions to the Definitive Map means that moves to consolidate it and publish a new edition may now be advanced.

Ref	Objective	Detail	Further Detail/Future Actions	Timeframe
B5	Consolidate the Definitive Map	Produce a new edition of the Definitive Map (& Statement) incorporating all modifications since the current 2002 edition.	Undertake a feasibility study with regard to Definitive Map consolidation. Produce a costed business case.	By end of Year 2
B6	Review the Definitive Map	Statutory duty but 2026 deadline relating to historic errors has been rescinded.	Essex Legal Services continue to investigate applications to modify the Definitive Map. There are currently 48 registered applications pending. Target to halve this in 5 years.	Year 5
B7	Presumptions guidance	DEFRA published Presumptions Guidance in 2023 with implications for weighted consideration of certain factors within the PPO process.	Incorporate and apply the new Guidance consistently. Monitor case studies elsewhere in England.	Year 1 and monitor
B8	PPO waiting list	Diversions/extinguishments need to be processed in as timely fashion as possible. New planning regulations may make this even more relevant. This may require staff resource.	Keep the waiting period to 18 months or below.	Year 2 and maintain

B9	Integrate additional access information	Add to the online interactive map information regarding county-wide public access areas.	Include details relating to open access land; nature reserves; country parks; village greens; common land. Year 1 feasibility study, Years 2-3 add the information, maintain thereafter.	Year 3

THEME C: A well signed and maintained network.

Surface and signage maintenance on PRoW are primary and statutory functions of the highway authority. This includes:

- Installation and maintenance of bridges (unless third-party owned).
- Installation and maintenance of a fingerpost at every junction of a PRoW and a road.
- Preventing surface vegetation from rendering a path inconvenient to use.
- Waymarking, though not statutory, is recognised as providing a useful reference for users especially in certain situations.

The adoption of a formal PRoW hierarchy and maintenance strategy, direct outcomes of the 2009 RoWIP, have facilitated a far more structured and consistent approach to work on the network.

Ref	Objective	**Detail**	**Further Detail/Actions**	**Timeframe**
C6	Fault reporting	Continuous improvement to the online fault reporting/tracking portal.	Ensure it is user-friendly, reliable and provides relevant and accurate feedback.	Immediate
			Liaise with users, particularly via the PRoW User Group, to monitor customer satisfaction. Also benchmarking via organisations such as ADEPT and IPRoW.	Immediate
C7	Improve signage maintenance	Further improve the standard of fingerposting on the network.	Implement a programme to identify and replace missing fingerposts.	Year 1
		Address the deteriorating condition of waymarking on non-promoted routes.	PRoW Maintenance Strategy requires damaged/missing waymarking to be logged as a defect. Priority is added if at a PRoW junction, or at the inspecting Officer's discretion.	Ongoing
			Volunteer groups encouraged to repair waymarking defects.	Year 1
			Following completion of the fingerposts project, a similar project to be undertaken specific to waymarking.	Year 3

C8	Byway management & maintenance	Avoid creation of anti-social behaviour hot-spots caused by inappropriate motorised use of byways.	Support and widen membership of the Essex Byways Working Group and implement the Group's decisions.	Immediate
		Minimise the disproportionate maintenance burden caused by damage to byways.	Work with the Byways Working Group, Essex Police, landowners and other local authorities to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour associated with byways (see also G4).	Years 1-5
			Operate a proactive maintenance regime to minimise severe damage and avoid high maintenance costs.	Immediate
C9	Utilising volunteers	Maximise use of volunteer labour across the network: • optimises overall cost-effectiveness of network maintenance. • harnesses good relations with local groups. • cultivates happiness and a sense of 'usefulness' among the volunteers. • group work facilitates social inclusion. • outdoor physical work provides 'green gym' opportunity.	Seek to utilise further volunteer resources. Continue to support volunteer initiatives across a range of projects.	Immediate Years 1-10

THEME D: A more continuous network.

For the rights of way network to be most effective as a public facility it obviously needs to be well interconnected. While roads can provide links between rights of way they often have no footway or insufficient verge and levels of road traffic are continuously increasing, particularly in rural and semi-rural areas where the roads are less likely to have a footway or verge.

For non-pedestrian users, the bridleway, restricted byway and byways networks are much more dispersed and significantly discontinuous in places, requiring even greater use of roads in-between rights of way.

Large infrastructure projects present a potential source of network fragmentation through route severance; Network Rail are also always seeking to remove level crossings from their network.

Ref	Objective	Detail	Further Detail/Actions	Timeframe
D7	Footpath/ bridleway creation	Expand the network where possible, even for the most basic access right.	Where feasible, any opportunity for new PRoW should be pursued. Link to PPO and planning applications, section 106 negotiations. Give added priority to links with green/blue infrastructure, leisure & tourism facilities and places of work/education. Bear in mind connectivity, though any new rights may provide additional opportunity for outside exercise/engagement with nature even if poorly connected, and connectivity may improve through further future gains.	Years 1-10 Immediate Immediate
D8	Network Rail (NR)	Avoid severance of the network by further loss of rail crossings.	If it is agreed that a genuine safety concern exists: • Push NR to seek to address it through vegetation management, whistle-boards, miniature stop lights, underpass or overbridge. • Only consider diversion if a safe and no less convenient and enjoyable route is available. • Make reference to the NR Memorandum of Understanding where appropriate. • Temporary closure and permanent stopping up are the very last option, only if absolutely unavoidable with no alternative.	Immediate
D9	Climate response	Plan to 'climate-proof' the network in response to changing conditions, notably: • Summer drought and wet winters. • Sea-level rise with increased probability of coastal erosion. • Riverbank erosion from increased run-off and higher winter rainfall levels.	Work with Natural England to ensure roll back arrangements are in place where necessary.	Year 4
			Investigate temporary winter prohibitions if needed to protect natural surfaces of certain routes. If a byway, plan via the Byways Working Group.	As required
			Consider further Anti Erosion Agreements and/or review any diversion proposals taking PRoW near to water courses.	As required
			Reference to DEFRA's Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management policy; work alongside the Environment Agency to implement Shoreline Management Plans.	As required

THEME E: Provide an accessible network that meets the requirements of all users.

Very much a focus area, particularly given the legislative introductions since the CRoW Act 2000, especially the Equality Act 2010. The aspiration is to improve the network for *all* users, existing and potential.

Through its response to the guidance issued subsequent to the Equality Act – notably adopting a proactive stance towards the removal of stiles from the network and a blanket refusal to authorise new ones - Essex Highways is considered to be at the forefront of network accessibility. There is always, however, enormous room for improvement.

The subject, of course, has to be considered in the context that the majority of the network is historic and crosses countryside which has natural topography, although converse to that are the advances in technology meaning those with disabilities are increasingly able to access routes which have steep gradients or uneven surfaces. Consideration also has to be given to the increasing proportion of older people in the county, who are still active and wish to exercise and enjoy outdoor leisure activities but may have some mobility limitations which make structures, notably stiles, a significant barrier.

Ref	Objective	Detail	Further Detail/Actions	Timeframe
E5	Enhance accessibility of existing network for all users and potential users	Surface condition, available width and structures can present barriers for many, above and beyond what might be considered an unlawful obstruction. Obvious links to many other objectives in the Plan, including others within this Theme.	Wherever reasonably possible the PRoW surface should be firm and level with any arising vegetation kept to a minimum. All actioned with reference to the PRoW Maintenance and Inspections Strategy.	Immediate
			Clear widths maximised where possible. Ref: Sensory Trust guidance "By All Reasonable Means".	Immediate
E6	All structures are least restrictive	Continue adherence to section 147 Highways Act 1980 and British Standard 5709:2018.	Robust adherence to the s.147 HA80 process. No structure permitted if criteria are not met.	Immediate
			If s.147 criteria are met, rigid adherence to BS 5709:2018 and its 'least restrictive' hierarchy. No new stiles authorised.	Immediate
E7	Reduce the number of structures	Actively seek to remove stiles and gates from rights of way wherever possible.	Address any structures found to be present on the network without authorisation (recorded as limitation or with s.147 HA80 consent). • Enforce removal if s.147 criteria not met. • If s.147 HA80 criteria are met, ensure the landholder has the least restrictive structure in place and then issue consent.	Years 1-10

			Liaise with landholders to seek removal of any authorised structures which are no longer required.	Years 1-10
E8	Improve accessibility of structures	Act to improve the ease of use of authorised structures.	Actively pursue formal agreements under s.147ZA HA80 whereby existing authorised structures are replaced by a less restrictive alternative.	Immediate
			Seek and assist sources of external funding to help replace structures with less restrictive alternatives.	Immediate
E9	Steps/slopes	Methods of addressing gradients on rights of way.	Wherever reasonably possible no routes with a longitudinal gradient steeper than 1 in 20.	Immediate
			Crossfalls kept to a minimum wherever reasonably possible.	Immediate
			Use appropriate surfacing materials where exceptional slopes cannot be avoided.	Immediate
			If steps cannot be avoided then they should comply with the latest design guidance.	Immediate
E10	Bridges	Act to improve the ease of use of bridges.	Seek to provide step-free access.*	Review year 5
			All bridges to meet the required design specification. See appendix 2.	Immediate
			Review of standard PRoW bridge width to consider increasing footbridge to 925mm.	Year 2
E11	Routes accessible by all.	Develop specific identified routes accessible for all regardless of any mobility issues.	Identify and promote at least 12 routes, ideally circular and with a variety of lengths, accessible to all and with links to accessible transport and/or green/blue infrastructure wherever possible. Include on the interactive map.	Year 1
			Those identified routes to be subject to greater scrutiny and maintenance so as to remain fully accessible.	Year 2
			Add a minimum of 6 additional routes, possibly extending or linking the existing.	Year 3
			Continue to add 6 additional routes every other year, seeking to spread the coverage over a variety of landscape types and build networks in some areas.	Year 5 Year7 Year 9
E12			Seek to avoid the necessity for any new limitations and if they are unavoidable then they must be least restrictive.	Immediate

	Accessibility of proposed diversions	When landholders seek to divert rights of way, ensure the proposed new routes take accessibility into full consideration.	Seek minimum widths whenever practicable: 2 metres for footpaths and 3 metres for bridleways.	Immediate
			Avoid new routes with a longitudinal gradient steeper than 1 in 20 and a cross gradient greater than 1 in 40.	Immediate
			Any adjacent planting to leave sufficient margin, taking side growth into consideration.	Immediate
E13	Landowner guidance	Make relevant details and information available to landholders.	Review and republish the guidance document: 'Landowners and Farmers Guide to Public Rights of Way'.	Republish Year 2

* The Environment Agency require bridge decks to be 600mm above bank level. This is currently being disputed on Equality Act grounds. Wooden bridges have also been demonstrated to last longer if not dug into the bank; solutions are being investigated, e.g. ramping to any step or utilising alternative materials.

THEME F: Make better use of sustainable practices, including specific regard to seasonal variation and promotion of biodiversity/abundance.

Matters pertaining to this theme have developed extensively as reflected in national guidance and policy/strategy.

As an inherently 'green' asset, the rights of way network is intimately bound into all proposals for more sustainable travel, increasing biodiversity/bioabundance and responding to climate change. It is particularly relevant to the Essex Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS).

Ref	Objective	Detail	Further Detail/Actions	Timeframe
F3	Sympathetic maintenance practices	Particularly in the context of the Essex LNRS and the County Council's biodiversity duty, develop maintenance practices which seek to promote biodiversity and abundance and recognise specific valuable habitat types.	Identify and map PRoW routes which are considered as high value from a LNRS perspective.	Year 1
			Develop a PRoW Biodiversity Action Plan.	Year 3
			Implement additional maintenance practices such as: • Sympathetic work to any mature trees. • Leave standing deadwood if possible. • Leaving piles of cut wood to provide habitat. • Sympathetic clearance on wide routes to leave areas of scrub.	Identify and implement year 1 Review annually

			• Zero use of herbicides. • Removing arisings when cutting ground vegetation in some areas. • Creating appropriate habitat piles, including when using chipper. • Create south-facing bare patches (mosaic habitat).	
			Manage surfaces of rights of way with regard to making them more resilient to hotter, drier summers and milder, wetter winters.	Year 2
F4	Diversions	Actively consider environmental issues as integral to the Public Path Order-making process.	Avoid diverting paths through environmentally sensitive habitat.	Year 1
			Consider improving access to green/blue infrastructure.	
			Seek to include biodiversity gains such as native hedge planting and similar habitat generation.	
F5	PRoW as wildlife corridors	Manage the network with due regard to the fact (LNRS) that many PRoW act as effective wildlife corridors, linking habitat areas.	Avoid unnecessary breaks in habitat along rights of way routes.	Year 1
			Identify key routes on the network which can then be managed appropriately.	Year 3
			Work with landholders to improve the quality of potential PRoW wildlife corridors wherever possible.	Year 1
			Promote and protect PRoW which provide green corridors in otherwise urban areas.	Year 1
F6	Drainage	Already integral to many rights of way but circumstances are likely to change with greater peaks and troughs of rainfall and the trend for hotter, drier summers.	Manage drainage of rights of way with greater regard to climate.	Year 1 Review year 4
F7	Byways	Used and managed correctly, byways provide important mosaic habitat.	Byways Working Group to add environmental consideration to its efforts regarding the Essex byways network.	Year 1
	See also A14			

Theme G: Reduce anti-social behaviour on Rights of Way.

Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) is primarily a police responsibility, however ECC recognises that addressing and deterring it are best approached through a collaborative effort, also involving local authorities where appropriate.

Particular issues recognised are:

- Dog fouling.
- Dogs allowed to run loose and out of control.
- Fly-tipping.
- Inconsiderate use of byways by motorised vehicles.
- Unlawful use of footpaths by cyclists (civil offence of trespass against the landowner).
- Unlawful use of footpaths/bridleways by motorised vehicles (criminal offence s.34 Road Traffic Act 1988 enforceable by the Police).

In some instances criminals use rights of way to access the site of their criminal activity. This is often cited as a justification for temporary or even permanent closure of the right of way but the legislation does not permit such action, besides which the access over a right of way is often incidental and access would have been made whether rightful or otherwise.

Ref	Objective	Detail	Further Detail/Actions	Timeframe
G2	Education	Improved publicity aimed at dog walkers regarding their responsibilities for controlling their dogs on PRoW. Carried forward: if anything an even greater focus due to the recent marked increase in dog ownership.	• Working with the NFU/CLA to improve liaison with farmers and landowners. • Erection of signage regarding dog waste in problem areas. • Liaising with local authorities to address specific issues/sites. • Work with Essex Highways comms team to publicise the issue.	Ongoing
G3	Fly-tipping	A particular problem on byways due to vehicular access.	Where possible, supporting local authorities to take steps to prevent fly-tipping and/or to prosecute offenders.	Ongoing
			Byways Working Group to investigate particular problem sites as they arise and discuss/propose potential preventative measures.	Ongoing

G4	Byways	Inappropriate use: • Causing significant damage to routes and making them inconvenient / impossible for other users. • 'Off piste' activity, using byways as access for private land. • As C8	Work with the Byways Working Group, Essex Police, landowners and other local authorities to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour associated with byways.	Ongoing
			Operate a proactive maintenance regime to minimise severe damage and avoid sites becoming attractive to inappropriate users, escalating the problem.	Ongoing
G5	Dog-related problems	Out of control dogs.	• Liaise with Essex Police to reduce the number of recorded dog attacks on PRoW users. • Work with the NFU/CLA and individual landowners to mitigate problems with livestock worrying. • Public education via EH Comms team.	Immediate and ongoing
		Dog waste either not bagged or bagged and then discarded inappropriately.	Work with local authorities to increase the number of dog waste bins at PRoW entrances. Target problem paths with 'clean up' roundel signage.	Year 1

Monitoring.

Progress against the objectives and actions will be monitored by the management of the PRoW service and by the ECC Commissioning Team.

The principal external monitor will be the Essex Local Access Forum. Many of the objectives will also undoubtedly be discussion points within the PRoW User Group and the Byways Working Group.

Target for review is five years from publication.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Review of Objectives in the 2009 Essex RoWIP.

Under each Theme the 2009 'interventions' are listed with progress against them summarised using a traffic light colour scheme and with further detail added where required. Some, marked with an asterisk, have been superseded. Improvement against some continues to be made, for which a timeframe is given in bold.

THEME A: Education, information and promotion.

Ref	Objective	Detail	Completed?	Further Detail/Future Actions	Timeframe
A1	Information co-ordination	ECC to develop action plan for how it intends to co-ordinate information.	Yes	Addressed during the early stages of the Essex Highways contract, with Comms. Team & Innovation Manager.	N/A
A2	Diary lists	Links page from ECC website to other organisations' diary pages.	Yes	All EH online resources are openly available.	N/A
A3	Discussion forum	External body to create and moderate an online forum for users to discuss PRoW and routes linked to through the View Essex Portal.	Yes	Superseded by online resources and social media, including Essex Local Access Forum (LAF) website.	N/A
		Aim to collect favourite routes for different user groups across the county, including accessibility information, and provide feedback to ECC.		Feedback via EH website and regular liaison with user groups. See also Themes E.	
A4	Partnership with safety groups	Regular meetings with ECC including Area Officers, Safer Routes to Schools, Road Safety, schools and other user groups. Aim to discuss safety, safer routes to school and scheme priority.	Ongoing	Continuing on an ad hoc basis, particularly through inclusion in Development Management/Planning consultations and discussion where any proposed diversions occur near schools, play areas or related sites.	**Ongoing**

		PRoW education and training programme on safety and the Country Code – need to integrate with National Curriculum and work closely with schools.	No	Renew this project: work with EH Safety Team and Comms Team to publicise the Countryside Code locally, particularly targeting under-18s. See also A6.	**Year 2**
A5	Accessibility information	Discussion with different user groups to find if additional accessibility material is required. Add additional information as material is updated Link leaflets to ECC website PRoW forum.	Yes	Online interactive maps provide a wealth of information, including up-to-date details on diverted routes and Temporary Traffic Regulation Orders (TTROs). A multitude of additional PRoW information is also now available via the Essex Highways website.	N/A
A6	Published information	Collections of routes suitable for different user groups by different locations (including key destinations).	Ongoing	Visit Essex provides routes for certain themes. Focus on disabled users. See also E11.	**Ongoing**
		Links on paper leaflets to online versions/forum where users can give comments and ratings.	*	Largely superseded by online resources, notably the EH website.	N/A
		Leaflets to be made available at more local venues such as stations, shops, bus stations, village or town shops, libraries and GPs premises.	*	Superseded by online resources.	N/A
		Include links and information on the Countryside Code in all paper and online publications to encourage users to respect, protect and enjoy the countryside in a sustainable manner.	Yes	The Countryside Code is kept up to date by Natural England. Links are included in several places on the PRoW section of the EH website.	N/A
A7	Advertising	Ensure promoters of PROW information are aware of newly published material – email lists for those that new material should be sent to.	Yes	Ensure all available online resources remain up-to-date and relevant	**Ongoing**
		Public Right of Way information on parish notice boards, making best use of existing work conducted under the Parish Paths Partnership Scheme.	Yes	Largely superseded by online resources although extensive dialogue with Parish Councils and P3 groups remains.	N/A

		Use parish magazines and websites and magazines of relevant user groups to disseminate information on PRoWs as widely as possible.	Yes	Close partnership with key user groups is well established and the PRoW service is frequently referenced in their publications. Monthly walks also contributed to Essex Life magazine which publishes hard copy and online.	**Ongoing**
A8	Partnership with health groups	Take active part in partnerships and existing schemes. Aim to support improvements in health and quality of life and share resources where suitable and information regarding funding sources.	No	It could be argued that groups such as the Ramblers are focused on health-promoting activities, and they are very close partners. Many local schemes also utilise PRoW and feed into the service e.g. to ensure locally promoted routes are kept in good order. There is also active liaison with local equal access groups. Nevertheless, further active partnership with health and quality of life projects is to be sought.	**Year 1**
A9	Partnership with tourism groups	Support sustainable tourist activities and contribute to partnerships initiated by tourist bodies and visitor related organisations.	Ongoing	Link with Visit Essex. Links with Sustrans via PRoW User Group and LAF.	**Ongoing**
A10	Feedback system	Clear and marketed complaints and feedback system integrated with CONFIRM, encouraged through leaflets and online forum. Possible basis for procedure using Ramblers Association Guide to Complaints of using the template of Highways Defect Forms.	Yes	'Tell us online' and 'Track it' are on the EH website homepage. Both have been extensively user-tested and promoted via stakeholder groups, and continuous improvement is still sought.	N/A

THEME B: Produce an up-to-date and publicly available digitised Definitive Map for the whole of Essex.

The 2009 RoWIP very much anticipated the Deregulation Act 2015 and the measures it was due to introduce. Of particular concern to consultees at the time was the 2026 cut-off date, after which any routes thought to have been rights of way in the past but not included in the Definitive Map & Statement could no longer be claimed.

Ref	Objective	Detail	Completed?	Further Detail/Future Actions	Timeframe
B1	Produce Definitive Map	Additional resources required by ECC Legal Team to consolidate changes to the Definitive Map and assist in developing and finalising the Definitive Map for pre 1949 Rights of Way by 2026.	*	See B5 below	N/A
				See B6 below	N/A
B2	Digital version of Definitive Map	Provide additional resources to ECC Public Rights of Way team to produce digital version of Definitive Map by 2010 and ensure that this is available for the public to view online.	Yes	Digital version was completed within the deadline and is now well-established as an online resource as the PRoW Interactive Map.	N/A
B3	Partnership working on boundary issues	Work in partnership with neighbouring local authorities to resolve anomalies in the vicinity of county boundaries such as dead-end routes/ change in path status etc.	Some outstanding	Examples have been addressed on an ad hoc basis. There are no proposals to address the numerous examples where PRoW status changes at parish boundaries.	Whenever possible
B4	Review process for Rights of Way claims	Develop a revised review process in consultation with users, land managers and ECC legal team to ensure a fair, balanced and efficient review system.	See B6 above	Historic evidence claims are no longer subject to the 2026 cut-off date. New measures under the Deregulation Act 2015 to allow modification of claimed historic rights prior to addition to the DM&S are still to come into force.	See B6 above

THEME C: A well signed and maintained network.

Ref	Objective	Detail	Completed?	Further Detail/Actions	Timeframe
C1	Rolling Programme	Seek additional resource for rolling maintenance programme to maintain 20 per cent commitment	Yes but then reversed	The rolling programme ran two full cycles. Proactive inspection to progress via a targeted, project-based approach.	Immediate
C2	Partnership with land managers	Partnership with land managers to work on the following schemes:	-	-	-
		• Further extension of Headland Management Scheme.	Yes	Expansion to include farmers whose land is crossed by the King Charles III England Coast Path.	Immediate to Year 3
		• Funding for additional work conducted by land managers beyond statutory duties.	Yes	Addressed on an opportunity-driven basis.	Whenever possible
		• Extend and enhance the PRoW network through the creation of new PRoWs in agreement with landowners wherever possible.	Yes but continues	Addressed on an opportunity-driven basis. Creations must be of genuine or at least potential network benefit, must be funded and due regard should be given to future maintenance liability.	Whenever possible
		• Also encourage landowners to propose diversions where they will also benefit users.	Yes	Numerous examples where diversions have benefitted users as well as landholders.	-
		• Work with landowners to remove unnecessary and illegal structures such as stiles, fences and gates from the PRoW network.	Yes	A major area of improvement. Legal status of structures is checked and appropriate action taken. • Seek removal if no longer required. • Insist correct structure is in place if legitimate, or: • Seek installation of less restrictive structure. • Includes utilisation of section 147ZA agreements. • Back up with enforcement where necessary. See also Theme E	-
C3	Network Hierarchy	Create network hierarchy. The network hierarchy will consider the category of Public Right of Way, its usage and promotion, its integration with other Rights of Way, special	Yes	Three tier hierarchy was developed from 2019 and implemented in 2022, introducing Primary (PW1), Secondary (PW2) and Tertiary (PW3) classes. PW1	N/A

		designation such as AONBs, current provision, access provision and recreational facilities. It will have a direct input into a Scheme Prioritisation Framework.		receive priority attention. Incorporated into the PRoW Maintenance and Inspections Strategy.	
C4	Parish Paths Partnership Scheme	Extend the Parish Paths Partnership Scheme.	Yes	Still supported and extended where local enthusiasm exists.	-
C5	Detailed signage	As part of capital programme upgrade works and on and to promoted paths, consider using path numbers and distances to local destinations.	No	Proposal ultimately rejected as it proved excessively costly and cumbersome, especially on a network of the scale of that in Essex. The merit is also now partly mitigated by the accessibility of online resources.	N/A

Theme **D: A more continuous network.**

Ref	Objective	Detail	Completed?	Further Detail/Actions	Timeframe
D1	Review of network	Review of network to identify discontinuities, especially in bridleways for equestrians and cyclists.	No	An attempt was made but evidently there was no definition of a 'discontinuity'.	
				Now seek to overcome known severance by rivers and dual carriageway roads. • Compile a list of all known such severances. • Compile an action plan on how each could be addressed, with potential timescale.	Year 1 Year 2
				Seek to overcome known status discontinuities, e.g at parish boundaries. • Compile a list of all known such discontinuities. • Compile an action plan on how each could be addressed, with potential timescale. • Aim is to work towards the higher status being continuous.	Year 3 Year 4
			Yes	Always be aware of potential 'missing links', the creation of which would improve the connectivity of	Whenever possible

				the network. Include in planning and PPO negotiations.	
D2	Network hierarchy	Create network hierarchy. The network hierarchy will consider the category of Public Right of Way, its usage and promotion, its integration with other Rights of Way, special designation such as AONBs, current provision, access provision and recreational facilities. It will have a direct input into a Scheme Prioritisation Framework.	Yes	As C3. Three tier hierarchy was developed from 2019 and implemented in 2022, introducing Primary (PW1), Secondary (PW2) and Tertiary (PW3) classes. PW1 receive priority attention. Incorporated into the PRoW Maintenance and Inspections Strategy.	N/A
D3	Scheme prioritisation	Develop means of determining improvement and maintenance priority.	Yes	The PRoW Maintenance and Inspections Strategy published in 2022 determines a risk-based approach to maintenance and improvement schemes. The risk score applied to defects, combined with the route hierarchy, determine the appropriate level of response.	N/A
D4	Higher rights	Greater amounts of bridleway and cycle path creation, considering the use of Section 25, Highways Act 1980 and Compulsory Purchase Orders (Although Compulsory Purchase Orders will be used only as a last resort given the cost and controversy that they can incur). All possible path upgrades to bridleways will give consideration to existing users. Make best use of Section 106 Agreement funding from new developments.	Ongoing	Actively encourage application of Cycle Track Conversion Orders where appropriate on urban paths.	Immediate
				Where appropriate on semi-urban and rural footpaths seek upgrade of status to bridleway. Link to PPO and planning applications, section 106 negotiations.	Immediate
				Investigate and actively pursue any options which may emerge for the creation of higher status rights of way. Give added priority to links with green/blue infrastructure, leisure & tourism facilities and places of work/education.	Immediate

D5	Further develop permissive paths network	Recognise the role of, and encourage the usage and expansion of the permissive path network. Take forward with land managers and user groups.	*	Entirely at the discretion of landowners. Permissive routes are inherently unsustainable and cannot be relied upon for network continuity.	N/A
D6	Safeguarding Rights of Way in road schemes	Ensure the needs of users are taken into account in the building of new road schemes to prevent severance.	Yes	PRoW Officers and staff within the Definitive Map team are actively reviewing all road scheme consultations and contributing as appropriate so as to avoid/minimise disturbance to the network and to explore opportunities for possible gain.	Ongoing

THEME E: Provide an accessible network that meets the requirements of all users.

Ref	Objective	Detail	Completed?	Further Detail/Actions	Timeframe
E1	Scheme prioritisation	Develop means of determining improvement and maintenance priority.	Yes	Maintenance priority matrix implemented via the PRoW Maintenance and Inspections Strategy and in universal use.	N/A
E2	Partnership with disabled groups and other users	Greater partnership with physically and sensorially impaired user groups to address issues of accessibility (already planned) and act upon recommendations where possible by prioritising existing funding.	Yes	Via Essex LAF and User Group	N/A
E3	Parish Paths Partnership Scheme	Extend the Parish Paths Partnership Scheme.	Yes	Still supported and extended where local enthusiasm exists. Links to local devolution. Also C4.	Ongoing
E4	Develop suitable facilities at access points to Promoted Paths	Ensure that suitable facilities for access, signage, litter collection and toilets are available where possible at major path access points.	Yes	These were specific targets for promoted routes but now some principles apply to all routes. See below.	Review year 5

THEME F: Make better use of sustainable practices for accessing and maintaining Rights of Way

Ref	Objective	Detail	Completed?	Further Detail/Actions	Timeframe
F1	Public Transport Operators	Discussion with rail and rural bus operators regarding information provision.	Yes	• Increased use of real-time information on public transport. • Priority given to rights of way signage close to public transport access points.	N/A
		Greater information provision and publicity for bus routes to key destinations.	Yes	• Relevant and up-to-date information available with regard to access to promoted routes. • Roll out with any new promoted routes including identified accessible routes.	N/A Year 1 then as required
		Encourage greater flexibility for request boarding and alighting, routing, operating times and ticketing.	Yes	Request regularly fed into sustainable transport consultations.	N/A
		Bus stops to promote information.	No	Investigate means by which access to rights of way, particularly promoted routes, can be indicated from nearby bus stops.	Year 1
		Bus subsidies to become dependent on co-operation with partnership.	*	Superseded by new public transport arrangements.	N/A
F2	Use recycled and sustainable materials	Review contract with local highways contractor to insist on use of recycled, sustainable, and/or local materials and sustainable practices where possible whilst maintaining quality control.	Yes	Such requirements are built into the current Highways Contract arrangements.	N/A
		ECC Highways to use recycled materials and/or materials from sustainable sources and use sustainable practices wherever possible whilst maintaining quality.	Yes	• Recycled plastic fingerposts not fit for purpose. Timber is now used. • Recycled plastic materials are used for bridges and boardwalks whenever possible. • See also F3	N/A

Theme G: Reduce anti-social behaviour on Rights of Way.

Ref	Objective	Detail	Completed?	Further Detail/Actions	Timeframe
G1	Enforcement	Offer provision of training for Environmental Protection Officers and the Police.	Yes	Offer made and stands. Partnership working is more the norm.	N/A
		Better enforcement of PRoW legislation where landowners have infringed through existing surveys.	Yes	Experienced Enforcement & Liaison Officer in position, working closely with PRoW Officers. Enforcement Concordat published.	N/A
G2	Education	Improved education (in conjunction with safety training – See A4) for children linked to the National Curriculum.	*	Duplication of A4. Adult education regarding anti-social behaviour reporting covered by ECC website.	
		Improved publicity aimed at dog walkers regarding their responsibilities for controlling their dogs on PRoW.	Ongoing	Essentially a never-ending task, accentuated by the recent increase in dog ownership and exercising. Efforts include: • Working with the NFU/CLA to improve liaison with farmers and landowners. • Erection of signage regarding dog waste in problem areas. • Liaising with local authorities to address specific issues/sites. • Work with Essex Highways comms team to publicise the issue. See also G5	Immediate Review year 5

Appendix 2

Footbridge Specifications

PROW Type	Bridge length	Drop	Type	Handrail?	Single/ Double	Knee rail	Notes:
Footpath	≤2m	<1m	Plank	No			PW1 - always a knee rail.
		1m - 2m		Yes	Single	Optional	
		>2m		Yes	Double	Yes	Can increase Spec as per PROW Officer instruction.
	3m	<1m	Plank	Optional		No	
		1m - 2m		Yes	Single	Optional	Planks bridges are 700mm wide, an additional plank can be added to
		>2m		Yes	Double	Yes	increase the width in high use areas to 925mm
	3-5m	<1m	Decked	Optional		No	BDWY bridges must have toe boards.
		1m - 2m		Yes	Single	Optional	
		>2m		Yes	Double	Yes	
	>5m	<1m	Decked	Optional		No	
		1m - 2m		Yes	Single	Optional	
		>2m		Yes	Double	Yes	
Bridleway	<3m	<1m		Optional		Yes	
		1m - 2m		Yes	Double	Yes	
		>2m		Yes	Double	Yes	
	3-5m	<1m		Optional		Yes	
		1m - 2m		Yes	Double	Yes	
		>2m		Yes	Double	Yes	
	>5m	<1m		Optional		Yes	
		1m - 2m		Yes	Double	Yes	
		>2m		Yes	Double	Yes	