

# A Plan for Improving the Rivers and Waterways in and around Chelmsford

## Context

1. Improving the environmental quality, attractiveness and recreational potential of the rivers and waterways and associated green spaces has been identified as one of the top priorities for the Council.
2. To co-ordinate efforts a Waterways Working Group was established under the auspices of Chelmsford Policy Board to examine options and opportunities to improve the appearance, attractiveness, and recreational use of these assets and to promote schemes and activities that enhance their habitat, ecological and biodiversity value.
3. The policy context for the improvement, management and maintenance of rivers and waterways in and around Chelmsford is provided by the Parks, Green Spaces and Waterways Strategy, the core priorities of which are to ensure that:

- a) A network of attractive, high quality green spaces is provided that are clean, safe, and easily accessible to all
- b) People can connect with the natural environment through the active use of parks, green spaces, and waterways, enjoying positive experiences whilst using them
- c) Wildlife, habitats, and landscapes in and around Chelmsford are protected and enhanced
- d) Parks, green spaces, and waterways are planned and managed in a sustainable way, reducing unnecessary waste, and helping to preserve natural resources

4. There is growing recognition of the importance to residents of the city's green spaces and waterways, in terms of nature conservation, health and wellbeing, improving flood resilience and helping to address the impact of climate change. This is reflected in increasing interest in the river and waterways and their importance to the cultural, agricultural, and industrial heritage of the area, as well their significance as special environments, connective networks, for recreational use and for 'place-shaping', regeneration and economic growth.
5. The character and physical quality of the rivers and waterways in and around Chelmsford is varied with highly urbanised river sections in the town centre, some

areas with engineered embankments, compared to a more natural setting along the river valleys west through Bell Meadow, Central Park, West Park, Admirals Park and onto Hylands Park, east through the Baddow Meads and to Sandford Mill and north along the Bunny Walks towards Broomfield and Little Waltham.

6. The river Crouch, where it adjoins South Woodham Ferrers is an entirely different proposition being tidal and fed by a series of creeks, most notably Fenn Creek which defines the west boundary of the town, Clements Green Creek to the east and Hawkbush Creek to the south.
7. The Crouch and Roach Estuary is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, a Special Protection Area and a RAMSAR (wetland) site. The Essex coast recreational disturbance avoidance and mitigation strategy (RAMS) covers this area and is a long-term strategic approach to avoid and mitigate the impact of housing development on coastal bird disturbance from recreational activity. Any proposals in respect of the River Crouch at South Woodham Ferrers need to be considered against these requirements.
8. The other key feature of the rivers and waterways in and around Chelmsford is the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation and its environs. Essex Waterways Ltd, a subsidiary of the Inland Waterways Association, manages and maintains the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation. The Chelmer Canal Trust Limited is a registered charity and voluntary group whose aims are to preserve the waterway, and the associated conservation area, and to enhance the quality of its public enjoyment and appreciation.
9. The City Council, as 'riparian owner' is directly responsible for the management and maintenance of 10.2 kilometres of rivers and waterways and 23.06 hectares of natural riverside corridors/flood meadows. The rights and responsibilities of riparian owners are set out in Environment Agency guidance 'Living on the Edge'<sup>1</sup>.
10. The Environment Agency has a significant role in the management and maintenance of watercourses including protecting the river environment, improving water quality and resources, promoting the conservation of the water environment and the wildlife that lives there, and managing flood risk. The Environment Agency is also currently the regulator in England, although the Environment Act 2021 established a new Office for Environmental Protection with responsibilities to scrutinise environmental policy and law, investigate complaints and take enforcement action against public authorities, if necessary, to uphold environmental standards.
11. The Environment Agency carries out maintenance, improvement, or construction work on 'main rivers' to manage flood risk. The rivers Wid, Can, Chelmer and Crouch,

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<sup>1</sup> Environment Agency: Living on the Edge: A guide to your rights and responsibilities of riverside ownership (April 2016) <http://www.environment-agency.gov.uk/homeandleisure/floods/31626.aspx>

as well as some smaller 'brooks' are all currently designated as main rivers [plan attached].

12. Other rivers are called 'ordinary watercourses'. Lead local flood authorities [Essex County Council in this area], district councils and internal drainage boards carry out flood risk management work on ordinary watercourses.
13. Functionally rivers, waterways and the related green spaces play a key role in:
  - Protecting conserving and enhancing the natural environment and improving biodiversity
  - Helping to address climate change and flood risk
  - Providing opportunities for people to enjoy healthy and active lives
  - Improving pedestrian and cycleway connectivity
  - Increasing footfall, improving social inclusion, and providing access to a safe natural environment
  - Providing access to the cultural and water-based heritage of the area
14. It is essential that a cohesive plan is in place for the rivers and waters to make the most of planned public and private sector investment that will be occurring in the vicinity, providing physical and environmental benefits to the quality of the public realm and the associated green spaces.

## Improvement planning

15. The priorities for action to improve the environmental quality, attractiveness and recreational potential of rivers and waterways and associated green spaces are as follows:
  - A. Putting in place measures to improve navigation on the rivers and waterways and expand recreational use
  - B. Ensuring that future development proposals are complementary to the river environment, creating attractive 'softer' river frontages / riverside terraces, revitalising the presentation and use of waterways, improving accessibility and where possible incorporating 'renewable energy' initiatives
  - C. Identifying opportunities to extend and improve green spaces adjoining the rivers and waterways, including options for greening the 'engineered / canalised' sections of the river to improve their appearance and attractiveness
  - D. Promoting schemes and activities that enhance the habitat, ecological and biodiversity value of the river corridors, including the declaration of areas as local nature reserves
  - E. Identifying ways to improve pedestrian and cycle movement along river corridors including opportunities that could be taken to extend and improve the network of riverside footpaths and cycleways

## F. Using natural flood management techniques to mitigate the risk of flooding whilst also improving the river environment

16. The 'Plan for Improving the Rivers and Waterways' needs to be viewed as a 10-year programme. Delivery of some elements of the programme will be determined by the phasing of the main City Centre development sites. Replacement for the current 'flood gates' needs to be planned now for delivery within 5 years. The river and waterways greening programme will take place over a 3 to 5-year period.
17. If the full potential of the rivers and waterways is to be realised a combination of low-cost actions and larger scale high impact projects needing significant capital investment will be required. The level of investment in total over the next 10 years is likely to be in the region of £13m to £15m. There should be scope to lever in external funding to offset some of these costs.
18. It is anticipated that many of the larger scale improvements will be integrated into the development of specific sites, and in some cases, resources will be secured through planning obligations to deliver them.
19. However, the notable exceptions to this are likely to be improvements to navigation [proposed lock] and the structure that replaces the flood gates to retain water in the City Centre. A combined solution will probably need an investment in the region of £10m, not all of which will be secured from external sources.
20. An allowance of £600,000 spread over 3-years has been included already in the City Council's capital programme for smaller-scale 'rivers and waterways improvements' that will not be delivered via the major site developments.
21. The key elements of the emerging improvement plan for rivers and waterway plan identified to date are set out below.

## A. Putting in place measures to improve navigation on the rivers and waterways and expand recreational use

- i. New lock and replacement of the automatic flood gates on the river Chelmer, to retain water in the City Centre. An options appraisal suggests that these two requirements can be addressed by a combined structure achieving cost efficiency and causing less disturbance / disruption to the waterways. Initial feasibility works have been undertaken suggesting the likely construction cost will be in the order of £10m.<sup>2</sup> Whilst there is no final commitment to this as yet, the location and configuration of a combined lock / water retention device can be accommodated in the design and positioning of the new access road over the river Chelmer that enables the development of the Waterside site [Our Chelmsford Our Plan ref F3.2 and Climate and Ecological Action Plan ref 8b No.60 on plan]
- ii. New and replacement access points / facilities for water-based recreation activities – for example replacing the ‘unsafe’ landing stage near Waterloo Lane footbridge. Assume four new / replacement landing stages at £40,000 each – allow £160,000 [No. 45 on plan]
- iii. Review future use of Sandford Mill and surrounding land in accordance with its Special Policy Area [SPA5] notation in the adopted Chelmsford Local Plan – for example introduce commercial use of the Engine House with improved visitor facilities providing the focus for the wider recreational use of the Chelmer East Green Wedge identified in the adopted Local Plan – possibly local natural resource centre on the former water works site - so that it can operate as an all-year-round destination. Linked to the master plan for East Chelmsford Strategic Growth Area which should provide some of the supporting infrastructure [new access road, car park and contribution to a new ‘visitor centre’] as part of planning obligations for the wider development<sup>3</sup> [OCOP I3.1 No.87 & 89 on plan]
- iv. New serviced and managed moorings – 7 along the Chelmer, 10 along the Can and 7 adjacent to the current Travis Perkins site – probably including facilities for residential boats and charging points for electric / hybrid boats on moorings
- v. New boat craning facility and storage area secured as part of the planning obligations for the Taylor Wimpey development [No.59 on plan]

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<sup>2</sup> The initial focus of the Chelmsford Waterways Working Group during 2020 was to develop plans and test the feasibility of the construction of a replacement structure for the so-called automatic flood gates, to retain water in the City Centre rivers and improve navigation on the River Chelmer. An options appraisal was considered by the WG on 22 January 2020 and the recommendations endorsed by the Policy Board on 5 March 2020. Following approval at Cabinet on 8 September 2020, further detailed survey work and a second stage feasibility study was commissioned in December 2020. This work is currently underway which will provide more detailed scheme proposals sufficient for consideration to be given to including the scheme in the Council's capital programme in 2022/23

<sup>3</sup> The development potential of the Sandford Mill site itself is being examined by a project group reporting to the Waterways Working Group. Initial workshop sessions were held in 2019 and 2020. A site appraisal examining the development opportunities has been undertaken by external property consultants, but further work is temporarily on hold due to other priorities arising from the Covid-19 outbreak. This will also allow the extent of the planning obligations to be confirmed

B. Ensuring that future development proposals are complementary to the river environment, creating attractive 'softer' river frontages / riverside terraces, revitalising the presentation and use of waterways, improving accessibility and where possible incorporating 'renewable energy' initiatives

- vi. New 5,000m<sup>2</sup> riverside public space, including 350m<sup>2</sup> equipped play area and waterside access improvements, delivered as part of the planning obligations for the former gasworks site [No.1, 2, 53 & 54 on plan]
- vii. Seek a new 2,500m<sup>2</sup> public space, including 250m<sup>2</sup> equipped play area, delivered as part of the planning obligations for the Lockside site [No.3, 4 & 32 on plan]
- viii. New 3,155m<sup>2</sup> and 1,745m<sup>2</sup> public spaces completed as part of the planning obligations for the Taylor Wimpey site [No.5 & 7 on plan]
- ix. Improvements to riverside spaces around Essex Records Office to be delivered as part of the planning obligations for the Taylor Wimpey Wharf Road site [No.6 on plan]
- x. Improvements to the facilities, services and access arrangements, including dedicated landing stages, for existing river users [No.52 & 56 on plan]
- xi. New feeder channel from River Chelmer to Springfield Basin to ameliorate water levels, delivered as part of the planning obligations for Chelmer Waterside [No.55 on plan]
- xii. Possibility to incorporate 'green energy initiatives' into the development proposals for the Waterside and Lockside sites, subject to further feasibility testing as more detailed plans are progressed

C. Identifying opportunities to extend and improve green spaces adjoining the rivers and waterways, including creative solutions for greening the 'engineered / canalised' sections of the river to improve their appearance and attractiveness

- xiii. Establish a new 60 ha. 'country park' within the Chelmer East Green Wedge on the water-meadows at Manor Farm, Sandon as part of the development associated with the East Chelmsford growth area. This will also include a neighbourhood play area and recreational cycle routes through the country park. The planning obligations for the growth area will seek to deliver supporting infrastructure such as a new access road and car park together with additional river crossing and footpath and cycleway links to the City Centre and make the land available to be adopted as green space. [OCOP E2.2 and CaEE 7b&f No.21, 35, 38 & 39 on plan]
- xiv. Ambition to secure a 30 ha. extension to the 'country park' on land north of the river Chelmer / west of the Fox and Raven to support the Local Plan 'Green Wedge' designation in the medium-term. [No.21 on plan]
- xv. Ambition to secure a 60 ha. extension to the 'country park' on land south of the river Chelmer to support the Local Plan 'Green Wedge' designation in the longer term. [No.22 on plan]
- xvi. Implement a continuous, fully connected green corridor through the Chelmer River Valley north of Chelmsford City Centre as per the policy framework in the adopted



Chelmsford Local Plan 2012-2036. Aspects will be incorporated into the masterplan for the Northeast Chelmsford Garden Community [OCOP E2.1 CaEE 7a and Nos.104, 105 & 106 on plan]

- xvii. Transfer responsibilities for and incorporate ECC land adjacent to A1016 / Chelmer Valley / Valley Bridge Road into the management plan for the Chelmer Valley Nature Reserve [Nos. 101, 102 & 103 on plan]
- xviii. Undertake greening programme to include ‘green walls’ and ‘floating beds’ to soften revetments, in tandem with art commissions [possibly linked to Chelmsford Arts and Culture Festival] and other creative solutions such as lighting [possibly part of Chelmsford Lighting Festival in 2023] to transform canalised sections of the river Can and river Chelmer. These initiatives arose from the community creative workshop sessions held in 2021. Allowance of £260,000 over two-years. External funding should also be available. [OCOPF3.3 CaEE 8c No.64 on plan]

**D. Promoting schemes and activities that enhance the habitat, ecological and biodiversity value of the river corridors, including the declaration of areas as local nature reserves**

- xix. Targeted land acquisitions to extend publicly accessible green space along river corridors as set out in the Chelmsford Green Infrastructure Strategic Plan 2018-2036. May also involve consolidation of land holdings to secure changes in management practices to protect and enhance wildlife habitats and encourage biodiversity. Allowance of say £2m over the 10-year programme
- xx. Implement the new policy for ‘creating and managing species-rich grassland’ adopted by the Council in November 2021
- xxi. Adapt and enhance the existing fishing lakes at Manor Farm to improve the wetland habitat and fully integrate these with the new ‘country park’, proposed for delivery as part of the planning obligations for the East Chelmsford growth site [No.61 on plan]
- xxii. Create new wildflower meadows and habitat areas at selected locations as part of the programme to enhance wildlife and increase species diversity – for example wildflower plug planting in Springfield Hall Park linking into Chelmer valley LNR / receptor field and at Compass Gardens linking into the SSSI and RAMSAR sites
- xxiii. Put in place a management plan to allow parts of Admirals Park to be declared as a Local Nature Reserve [formally declared in June 2021] [OCOP F3.4 CaEE 8d]
- xxiv. Put in place a management plan to allow Frankland Fields [SWF] to be declared as a Local Nature Reserve [formally declared in June 2022] [OCOPF3.4 CaEE 8d]
- xxv. Undertake an ongoing programme to control of invasive non-native species [for example giant hogweed, pennywort, and mink] along the rivers and waterways in and around Chelmsford
- xxvi. Develop a nature and arts trail from Chelmsford Library to Sandford Mill to interpret the natural and industrial heritage of the area and promote understanding and appreciation the diverse habitats along the river valleys [No.93 on plan]
- xxvii. Support the Essex Coast Recreational Disturbance Avoidance and Mitigation programme in developing guidelines, undertaking educational initiatives and producing a ‘code of behaviour’ to help protect nationally important coastal and wetland areas [SSSIs and RAMSAR sites] from the adverse impact of recreational use
- xxviii. Request that the Environment Agency [who has the statutory responsibility] to review water quality in Chelmsford rivers and waterways, including an assessment of

the impact of pollution and water contamination, in particular plastic litter and phosphate run-off

E. Identifying ways to improve pedestrian and cycle movement along river corridors including opportunities that could be taken to extend and improve the network of riverside footpaths and cycleways

- xxix. Replacement of the foot / cycle bridges that cross the Chelmer and Can and link Chelmer waterside to the City Centre and wider footpath and cycle network. These are substandard and no-longer fit for purpose. Essex County Council have committed to replace the bridge over the river Chelmer adjacent to the Sea Cadets site – the City Council are responsible for replacing the bridge between Baddow Road Car Park and Meadow Walk. The anticipated cost is in the region of £1.1m. [No.27 on plan]
- xxx. Replacement of the Mallard Bridge connecting Waterloo Lane car park / Riverside to Tesco. This is expected to be secured as part of the planning obligations associated with the development of the former Riverside swimming pool site [No. 45 on plan]
- xxxi. Upgrade the surfacing, lighting and signage of the footpath / cycleway along riverbank, south of Taylor Wimpey and Chelmer Waterside developments to be delivered as part of the planning obligations for the site [Nos.28, 29 & 30 on plan]
- xxxii. Seek the completion of the 'towpath' / walkway around canal leading to Springfield Basin delivered as part of the planning obligations associated with the Lockside development [No.32 on plan]
- xxxiii. Ambition to secure new foot / cycle bridge over the river Chelmer / Blackwater Navigation adjacent to Barnes Mill Lock [No.36 on plan]
- xxxiv. New cycle route from Meadgate to Manor Farm [using underpass on Essex Yeomanry Way] – phase one of the City Centre to East Chelmsford strategic cycle route [No.33 on plan]
- xxxv. Seek to deliver a new cycle route between Chelmer Waterside and Meadgate / Manor Farm – phase two of the City Centre to East Chelmsford strategic cycle route [No.34 on plan]
- xxxvi. Implement the Safer Streets project to extend CCTV coverage and lighting, undertake site-based community engagement to improve access along the northern section [Bunny Walks area] of the river Chelmer
- xxxvii. Facilitate the use of e-Scooters to encourage more sustainable transport choices and the wider use of the riverside cycleway networks

F. Using natural flood management techniques to mitigate the risk of flooding whilst also improving the river environment

- xxxviii. Now the core approach of the Chelmsford Flood Resilience Partnership to implement a programme of catchment improvements and natural flood management interventions to slow flow of water upstream of Chelmsford city centre. Specific actions / locations will emerge from the design and flood modelling work currently being carried out by the Chelmsford Flood Resilience Partnership [OCOP H3.1 CaEE 10a and Nos. 201, 202,203, 204,205,206, 207 & 208 on plan]





# Environment Agency Statutory Main River Map [in consultation 2022]

