

CFE County Priorities for Essex

1. Aim

This document has been drawn together by the CFE Local Liaison Group for Essex with input from all LLG members and their respective organisations. The aim is to ensure that all advisers and partners have a clear, concise and consistent message about the aims of CFE in Essex that can be used by farmers and landowners to ensure their actions deliver maximum benefit to the environment. The action undertaken on each farm may differ depending on the farm type and enterprise.

2. County Overview

Essex rises gently from flat land at the coast towards low hills and ridges in the north-west of the county. It is a county with a large number of rivers and many hedgerows and ancient woodlands. From early enclosure, it is characterised by scattered hamlets and isolated farms, and is influenced by the proximity of a large urban population.

Seventy-five percent of the county is farmed, and half the agricultural land is Grade 1, 2 or 3a. Farms are generally large, with wheat and oilseed rape as major crops. There is some remaining cattle and sheep grazing.

Essex is divided into the following National Character Areas:

- The South Suffolk and North Essex Claylands cover the majority of the county and consist of an undulating wooded landscape dissected by river valleys. It is a predominantly arable landscape, with irregular shaped fields growing wheat and oilseed rape. It has a wooded appearance and the boundary with Suffolk incorporates the nationally important scenery of the Dedham Vale AONB.
- In north west Essex the East Anglian Chalk consists of a distinctive, open, large-scale rolling late-enclosure landscape, mainly arable, with ash-dominated woodland and intimate river valleys. Cereal farms predominate with small numbers of livestock.
- The Greater Thames Estuary forms a ribbon along the Essex Coast and consists of low lying, extensively drained productive arable land protected by sea walls. Open grazing pastures are bounded by reed-fringed ditches and dykes, numerous creeks with few hedges. Large farms which are mainly arable but with increasing amounts of livestock grazing.
- The Northern Thames Basin runs alongside the Greater Thames Estuary and comprises a diverse plateau landscape divided by a series of broad river valleys and extensive areas of broadleaved woodlands. Arable floodplain land with hedgerow-deficient field boundaries alongside open grazing land in certain areas. A larger number of small-holdings than elsewhere, but mainly cereals and oilseeds, with mainly sheep-grazed grass.
- The Suffolk Coast and Heaths is an area in the north-eastern tip of the county with a distinct topography and free draining, easily worked acidic sands and gravels. This area falls on the southerly point of the Suffolk Coast and Heaths AONB. It comprises a largely unspoilt mosaic of estuaries, saltmarsh, grazing marsh, reedbed, river valleys, arable, heath and woodland with strong coastal influence. Farms are mainly large cereal farms, but cash roots, vegetables and pigs are also important.

3. County designated sites

- 2 AONBs - The Dedham Vale and Suffolk Coast and Heaths.
- 10 Special Protection Areas. The SPA network runs almost continuously from the Benfleet and Southend Marshes to the Foulness SPA, continuing to the Dengie peninsula then north to the Blackwater Estuary and Stour Estuary. The Lee Valley, along the Essex Hertfordshire border, is also an SPA.
- Special Areas of Conservation are Epping Forest and the Essex Estuaries.
- 10 Ramsar Sites
- 7 National Nature Reserves
- 81 Sites of Special Scientific Interests.
- Notably, Essex is one of only two counties in England without a Local Nature Partnership.

4. County Priorities

The following sections aim to define the county priorities by theme. Please note this should be broken down further than county level where relevant.

a) Theme: Priority farmland habitats and description

Hedgerows: Many Essex hedges are ancient, species rich habitats associated with the chalk and chalky boulder clay soils of central and north west Essex.

Arable field margins: On the chalk in the north west of the county and the sands and gravels scattered along the river corridors cultivated margins give opportunities for rare arable plants. Riparian grass buffer strips along river corridors are important for the protection they give to water, as well as wildlife benefits.

Floodplain and Coastal grazing marsh: It is estimated that there is 6,500ha of grazing marsh in Essex, having declined by as much as 72% since the 1930s.

Semi and unimproved grassland: Wet meadows along the rivers Lea, Stort and Roding Valleys, and semi-improved grassland along the rivers Chelmer and Blackwater. Heath and acid grassland sites along a band running from the south west of Essex to the north east, with a few outlying sites in south Essex and on the Naze to the east of Colchester (reflecting the underlying geology of glacial sands and gravels).

Ponds: an extremely important component of the biodiversity of Essex.

Any specific action required:

- Hedgerow management to maintain a diverse range of flowering species, hedge age and structure. Complete hedge management important, e.g hedge and buffer strips combined. Habitat connectivity important. Hedge rejuvenation to reinvigorate tall gappy hedges.
- Retaining existing arable field margins and create a range of different habitat types in relevant areas.
- Appropriate management and restoration of floodplain and coastal grazing marsh.
- Appropriate management of semi-improved and unimproved grassland (acidic, neutral and calcareous).
- A policy is needed to promote livestock grazing for managing the above grassland, as many farmers are leaving this sector.
- Pond management especially buffering for great crested newt habitat and improving water quality.

Relevant AES options: hedgerow management, buffer strips, pond buffer strips, cultivated margins, grassland management

Relevant CFE Options: 1, 14, 19

b) Theme: Priority species and requirements

Shrill carder bee and other pollinators: Flower rich habitats, hedgerows and rough grassland, particularly along the Essex coast.

Brown hare: Requires a mosaic of crop types and grass margins for year round grazing and undisturbed cover for raising young in May/ June/ July.

Farmland birds: Important populations along the Essex coast and north-west Essex on the chalk, particularly corn bunting, lapwing, tree sparrow, yellow wagtail and grey partridge. Require winter cover and food source, spring nesting habitat and source of insects for feeding young from springtime.

Great crested newts: Suitable ponds, insect rich grassland, good water quality.

Arable plants: Cultivated, untreated areas on chalk and sands and gravels, close to field edges.

Water vole: Vegetated banks of (mink-free) slow-flowing rivers, streams, ditches, lakes, ponds and dykes.

Bats: Insect rich habitat including woodland, lakes, ponds and marshy areas. Flight line features such as hedges and roost sites.

Any specific action required:

Increase in insect rich habitat.

Relevant AES options: hedgerow and ditch management, buffer strips, field corners, wildflower supplements, nectar flower mix, legume rich grass, ryegrass seed set, wild bird

mix, skylark plots, cultivated plots and margins, cereal headlands, overwintered stubbles, supplementary feeding, beetle banks, grassland management, arable reversion to grassland

Relevant CFE Options: 1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21

c) Theme: priority river catchments

- The Chelmer & Blackwater covers the majority of central Essex and is a Catchment Partnership. Metaldehyde and clopyralid are significant issues for drinking water. Phosphates are present from surface water run-off.
- River Stour and Colne and their tributaries. Part of these are a Catchment Sensitive Farming target area, with the aim of reducing pesticides and yard run-off and managing slurry and manure.
- Upper River Roding is a Catchment Sensitive Farming target area, looking to reduce sediment run-off and pesticides and manage slurry and manure.
- Upper Lee and Stort are also a Catchment Sensitive Farming target area with the same aims as above.

Any specific action required:

Buffer watercourses and avoid run-off.

Relevant AES options: buffer strips, in-field grass strips, management of maize, watercourse fencing, winter cover crops, field corners, beetle banks

Relevant CFE Options: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 17, 18

d) Other county priorities not already covered

Any specific action required:

Relevant AES options:

Relevant CFE Options: