



Cabinet

14 July 2026

Adoption of the Revised Essex Coast Recreational disturbance and Avoidance Mitigation Strategy (RAMS)

Report by:

Cabinet Member for Planning and Place-Shaping

Officer Contacts:

Claire Stuckey, Strategic Planning Manager (Planning Policy),
claire.stuckey@chelmsford.gov.uk, (01245) 606475

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to consider the revised Essex Coast Recreational disturbance Avoidance Mitigation Strategy (RAMS) 2026 and associated tariff and to recommend its adoption by the Council's Cabinet. It also seeks approval to revoke the existing RAMS Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) which no longer aligns with the revised RAMS and to replace it with a Technical Advice Note (TAN).

Options

1. Adopt the revised Essex Coast Recreational disturbance Avoidance Mitigation Strategy (RAMS 2026) and the associated tariff, and to revoke the existing RAMS Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) and replace it with a Technical Advice Note (TAN).
2. Not adopt the revised Essex Coast Recreational disturbance Avoidance Mitigation Strategy (RAMS 2026) and the associated tariff, and to revoke the existing RAMS Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) and replace it with a Technical Advice Note (TAN).

Preferred option and reasons

The preferred option is the first option, as it will ensure the council continues to meet its legal duties under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended) by providing a robust, evidence-led and legally compliant framework to mitigate the impacts of residential development on internationally protected habitats. The updated tariff will ensure that the full cost of mitigation is fairly and proportionately secured for the lifetime of the

development. Revoking the Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) and replacing it with a Technical Advice Note will provide up-to-date guidance on the revised RAMS implementation and reflect legislative changes which remove the ability to prepare new SPDs.

Recommendations

1. That Cabinet adopts the revised Essex Coast Recreational Disturbance Avoidance and Mitigation Strategy (RAMS) 2026 and associated tariff as set out in Appendix 1.
2. That Cabinet approves the implementation of a revised Essex Coast Recreational Disturbance Avoidance and Mitigation Strategy (RAMS) 2026 tariff of £476 per net additional dwelling (or equivalent qualifying development and index linked), to take effect from 1 August 2026.
3. That Cabinet revokes the adopted Essex Coast RAMS Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), noting that its content is no longer fully aligned with the revised Strategy, evidence base and tariff.
4. That Cabinet agrees to replace the Essex Coast RAMS Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) with an Essex Coast RAMS Technical Advice Note (TAN) and that the Assistant Director – Planning and Place Shaping be authorised, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning and Place Shaping, to finalise and publish the TAN for use alongside the revised Essex Coast RAMS Strategy 2026.

1. Background

- 1.1. The Essex coastline stretches for around 350 miles, one of the longest of any county in England. The coastline of Essex begins in the Thames Estuary in the south and extends northwards to the port of Harwich and the estuary of the river Stour. The Essex coastline is of exceptional nature conservation importance, it is home to both breeding and non-breeding coastal birds and features a variety of habitats and environments from sandy beaches, shingle spits and shell banks to mud-flat, saltmarsh, offshore islands, and clay cliffs.
- 1.2. The majority of the Essex coastline is covered by internationally important nature conservation sites that support significant bird populations through a range of designations including a Special Area of Conservation¹ (SAC), Special Protection Areas² (SPAs) and Ramsar³ sites which are afforded the highest level of protection under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017⁴ (as amended).
- 1.3. There are ten protected habitat sites along the Essex coast including the Crouch and Roach Estuaries SPA and Ramsar at South Woodham Ferrers. These sites are shown on page 10, Map 1 of the revised RAMS 2026 in Appendix 1.

¹ SACs are protected areas which support high-quality habitats and species.

² SPAs are protected areas which support rare, vulnerable and migratory birds.

³ Ramsar sites are areas of wetland of international importance which are designated under the Convention of Wetlands under the Ramsar Convention 1971.

⁴ Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017, as amended (commonly known as the 'Habitats Regulations')

- 1.4. As more homes are built in Essex, more people will live and work near the coast, leading to an increase in coastal visitors and demand for recreation such as walking, dog walking, cycling and water-based activities. This brings important social and economic benefits, including improved wellbeing and access to nature. However, higher visitor numbers can place pressure on sensitive coastal habitats, through increased recreational activities causing disturbance to birds and damage to areas such as saltmarsh and mudflats.
- 1.5. Recreational disturbance arising from residential development within the defined Zone of Influence (Zoi) has been identified as a key impact pathway on the designated habitat sites, particularly affecting qualifying bird species through disturbance, habitat degradation and increased visitor pressure.
- 1.6. Under the Habitats Regulations, Local Planning Authorities (LPAs), are Competent Authorities, who have a legal duty to ensure that new development does not adversely affect the integrity of protected sites which includes recreational pressure from occupiers of residential development. Where a risk of identified; effective mitigation must be secured before development can be permitted.
- 1.7. The RAMS is a partnership and co-ordinated approach between twelve Essex LPAs⁵ which aims to mitigate the in-combination recreational impacts of new residential development on protected coastal habitats and bird populations. It ensures that planned housing growth across Essex can take place in a lawful and sustainable way, while safeguarding sensitive species and habitats protected by international nature conservation designations over the longer-term. By addressing risks up front, the strategy provides a proactive, cross-boundary solution that ensures cumulative impacts of growth across a wide area are considered. The strategy ensures necessary resources and costs are identified and provides clarity for developers when bringing forward sites for development within the evidenced Zone of Influence (Zoi).
- 1.8. The strategic RAMS approach enables developers to contribute towards a coordinated mitigation package delivered across a wide area, rather than being required to provide bespoke mitigation on a site-by-site basis for individual planning applications. This approach is widely used nationally and has been repeatedly demonstrated to be effective, efficient and legally robust through the planning process. Developers can also choose to provide their own bespoke mitigation rather than pay the RAMS tariff, however this is extremely resource intensive. RAMS provides a clear and efficient mechanism for complying with the Habitats Regulations, for both developers and LPAs. The Essex Coast RAMS is one of eleven strategic solutions nationally, of which seven are related to coastal habitats.
- 1.9. The RAMS was originally adopted by the twelve Essex LPAs in 2019/20. Chelmsford City Council operates as the project Accountable Body and Lead Institution responsible for managing the project finances and employing the project staff including the Coastal Rangers. The commitment to implement the RAMS is set out in the adopted and emerging Chelmsford Local Plans.
- 1.10. [Bird Aware Essex](#) is the delivery mechanism for the Essex Coast RAMS. It is the public-facing service that delivers many of the on-the-ground mitigation measures and

⁵ Basildon Borough Council, Braintree District Council, Brentwood Borough Council, Castle Point Borough Council, Chelmsford City Council, Colchester City Council, Maldon District Council, Rochford District Council, Southend-on-Sea City Council, Tendring District Council, Thurrock Borough Council, Uttlesford District Council

plays a key role in ensuring that RAMS is effective, visible and evidence-led. As Accountable Body, Chelmsford City Council employs and hosts the Bird Aware Essex Coastal Rangers and delivery staff through a Partnership Agreement with the participating LPAs.

1.11. RAMS funding through developer contributions has already enabled the delivery of a number of tangible mitigation measures which directly benefit the Essex coastline including around South Woodham Ferrers. These include:

- Regular patrols and visitor engagement across the Essex coast by the project's team of Coastal Rangers
- Project-wide communication and engagement initiatives, including the installation of interpretation boards, signage, leaflet boxes and fencing at Marsh Farm Country Park, South Woodham Ferrers and contributions to 'Love your Chelmsford'
- Educational materials which promote responsible coastal visits including a Coastal Code
- Direct engagement with 7,600 school children including through the Food and Farming event and school events held at ARU Writtle
- Ongoing monitoring of both recreational activity and ecological conditions across the Essex coast, including South Woodham Ferrer's Habitats Sites.

2. The Essex Coast RAMS Review

2.1. In December 2023, Natural England, the Government's advisor for the natural environment in England wrote to the Essex Coast RAMS Partnership, formally advising of the need to undertake a review and update of the Essex Coast RAMS, specifically to address:

- Significant increases in projected housing growth across Essex (almost double original assumptions)
- Insufficient long-term costing of the original Strategy (or in-perpetuity funding)
- Under-provision of Coastal Rangers and equipment to manage 500km of coastline, and
- Omission of certain delivery elements in the original mitigation package (e.g. Coastal Ranger vehicles).

2.2. In line with established best practice, strategic mitigation solutions should also be reviewed approximately every five years.

2.3. Under the Habitat Regulations⁶ mitigation measures must be secured and effective for as long as the plan or project has the potential to affect the protected site. In practice, this requires mitigation to be provided for the lifetime of the development. The original RAMS package was costed only to the end of the Local Plan period (2038) and not for the duration of the impact which was identified by Natural England as a fundamental omission. A review was required to ensure that mitigation measures are fully funded and secured in perpetuity. In addition, the original visitor surveys undertaken between 2011 and 2013 had become dated and required updating.

2.4. The RAMS review began in Summer 2024, and progress has also been regularly reported and agreed by the Essex Planning Officers Association (EPOA) Chief Officers

6. Regulation 63 (Appropriate Assessment) and Regulation 64 (Derogations)

Forum, which operates as the RAMS Project Board or main governing body. Independent ecological consultants, Footprint Ecology were appointed in October 2024 to undertake repeat visitor surveys across the coast, provide an up-to-date evidence base, review the effectiveness of the current mitigation package, and produce an updated Strategy that ensures the long-term costs of the mitigation are properly accounted for.

- 2.5. Natural England has endorsed the approach taken for the review and the final RAMS documentation. The final revised RAMS was also endorsed by EPOA Chief Officers on Thursday 30 April 2026.

3. Key differences between the current and revised Essex Coast RAMS

- 3.1. The revised RAMS represents a significant revision to the original approach, while maintaining the same underlying principles. The key changes are summarised below:

- An updated mitigation package, considering increased housing growth and in-perpetuity mitigation for the lifetime of development
- An updated tariff fee, and
- Amended development types eligible to pay the tariff.

Updated mitigation package

- 3.2. The National Planning Policy Framework published in December 2024 changed the standard methodology for calculating an area's housing need. This has led to a significant increase in the numbers of new homes to be built across Essex and in the project Zone of Influence (Zol) since the adoption of the current RAMS in 2019/20.
- 3.3. Projections indicate approximately 148,309⁷ new dwellings within the Zol over the next 20 years, an increase of around 72,907 dwellings in the original RAMS. With an estimated 609,786 existing dwellings in the Zol in 2025, this represents a 24% increase in the housing stock within the Zol. This growth will result in a commensurate increase in recreational visits to designated coastal sites, requiring an enhanced mitigation response.
- 3.4. Updated visitor surveys undertaken by Footprint Ecology in winter and summer 2025 to support the RAMS review demonstrate that the Essex coast was busier in 2025 than indicated in the earlier surveys to inform the original RAMS. The Visitor Survey Report (attached at Appendix 2) concludes that an enhanced recreation mitigation package is necessary to ensure continued compliance with the Habitats Regulations.
- 3.5. The updated mitigation package builds on and expands interventions in the original RAMS to reflect the additional workload associated with providing mitigation for more planned housing growth, changes in recreational patterns and visitor behaviour and the requirement to deliver mitigation effectively in perpetuity or for the duration of the impact. It was developed through workshops and engagement with key stakeholders and subsequently refined in discussion with partner LPAs and Natural England. The outcome is a robust and proportionate mitigation package capable of ensuring that the

⁷ It should be noted that this is a predicted figure agreed by LPAs in 2025 in order to agree a baseline for the RAMS review. Future reviews of the RAMS will consider changes to proposed predicted housing growth.

recreational pressure arising from new development, in-combination, will not lead to adverse effects on the integrity of protected sites.

3.6. The enhanced mitigation package is summarised in Table 3 of the revised RAMS (attached at Appendix 1) and includes:

- An expanded and more specialised ranger service including 9.5 full-time equivalent Coastal Rangers (currently five) and three new specialist roles with budgets including an Education and Community Engagement Lead and Dog Project Officer
- A stronger focus on tackling dog disturbance risks including coast-wide dog projects and targeted engagement with commercial dog walkers
- Increased visitor engagement and education
- Increased seasonal coverage for beach nesting birds and winter roost protection
- Opportunities for new site-specific and more local mitigation projects, and
- Enhanced monitoring and data collection, with monitoring embedded as a core delivery function.

Updated tariff fee

- 3.7. The RAMS tariff is a financial contribution paid by a developer for every net new dwelling or qualifying unit to fund the strategic mitigation package. The original mitigation package was not costed in perpetuity i.e. it did not consider the lifetime of the development, calculated as 80-years. This omission was a primary reason why the existing RAMS tariff remains significantly lower than tariffs for comparable strategic schemes elsewhere in the country, despite the scale and sensitivity of the Essex coastline.
- 3.8. Natural England identified this as a key issue that needed to be addressed as part of the review. Had the original mitigation package in the current RAMS been costed in-perpetuity from the outset, the baseline tariff would have been £489.18 per dwelling, rising with inflation to approximately £660.06 at 2025 values. As the current RAMS does not include an in-perpetuity cost, the current 2026 tariff stands at £175.55. This is significantly lower than tariffs from comparable strategic mitigation solutions elsewhere in the country which typically range from £300 to over £1000, with an average cost of £500.
- 3.9. The updated RAMS mitigation package has been costed at £72,594,500 (was originally £8,916,448), reflecting delivery in perpetuity and the expansion and strengthening of the mitigation package. The tariff is calculated by dividing the total cost of mitigation by the total number of dwellings planned within the ZoI. As such, the revised RAMS tariff will be charged at £476 per new dwelling or qualifying unit (rounded to the nearest pound and indexed-linked annually). This revised tariff remains within the national average of £500 and can therefore be regarded as fair and proportionate. A summary of the tariff calculation is set out in Appendix 4.
- 3.10. As noted in paragraph 1.18, developers can provide their own mitigation requirements through a bespoke scheme if they choose, but the vast majority are likely to pay towards the RAMS instead as this is easier and more cost effective. The RAMS approach is also used across the country and provides clarity and certainty for developers and LPAs as it has been proven to be robust through the planning process.

Amended development types to pay the tariff

3.11. Whilst new residential development represents the main source of recreational pressure, other land uses can also create significant impacts on designated habitat sites, particularly those including overnight accommodation, high visitor turnover or public recreational use. The revised RAMS may therefore also apply to other forms of development to ensure that recreational impacts are fully addressed such as residential or overnight accommodation. Further detail on eligible development types will be provided the RAMS Technical Advice Note (TAN).

3.12. Given the increase in the tariff level, a transitional period for implementing the revised tariff has been agreed with Natural England (Appendix 3):

- For planning applications submitted between 1 April and 31 July 2026, the tariff applicable is the current tariff of £175.55
- Where planning applications are still awaiting final determination on 31 July 2026, the tariff applicable is the rate in force at the time of submission of the planning application to the LPA
- Where permission is granted at appeal and RAMS has not been paid, the tariff applicable is the rate in force on the date of the appeal being allowed
- For planning applications submitted on or after 1 August 2026, the new RAMS tariff applies.

4. Revoking the RAMS SPD with replacing with a RAMS Technical Advice Note

4.1. The current adopted RAMS SPD provides more guidance to developers and Planners on how the RAMS is implemented and provides a consistent mechanism to guide decision-making within partner LPAs. The current SPD does not reflect the updated mitigation strategy, evidence base or revised tariff, so is now out of date. It is therefore recommended that the current RAMS SPD is formally revoked.

4.2. As part of the Government's plan-making reforms⁸, the ability to create and adopt new SPDs has been removed. Therefore, the SPD will be replaced with a Technical Advice Note (TAN) providing up-to-date guidance on the revised RAMS implementation. This approach is supported by Natural England and EPOA.

4.3. The TAN will not introduce new policy, so it is recommended that the Assistant Director – Planning and Place Shaping be authorised, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning and Place Shaping, to finalise and publish the TAN later this summer.

5. Governance and Longevity

5.1. The strategy will operate indefinitely on a rolling basis, with this version running to around 2031. The strategy has, however, been written in the context of local plans and the likely levels of growth to around 2045. The strategy will be reviewed and updated approximately every 5 years, providing the opportunity to check the housing numbers,

⁸

The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023, The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations 2026

delivery, costs and mitigation priorities. The reviews will inform the business plans that underpin the work of the partnership and their staff.

- 5.2. The existing RAMS partnership governance arrangements for decision making which include a RAMS Steering group and EPOA will continue following the review. The Essex Coastal Forum which comprises Officers and Members from partner LPAs, will also continue to receive reports on the project activities and implementation and provide democratic oversight. There will be also an opportunity to restructure the governance arrangements going forwards for example to ensure that it is resilient to Local Government Reform, Devolution and future planning system change.

6. Conclusions

- 6.1. There is a legal requirement for LPAs to comply with the Habitat Regulations and to implement the RAMS in the Council's adopted and emerging Chelmsford Local Plans. RAMS is a clear and effective mechanism for compliance through planning applications. It has a proven record of delivering mitigation measures since its adoption in 2019/20 through Bird Aware Essex, contributing to the protection of designated habitat sites along the Essex coast. Chelmsford benefits from the mitigation (Coastal Ranger patrols, communication and engagement activities etc.) that takes place along the coastline including around South Woodham Ferrers.
- 6.2. The revised Essex Coast RAMS provides a robust, evidence-led and legally compliant framework to mitigate the impacts of residential development on internationally protected habitats. The updated tariff ensures that the full cost of mitigation is fairly and proportionately secured for the lifetime of the development.
- 6.3. Adoption of the updated RAMS 2026 is essential to enable the continued lawful determination of planning applications and to ensure the protection of the Essex coast's internationally important habitats. Implementation will be supported by a TAN due to be published later in the Summer.

List of Appendices:

- Appendix 1** – Essex Coast Recreational disturbance Avoidance Mitigation Strategy 2026
- Appendix 2** – Essex Visitor Survey Report
- Appendix 3** – Natural England Letter to LPAs 16 April 2026
- Appendix 4** – RAMS Tariff Calculation Table

Background Papers:

[Adopted Chelmsford Local Plan May 2020](#)

[Chelmsford Local Plan Review - Pre Submission \(Regulation 19\) Document 2025](#)

[National Planning Policy Framework, December 2024](#)

Essex Coast Recreational disturbance Avoidance and Mitigation Strategy (RAMS) and Supplementary Planning Document available at <https://www.chelmsford.gov.uk/planning-and-building-control/essex-coast-rams/>

[Home - Bird Aware Essex](#)

[The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017](#)

[Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023](#)

[The Town and Country Planning \(Local Planning\) \(England\) Regulations 2026](#)

Corporate Implications:

Legal/Constitutional:

This is an executive function which falls to Cabinet to determine. The Council has a duty under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 as amended, to ensure that development does not adversely affect the integrity of designated European sites. Residential development within the ZoI gives rise to recreational disturbance impacts. Without appropriate mitigation, these impacts could result in adverse effects on site integrity. The Essex Coast RAMS provides the mechanism by which these impacts are mitigated. Without the Essex Coast RAMS, the Council would be unable to conclude no adverse effect on integrity and would therefore be unable to lawfully grant planning permission for relevant residential development.

Financial:

The Essex Coast RAMS tariff ensures that the full cost of mitigation is funded through developer contributions. This approach ensures that the financial burden does not fall on the Council, that recreational mitigation is delivered in line with development and that long-term funding is secured.

CCC's contribution toward the cost of the Essex Coast RAMS and Technical Advice Note (TAN) is covered by existing budget provision. CCC costs for operating as the RAMS Accountable Body and Lead Institution are recouped e.g. through annual Delivery Officer HR line management costs and annual financial management costs.

Potential Impact on Climate Change and the Environment:

The Essex Coast RAMS project ensures that the integrity of habitats sites along the Essex coast can be effectively preserved. This enables the Council to more effectively protect, enhance and conserve habitats and species through the planning process.

Contribution toward Achieving a Net Zero Carbon Position by 2030:

There are no contributions arising directly from this report.

Personnel:

CCC has a S106 Monitoring Officer in post who is responsible for administering the RAMS tariff payments. CCC staff are already in place for operating as the project Accountable Body and Lead Institution and these costs are recouped.

Risk Management:

The Essex Coast RAMS is needed to deliver the adopted and emerging new Chelmsford Local Plans. The RAMS and Technical Advice Note (TAN) will reduce the risk of legal challenges by ensuring that all applications that pay the tariff comply with the Habitats Regulations. Failure to adopt the updated RAMS could lead to delays in determining planning applications and possible delays to development.

Equality and Diversity:

An Equality and Diversity Impact Assessment has been undertaken for the revised RAMS. The revised Essex Coast RAMS and increased tariff present low risk of negative equality impacts, all of which are appropriately mitigated. The strategy supports statutory compliance, environmental protection and long-term public benefit, while meeting the Equality Act 2010 duties.

Health and Safety:

There are no Health & Safety issues arising directly from this report.

Digital:

There are no digital issues arising directly from this report.

Other:

The Review of the Local Plan will seek to contribute to priorities in the Council's Our Chelmsford, Our Plan 2023: A Fairer and More Inclusive Place, A Greener and Safer Place, and A More Connected Place.

Consultees:

CCC – Development Management

Relevant Policies and Strategies:

The report takes account of the following policies and strategies of the City Council:

Adopted Local Plan 2013-2036

Essex Coast Recreational disturbance Avoidance and Mitigation Strategy 2018-2038

Climate and Ecological Emergency Action Plan (2020)

Our Chelmsford, Our Plan

The above report relates to the following priorities in the Corporate Plan:

Promoting sustainable and environmentally responsible growth to stimulate a vibrant, balanced economy, a fairer society and provide more homes of all types.

Creating a distinctive sense of place, making the area more attractive, promoting its green credentials, ensuring that people and communities are safe.

Bringing people together and working in partnership to encourage healthy, active lives, building stronger, more resilient communities so that people feel proud to live, work and study in the area.