



Essex Coast Recreational disturbance Avoidance and Mitigation Strategy (RAMS) – Revised Strategy 2026

Summary Note

1. What is the Essex Coast RAMS?

The Essex Coast Recreational disturbance Avoidance and Mitigation Strategy (RAMS) is a co-ordinated, partnership-led approach to protect the wildlife of the Essex coastline while allowing new homes and qualifying development to come forward.

It sets out how the recreational impacts of increased visitors, arising from new residential developments, is carefully managed so that important coastal habitats and bird populations are protected. It ensures that planned housing growth can take place in a lawful and sustainable way, while safeguarding internationally designated habitat sites and the species they support.

2. Why is the strategy needed?

Much of the Essex coastline comprises internationally important nature conservation sites that support significantly important bird populations. Stretches of coastline between the Stour Estuary to the Thames Estuary, are afforded protection through a range of statutory designations, including a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Ramsar sites, all of which provide a high level of legal protection.

As Essex grows and new housing is developed, 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 place pressure on sensitive coastal habitats, through increased recreational activities causing disturbance to birds and damage to areas such as saltmarsh and mudflats that support these birds.



The Essex Coast RAMS helps to balance this increased public access with the protection of important wildlife, whilst ensuring compliance with the Habitats Regulations.

3. What are the Habitat Regulations?

The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended) (Habitats Regulations) is UK legislation that protects internationally important habitats and species.

Under these Regulations, local planning authorities act as Competent Authorities with a legal duty to ensure that plans and projects do not harm the integrity of protected sites. They must assess potential impacts both alone and in combination with other plans or projects, and where any risk of adverse effects is identified, appropriate mitigation must be secured before development can proceed.

Local Plans across Essex collectively identified that increased housing growth resulted in increased numbers of residents and therefore an increase in recreational visits to the Essex coast and that recreational pressure (particularly frequent walking and dog walking) can cause disturbance to the protected bird species and habitats. These impacts arise from the combined effect of multiple developments and Local Plans operating together, rather than from individual developments on their own.

4. What does the Essex Coast RAMS do?

The Essex Coast RAMS is a long-term, joined-up strategy designed to protect the coastline while allowing new homes to be built. By looking ahead and planning early, it helps make sure that the combined impact of development is carefully managed, with the right funding and resources in place from the start.

Covering the whole Essex coast, RAMS brings together a co-ordinated set of measures to reduce disturbance to wildlife and protect important habitats by managing visitor pressure. Its key components include:

- A package of measures designed to influence how people access and use the coastline;
- Costs calculated for the long term impacts, and funding secured in-perpetuity through developer contributions;
- Central co-ordination and delivery;
- Long-term monitoring.

This approach enables new development to proceed while ensuring that internationally important coastal habitat sites and bird populations remain safeguarded and undisturbed.

This provides developers an alternative to providing site by site mitigation to address the in-combination effect of development across Essex. This approach is widely used across the country and has been shown to work well.



5. Why have we reviewed the Essex Coast RAMS?

The original Essex Coast RAMS was developed in 2018/2019 to mitigate planned housing growth up to around 2038. Since its adoption there have been significant changes to planned housing growth in Essex, insufficient long-term costing of the original strategy and a need to undertake a 5 year review.

A review was undertaken in 2025 to ensure the strategy remains fit for purpose, evidence led and legally robust.



The updated Essex Coast RAMS 2026 reflects:

- Significantly increased housing growth: Around 148,000 new homes are expected across Essex within the Zone of Influence;
- The need for long-term (ongoing) mitigation ensuring this is fully costed;
- Updated visitor survey evidence, reflecting changes in visitor behaviours and numbers;
- Lessons learned from delivering RAMS to date;
- Current best practice.



Map 1: This map shows the designated habitat sites on the Essex Coast and the RAMS Zone of Influence

6. Who has been involved in the Review?

The updated strategy has been developed by the Essex Coast RAMS Partnership, working with, Local Planning Authorities, Natural England, Essex County Council, coastal site managers and conservation organisations, and specialist ecological and visitor survey consultants. This collaborative approach ensures a consistent and effective mitigation framework across the Essex coastline.

7. What is included in the updated RAMS?

RAMS includes a wide range of practical measures to manage how people access and use the coast, including:

- An expanded and strengthened strategic access management and monitoring programme;
- Coastal ranger teams engaging with visitors;
- Education and community awareness campaigns;
- Clear signage and information
- Responsible dog walking and responsible recreation initiatives;
- Seasonal protection for sensitive bird species;
- Improvements to paths, parking and access;
- Monitoring to understand visitor use and target action.



These measures are designed to prevent harm before it happens, rather than react afterwards, supporting the Habitats Regulations to avoid adverse effects on site integrity. Mitigation is delivered in perpetuity, ensuring long term protection.

8. What evidence supports the updated RAMS?

The Essex coast provides a strong draw for a range of recreational activities such as walking, dog walking, sailing, paddle and wind sports, birdwatching, jet skiing and fishing. Updated visitor surveys were undertaken in 2025, to provide an update on visitor behaviour and recreational use of the coast.

Visitor survey evidence shows that:

- Most visitors to the Essex coast are local residents
- Visitors are predominantly local, travelling short distances
- Visits are frequent and repeated
- Dog walking and walking account for a large proportion of activity
- Awareness of wildlife protection is relatively low
- Recreational pressure on sites occurs year round

This evidence supports the links from housing growth to increased recreational pressure on the protected habitat sites.

9. How is the RAMS delivered?

Bird Aware Essex is the delivery mechanism for the Essex Coast RAMS.

This is the public facing service that delivers many of the on the ground mitigation measures funded through RAMS developer contributions. They focus on engaging and educating visitors, promoting responsible behaviour, to help reduce disturbance to internationally protected bird species.

Bird Aware Essex plays a key role in ensuring that RAMS is effective, visible and evidence led, helping local planning authorities meet their duties under the Habitats Regulations.



10. What you might see on the Essex Coast

When visiting the Essex coast, you may notice a range of activities and features linked to Bird Aware Essex.

You might see:



Coastal rangers: Friendly rangers may be out and about, talking to visitors, sharing information and answering questions about the coast and its wildlife.



Information signs and interpretation: Signs at access points and along paths explaining why certain areas are important for wildlife and how visitors can help protect them.



Advice for dog walkers: Gentle guidance on where dogs can be exercised responsibly, particularly in sensitive areas or at key times of year.



Seasonal messages: Temporary signs or ranger presence during bird breeding or wintering seasons, when wildlife is most vulnerable to disturbance.



Surveys and monitoring equipment: You may see staff carrying out visitor surveys or small counters used to help understand how sites are used. This helps improve future management.

View the project [Annual Report](#) for more information about delivery of the RAMS to date.

The Coastal Code:



11. What is the RAMS Tariff?

The RAMS tariff is a financial contribution applied to new homes and qualifying developments such as certain types of visitor accommodation, paid by developers per new dwelling or qualifying unit, to fund the mitigation measures.

The RAMS tariff is **£476 per new dwelling or qualifying unit** (rounded to the nearest pound and indexed-linked annually).

The revised tariff reflects:

- Updated housing growth
- The expanded mitigation package
- Long term delivery costs

12. Where does the RAMS tariff apply?

The RAMS tariff applies to residential and qualifying developments within the identified Zone of Influence (ZoI), which is the area around protected coastal sites from which people are most likely to visit those sites regularly. It is based on robust visitor survey evidence, which shows that residential development within the ZoI is considered likely to contribute to in-combination recreational impacts on protected sites.

All new residential development located within the ZoI:

- Is required to consider its potential recreational impact on protected sites
- Must ensure appropriate mitigation is secured
- Normally does this through a contribution to the Essex Coast RAMS

This approach allows impacts from development to be addressed collectively and strategically, rather than through individual site by site solutions. Developers can still propose their own bespoke mitigation if appropriate, but the majority choose the RAMS approach.

13. When does the revised strategy start?

The revised Essex Coast RAMS will take effect from the **1st August 2026** (following adoption by the partner authorities and it will replace the previously adopted strategy and tariff.)

14. Where can I view the RAMS?

The full strategy, visitor surveys and supporting documents are available via:

- Participating Local Planning Authority websites
- Bird Aware Essex Coast: www.birdaware.org/essex

Glossary

Habitats Site - Designated areas that protect habitats or species of international value and are of the very highest importance for nature conservation, These include the following designations: SPAs, SACs and Ramsar

Special Protection Areas (SPA) - Areas designated to protect rare, vulnerable and migratory birds, safeguarding the habitats that support these birds, under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended).

Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) - Areas designated to conserve habitats and species of international importance under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended).

Ramsar Site - Wetlands of international importance designated under the Convention on Wetlands.

In-Perpetuity - Mitigation for impacts on Habitats sites must be effective for the lifetime of the impact. For RAMS, best practice is to treat 80 years as the functional equivalent of in-perpetuity provision.



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