

River Walk Management Plans

2020 - 2030



Contents



Overview of Governance

- 3) Our Vision for the River Walk
- 4) Essex Wildlife Trust quote
- 5) Introduction Statement
- 7) Historical Context
- 8) River Walk Map
- 9) Management Framework
- 10) Committee Structure
- 11) Health, Safety and Working in the Public Realm
- 12) Financial Management



River Walk

- 13) Ecology
- 14) Ecological Catalogue
- 15) Future Vision
- 16) Community Involvement
- 17) Marketing & Promotion
- 18) User Survey
- 19) Future Aims & Objectives



Management Plan Detail

- 20) Amenity Grassland Areas
- 21) Rough Grassland
- 22) Nettle Beds & Ruderal Habitats
- 23) Sedge beds & Tall Swamp Habitats
- 24) Ponds
- 25) River View Meadows
- 26) Scrubland & Encroachment Control
- 27) Woodland
- 28) River Corridor
- 29) Recording & Monitoring
- 30) Litter & Dog Control
- 31) Accessibility & Creating a Welcoming Place
- 32) Maintenance programme
- 33) Wildlife sightings



Our Vision for the River Walk

“Witham’s River Walk is unique in Essex, bringing the countryside to the heart of the town and providing valuable habitats for the diverse range of flora and fauna present on site. This natural corridor is an invaluable green lung for the residents of Witham, both day and night, and will be the preserve of the non-human residents.

Working closely with the local community, Witham Town Council will seek the best balance between the needs and interest of people and wildlife alike, with a strong emphasis on providing safe and easy access, and enjoyment for all.

It is the Town Council’s intention to achieve ‘Green Flag’ status for the River Walk. The Green Flag Award scheme recognises and rewards well managed parks and green spaces, setting the benchmark standard for the management of recreational outdoor spaces across the United Kingdom and around the world.

Witham’s River Walk delivers a special challenge as we attempt to provide recreational green spaces for the residents, visitors and those working in Witham, combined with the need for areas reserved for wildlife and the natural habitat for the future wellbeing of Witham and the surrounding area. We will maintain and develop habitats to support valuable species and provide ever more opportunities for the community to learn, enjoy and be involved in their River Walk; truly the Jewel in the Crown of Witham.”

It is within this document that we lay out our commitments, processes and future plans for our most complex, valued and deeply loved asset.

“The Witham River Walk provides truly valuable urban wildlife habitat that is so rarely found in town centres. Sitting alongside the more maintained amenity grassland are areas that are allowed to remain much wilder and it is these that support a rich suite of species such as glow-worm, kingfisher, heron and otter. And while many towns have Local Wildlife Sites with similar features, it is the scale and connectivity of the River Walk to the open countryside that makes it such a unique and important asset for biodiversity. This may be why it still contains one of the last natural river populations of the declining and endangered water vole in Essex. With sympathetic management of the wildlife rich areas this will continue to be a vital corridor for urban wildlife on the River Brain.”

Darren Tansley BSc (hons) MCIEEM
River Catchment Coordinator
Water for Wildlife Project (Essex)
Essex Wildlife Trust



Introduction

The River Walk in Witham is unique in Essex in providing a semi-natural green corridor which runs through the entire town. It extends for over 3 kilometres along the River Brain (from Ordnance Survey grid reference TL810160 to TL828137) and covers an area in excess of 36 hectares. The area contains two Local Wildlife Sites, designated for the extensive sedge beds and floodplain grassland, rare habitat types within the county, and supports a diverse range of wildlife.

Witham Town Council took over management of the Witham River Walk in 2005 and it is managed for both wildlife and public access; it contains a network of public footpaths which are maintained by the council and allow access across most of the area to local visitors, dog walkers and cyclists

However, the origins of the River Walk date back to the late 1930's when Witham Urban District Council purchased the first parcels of land which today forms The River Walk.

The expansion of Witham from village to a market town, of necessity encroached on much of the neighbouring countryside. Whilst this development could have been to the detriment of the local wildlife, the farsighted decision was made to create a River Walk.

The site now is enjoyed by many for leisure and enjoyment or just as a safe and pleasant route around town, whilst others enjoy the wildlife. With the River Walk provided centrally to the town of Witham, it has excellent access for cyclists, walkers, dog owners and with the network of paths, aims to be accessible to all including those with limited mobility or disabilities.

Habitats and facilities

Today the River Walk contains a mosaic of various habitat types including:

- semi-improved grassland
- sedge beds
- nettle beds
- tall swamp and ruderal vegetation
- scrub, woodland
- pond and river corridor habitats

Public access for the site is good with surfaced paths extending across the majority of the site, with most being wide to accommodate both pedestrian and cyclists use. There is in addition a small network of additional unsurfaced paths. These have developed from public use of the site, supported by cutting and clearance by the Town Council's Operations Team.

Access on to the River Walk is readily achieved from many points around Witham. Information Boards and way marking signs are present across all major areas.

There are a good number of seats provided around the River Walk, some of which are picnic benches. Extensive provision of both litter and dog waste bins encourage visitors to help maintain the site in a tidy and safe condition.

Purpose of the Management Plan

The Plan contains the following aims which provide direction for the River Walk over the period 2020 – 2030

- *To provide a welcome and useable site for all local citizens and visitors.*
- *To ensure that the River Walk is a healthy, safe and secure site.*
- *To ensure that the site is kept clean and well maintained.*
- *To ensure sustainable management of resources.*
- *To ensure appropriate management of Conservation and Heritage elements.*
- *To ensure that the River Walk is effectively promoted as a destination of choice.*

The Management Plan looks to draw together the opportunities and challenges for the 10 years ahead.

Key to this aim is the need to define the balance between public access and use of the River Walk with the desire to enhance and protect the valuable wildlife habitats.

Other major considerations are to realise opportunities for greater community involvement with the River Walk, including a focus on educational, cultural and development initiatives. Allied to this issue is the development of marketing and promotional objectives.

These challenges are set in an area of limited resource availability, development pressure for both homes and employment in the area and climate change.

The Plan therefore does not exist in isolation but is inevitably linked to the wider community. Opportunities may exist to expand the current River Walk and its future management will doubtless have implications for the Whetmead Local Nature Reserve at the south-east end of River Walk. This site is also administered by Witham Town Council and it also provides exciting opportunities for the future.

The Management Plan is therefore a further step forward for the Town of Witham. As experience and opportunities expand in the years ahead this document will evolve into an assured and mature Plan safeguarding the River Walk for generations ahead.

History

The origins of Witham can be traced back to the early Iron Age or late Bronze Age and the remnants of a circular earthwork can be recognised in the contours of the landscape and circular pattern of roads around its perimeter at Chipping Hill. In 1843, the newly built railway line cut through this feature.

The Domesday survey in 1086 identified five manors in what became Witham parish, primarily belonging to the king with a total population of 750.

Witham as it is now developed from two separate medieval settlements, Chipping Hill to the North and Newland Street to the South.

The Chapman & Andre map of 1777 shows the town as a discrete linear cluster of houses along the Colchester road, still distinct from Chipping Hill to the north-west, being lined by what is now Avenue Road. By the time of the tithe map of 1839, Mill Lane provided a link from the town to Chipping Hill, following the River Brain.

The 20th century saw dramatic development into what is now modern Witham Town, however the rural setting of the town is still evident within the Mid-Essex region, surrounded by working rural landscape. The remaining River Walk was preserved from the rapid expansion of the 1960's Greater London Council making Witham as an 'expanded town' under the programme of new house building and town planning.

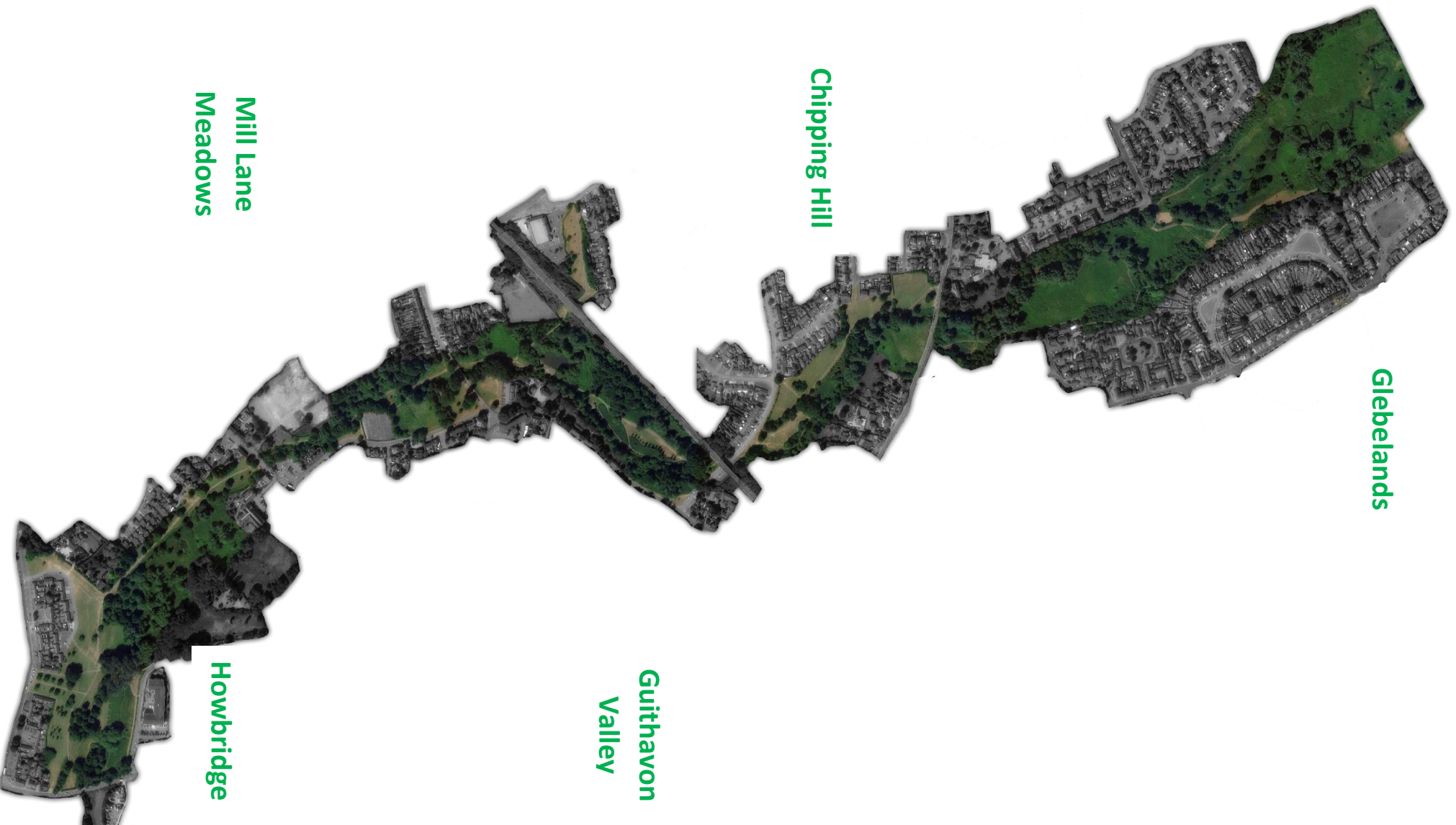
The River Brain corridor having been reduced in size by various 20th century development survives today as a contrasting green space running the length of the Town and providing an accessible green space to all residents and visitors, linking various roads and footpaths together as a healthy, active and diverse location to visit or pass through.

Historic Environment Record

The Historic Environment record (HER) carried out by Essex County Council provides the following summary of the River Walk:

“Historically this land comprised mainly of grazing marsh, whereas today it is largely laid to grass, being maintained as a riverside walk and community open space, the alluvial deposits in the Brain valley are likely to contain important paleo-environmental deposits. The River and its associated flood plain would have been exploited since the prehistoric period and there is potential for paleo-environmental remains.”

The earliest actual evidence of exportation has recently been recorded during excavations at Maltings Academy with Saxon features being identified. There is documentary and archaeological evidence for the construction of mills in the medieval period. The later rebuild of one of the mills survives and has been converted into a house.”



Management Framework

Management of open spaces is carried out by both elected Members of the Council and co-opted committee members who are responsible for policy and funding decisions, whilst officers are responsible for day to day operational management and allocation of resources.

Witham Town Council is a local authority constituted by the Local Government Act 1972 and is responsible for five electoral wards across the town, defending the interests of local people and enhancing public assets for the benefit of all. Witham is represented by sixteen local councillors who are the collective decision-making body for all executive functions of the Town Council including the management of land. In most cases however, issues concerning land management are delegated to the Environment Committee and the Open Spaces Management Sub-Committee who scrutinise decisions taken by officers, provide direction on new initiatives and agree funding levels for all open spaces. Both committees meet six times a year and are open to the public.

Open Spaces Management Sub-Committee (OSMSC)

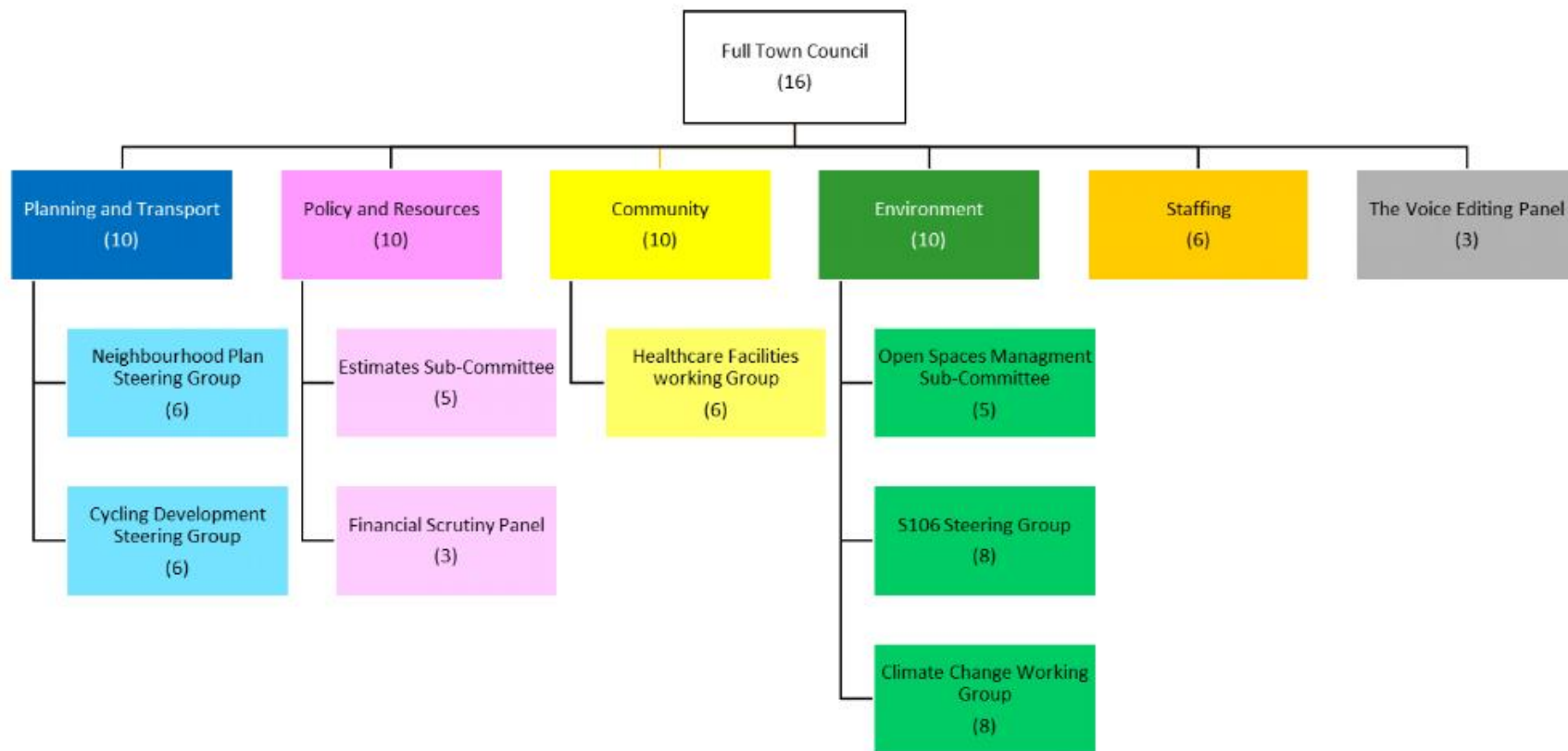
The OSMSC is the principal group that provides direction and advice to officers on the future shape of our local open spaces. Made up of both directly elected Councillors and interested members of the public, the group works towards general improvement of open spaces and ensures that the content of management plans is adhered to and correctly administered for. The group also devises new policies and makes recommendations to the Environment Committee for approval, adoption and funding.

Anybody with an interest in how the River Walk and supporting local sites are managed is eligible to join the Open Spaces Management Sub-Committee by simply getting in touch with the Town Council (subject to any qualifying criteria in the Representation of the People Act)

Officers

The Council's staff are responsible for day to day decisions as to how resources are deployed, and a team of four full time operatives oversee the maintenance of all Witham Town Council sites. In addition to this, they are supported by a core of office based administrators who act as both clerks to the relevant committees for open space and administrators for the Operations team.

Committee Structure



Health, Safety and Working in the Public Realm

The Town Council is duty bound to ensure that every member of the public is free to enjoy a safe environment when visiting open spaces and maintains a rigorous inspection and risk assessment framework which includes:

- Daily site inspections by qualified Operations staff.
- Quarterly asset inspections by administrators to record defects for remedy.
- Contracting of qualified arboriculturists to survey tree stock and quantify works required to preserve existing trees and encourage healthy growth.
- Periodic inspections of heavy infrastructure including bridges and footpaths.
- Robust training programme for all Operations staff for use of relevant equipment.
- Regular review of dogs using the site regarding control and fouling.
- Commitment to zero use of pesticide products.

Issues that arise from this regime which require attention from Members are referred to the relevant committee for funding and prioritisation when they cannot be resolved by officers.



The Town Council also works in partnership with numerous bodies including the Essex Wildlife Trust, EECOS, the Environment Agency and principal authorities for the safe and proactive management of all waterways and rivers that intersect the River Walk as part of our 'Riparian Duties'.

Financial Management



Witham Town Council as the governing body for the River Walk is required to allocate a sufficient budget to the proactive maintenance of open spaces and is committed to ensuring that open spaces are managed for the numerous benefits well maintained spaces provide for the public. As part of the annual budgeting process, the Council considers both day to day costs, capital expenditure and long term expenditure on large scale projects. The budgeting process is also responsible for allocations for staff resources and emergency or otherwise unforeseen expenditure.

Budget setting for open spaces also takes into account the relevant policies in relation to the River Walk which includes the detail of this Management Plan and ensuring suitable funds are available for the continued management and application of policy.

Understanding Expense on Open Spaces

As part of the Accounts & Audit Regulations and Local Government Act 1972, the Council is required to maintain a high level of transparency on all matters concerning expenditure and publishes its accounts in accordance with this statutory framework. Public accounts are free for inspection in addition to both internal and external audit reports. Any interested party can find out how budgets are being spent on the River Walk and future committed expenditure.

Ecology

The River Walk contains a wide and varied number of habitat types, semi improved grassland, sedge and nettle beds, tall swamp and ruderal vegetation, scrub, woodland, pond and river corridors.

For the purposes of this management plan, the various components of the reserve have been divided into eight features according to the habitat types:

- **1) Amenity Grassland**
- **2) Non Amenity Grassland**
- **3) Tall Ruderal**
- **4) Sedge Bed Mosaic**
- **5) Scrub**
- **6) Woodland**
- **7) River Brain**
- **8) Ponds**
- **9) Wildflower Meadows**

The notable flora within the site is concentrated within the fen/swamp habitats of the Local Wildlife sites, Witham marsh and Riverview Meadows, but not exclusively restricted to these areas. Three Essex red Data List species are recorded within the site:

- **Southern Marsh Orchid**
(Dactylorhiza praetermissa)
- **Butterbur**
(Petasites hybridus)
- **Small Teasel**
(Dipsacus pilosus)

Additional notable species include:

- **Skullcap**
(Scutellaria galericulata)
- **Marsh Marigold**
(Caltha palustris)
- **Ragged Robin**
(Lychnis flos caculi)
- **Cuckooflower**
(cardamine pratensis)
- **Hart's-tongue fern**
(Phyllitis scolopendrium)

The river corridor provides valuable habitat for numerous animal species, including breeding birds, small mammals and varied invertebrates. The Essex Red Data List invertebrates recorded along the River Walk include:

- **'The Four Spotted Moth'**
(Tyta lactuosa)
- **'White Legged Damselfly'**
(Platycnemis Pennipes)

In addition to:

- **Glow Worms**
(Lampyris noctiluca – recorded in central portions of the site)
- **Common Lizards & Great Crested Newts**
(Present in Witham Marsh)
- **Otters & Water Voles**
(River Brain – Essex Biodiversity Action Plan)
- **Kingfishers, Song Thrushes, Bullfinches and Mandarin Ducks**
- **Bats**
(River Corridor)
- **Willow Emerald Damselfly**
(Chalcolestes viridis)

Southern Marsh Orchid



Butterbur



Small Teasel



Skullcap



Marsh Marigold



Ragged Robin



Cuckooflower



Hart's Tongue Fern



The Four Spotted



Female Banded Demoiselle



Glow Worms



Common Lizard



Great Crested Newt



Otters



Water Vole



Kingfisher



Song Thrush



Bull Finch



Bats



Mandarin Duck



Future Vision

The existing value of the Witham River Walk for wildlife lies largely in the combination of a diverse range of different habitats and it is recommended that the broad distribution of habitat types is not only maintained, but enhanced for the future.

Increasing Biodiversity

The sensitive sedge beds and equally species rich grassland areas within the Local Wildlife Sites are considered a high management priority and as such require pro-activity to ensure that deterioration does not occur. A programme of targeted scrub clearance and cutting within the selected meadows and sedge bed areas ensure restoration over time of the former species rich plant assemblages, particularly benefiting declining species.

Maintaining Amenity

The extensive areas of amenity grassland offer scope for new habitat creation including wildflower meadows, ponds and rough grassland where it is possible to maintain the existing public amenity and accessibility for all members of the local community.

Routine management will ensure that all access routes are clearly visible and signposted and adequate information and interpretation boards are present across the site to educate new and returning visitors on the delicate and diverse nature of the site. Ensuring the balance between enhancement and preservation of nature with public amenity and multi-purpose use

is paramount to the future success of the site.

The Batten Report

Dr Leo Batten, a Biodiversity Consultant produced a report in 2001 examining the River Walk.

The report identified management plans for a number of the diverse habitats on the site and most important species present. The report helped raise awareness of the biodiversity value and potential of the River Walk and has formed the basis on which management plans are created. Building on these early observations and recommendations, the Town Council commissioned from EECOS a more detailed and extensive report to create the first management plan.



Community Involvement

The River Walk exists for the benefit of the local community and the Town Council is committed to public ownership and pride in this prominent asset. As such a commitment to take active steps towards a greater sense of community ownership with the River Walk is enshrined in the overarching business plans of the Environment Committee. It is overwhelmingly evident that the site is popular and well used, but understanding the attractions to different generations is paramount to ensuring the River Walk is managed correctly and for as wide a possible audience. Chief outlets for community involvement are via:

- **Social Media:** by offering photographic updates and showcasing of various seasonal points of interest and offering the public an opportunity to comment on photos taken including uploading their own.
- **Local Democracy:** by allowing any interested Member of the Public the ability to join the Open Spaces Management Sub-Committee with voting rights.
- **Participatory Rights:** by ensuring that all committee debates are open for public access and publicised as widely as possible in advance of their meeting, allowing interested Members of the Public the ability to contribute to debate or raise points of concern via the Council's "Public Participation" agenda items.
- **The Voice Newsletter:** providing more detailed articles on points of interest on the River Walk with a strong emphasis on community submissions of content and editorial pieces.
- **Accessible Information:** available in various formats and free of charge via the Council's dedicated Information Centre which includes the Town Council's commemorative tree book and index of tree planting locations.
- **Publication of Decisions:** via minutes and press releases of executive decision making committees, ensuring that maximum exposure is given to critical decisions and budget setting in addition to providing comprehensive accounting information in relation to Open Spaces.
- **Active Consideration of New Schemes:** such as commemorative bench dedication, dog bin sponsorship, a facility to receive donations of bat and bird boxes or volunteer opportunities on the ground particularly including the younger generation by involving the two secondary schools in the town.

Marketing & Promotion

The River Walk benefits from promotion to the general public as a destination of choice to visit and attracts reasonable levels of interest from outside Witham, contributing to the local economy by drawing in a basic level of tourism, however further steps as outlined in this plan must be taken to build on this baseline success. The following marketing plan outlines commitments within this management plan period to improve overall marketing of the site for the future:



Social Media Presence

Increasing number of direct posts to showcase work being undertaken by committee members and Operations staff including small competitions, opinion polls and photographic uploads to profile areas of interest. Cross referencing to other social media platforms for local interest groups for increased exposure.

Improved Information

Information available on site including way-marking, interpretation boards and maps will be installed to increase the River Walk's identity and better demonstrate the number of areas to visit.



Cross Authority Partnership

Commitment to advertisement of principal authority publications across the River Walk in relation to healthy and active lifestyles will be increased across the site to market the River Walk as a suitable space for fitness.



Showcasing In The Voice

Additional editorial space will be afforded for focused advertisement of the River Walk including community submissions and visitor experiences.



Smarter Site Mapping

Newly updated and interactive maps to be made available via the Information Centre and online will improve overall visitor experience. Additional work will be undertaken to link with the Witham Town Trail and ensure links are kept up to date.



Improved Site Wide Signage

Easy to interpret, informative and branded signs will be installed at every access point to clearly welcome visitors to the River Walk no matter where accessed.

User Surveys

Witham Town Council regularly take on board feedback and suggestions from the public with ideas for improvement to the River Walk. It is also important that the user demographic of the River Walk is known so surveys are carried out periodically to gain further knowledge of our user base.

A user survey was carried out through a questionnaire included in Witham Town Council's quarterly Voice newsletter's summer 2020 edition sent to all residents of the town. The paper version of the survey to be returned to the Town Hall or an online version was provided through Survey Monkey. It was also advertised on Social Media to gain attention from all audience groups.

100% of those surveys returned acknowledge that they were aware of Witham's River Walk and 99% actually used it. Participants were asked how often they used the site and 37% of those surveyed advised that they used it on a weekly basis or more, with 46% actually using the site daily.

The location is used for different activities and the survey asked about the various reasons that they may use the River Walk. 47% use the River Walk as a pleasant diversion or route through town and 53% enjoyed the wildlife found. 79% of users stated that walking was their preferred activity, 28% were dog walkers, 21% were cyclists and 9% used the River Walk for jogging or running. 12% of those surveyed like using the location for photography opportunities, 3% enjoyed picnics with 4% carrying out other activities such as painting.

The survey indicated that the most popular areas of the River Walk were Guithavon Valley and Mill Lane Meadows with 63% of users regularly using these stretches of the site. These were closely followed by the Howbridge section attracting 57% of users and Chipping Hill with 50%. The least used area was Glebelands with 24% as the location furthest from the town centre and a more natural environment. The River Walk is closely accessible for the majority of the town with 74% of users stating that they are within 5 minutes' walk.

The age range of those completing the survey were 24% 65-74 years old, 21% over 75 years old, 19% 55-64 years old, 16% 45-54 years old, 9% 35-44 years old, 10% 25-34 years old and 1% 18-24 years old.

Although a survey such as this provides interesting information, the results may be disproportionate due to the demographic of the population that have actually completed the survey. The younger members of the town may not necessarily read the Voice or complete a survey and in fact 94% of the paper versions of the survey were completed by those 55 years and older. Members of the Operations Team that work on the River Walk on a daily basis will have an overall perception of who our users are.

Results are based on 104 online surveys and 51 paper surveys returned during June and July 2020.

Future Aims & Objectives

Through the careful application of this management plan, future desired outcomes for the River Walk include:

Promoting Active & Healthy Lifestyles

By building on the existing popularity of the River Walk for runners and cyclists, improving footpaths and cycleway conditions to ensure that paths are kept safe and accessible all year round. In addition, marketing the River Walk as a space to ‘step away from it all’ as a calm and natural inviting space will form a cornerstone to District Wide mental health awareness and the benefits afforded to all from the free use of diverse and well maintained public spaces.



Increasing overall biodiversity in Witham

By carrying out the management plan’s maintenance regimes and having due consideration to improvement of the River Walk via the creation of new habitats and varied biomes, the River Walk can serve as an example of fostering biodiversity and satisfying the United Kingdom Biodiversity Action Plan.



Safe & Accessible Spaces for all

Witham Town Council as the governing body for this Management Plan is committed to ensuring the River Walk is as safe and accessible to all members of the local community as possible. As part of the ongoing risk assessment management of the site, new opportunities to increase access and ensure the River Walk is welcoming to all visitors will be identified and actioned.



Preservation for Future Generations

By ensuring strict adherence to the management plan’s maintenance regime to carry out desired objectives is adhered to in addition to ensuring adequate budgetary provision is afforded by the Council each financial year to not only maintain the existing standards on site but also to fund new capital expenditure projects that will meet the goals and desires of the plan.



Amenity Grassland Areas



To maintain amenity grassland areas without infringing on surrounding habitats, grassland areas will continue to provide open spaces for Members of the Public whilst care will be taken with regards to marginal habitats including woodland fringes and river banks.

Regularly mown grass areas are vital for visitor attraction and multi-purpose space and is designated as such. Care however will be taken by operatives performing grass cutting by ensuring a margin no greater than one metre either side of main footpaths is kept cut at any time so as to allow for maximum possible stimulation of marginal habitats.

A new comprehensive schedule of grass cutting regimes will be compiled and codified to increase general awareness of maintenance regimes and ensure that continuity is maintained.

A continued programme of litter picking is essential to ensure that the areas open for public amenity are kept presentable, clean and safe for all users. Daily patrol and survey of the site ensures that these areas are not subject to unauthorised access or inappropriate uses and that bins are kept in a well maintained state, never overflowing or awaiting pick up.

The Open Spaces Management Sub-Committee will identify suitable areas for trial plantings of wildflowers to encourage an increase in biodiversity and visual amenity without impacting on the available space and open nature of the amenity grassland areas.

Located in Chipping Hill, Guithavon Valley, Mill Lane Meadows and Howbridge areas.

Rough (Non-Amenity) Grassland



Areas of grassland will be retained largely as existing to continue to provide habitat for invertebrates, small mammals and reptiles. A return to traditional grassland management methods would make proactive steps towards restoring diverse flora.

Chipping Hill & Mill Lane Meadows should be managed with a review to restoring this declining habitat type. The reintroduction of periodic low-intensity grazing would be desirable but if not possible, a continued commitment to late autumn (October/November) cutting should be in place. All cuttings should be removed from the sites to provide as much encouragement as possible to the floristic diversity. Cuttings may be repurposed as alternative habitats elsewhere on site.

Desired outcomes would be the recolonization of native species and increased floristic diversity. Where rough grassland intersects mosaic sedge beds, the maintenance of sedge beds should take priority.

Located in Glebelands, Chipping Hill, Guithavon Valley, Mill Lane Meadows and Howbridge areas

Nettle Beds & Ruderal Habitats



The areas of tall ruderal vegetation including nettle beds will be maintained largely as a ‘non-intervention’ habitat for invertebrates, particularly glow worm and butterflies, with the exception of rotational scrub clearance; margins will be protected from cutting and continue to provide a valuable refuge for wildlife.

These areas offer a rich wildlife resource despite often being viewed as weedy waste ground. The large number of nettles found in open productive habitats along the River Walk will be used by many different species and support the local food chain for small birds and mammals. Steps should be taken to ensure that the public and visitors are aware of the purpose of these vital areas for supporting the biodiversity of the River Walk. Areas close to footpaths are trimmed when necessary to prevent encroachment.

From 2024/2025 it was agreed that some nettles along the river bank will be cut back to provide more views of the river. This decision was made after consulting with Essex Wildlife Trust and taking into account public comments.

Located in Glebelands, Chipping Hill, Guithavon Valley, Mill Lane Meadows, and Howbridge areas.

Sedge Beds & Tall Swamp Habitats



The large mosaic sedge, grassland and tall swamp vegetation contained within the Local Wildlife Sites continue to provide important resources for wildlife; clearance of margin scrub and continued management will reduce the drying up of sensitive areas or loss of habitats to dense scrub. Riverview Meadows will be subject to a more hands-on management approach and cutting back of rank and scrubby areas will benefit the once varied flora. An annual inspection and continued maintenance of the 'Back Water Channel' will help encourage growth in this degraded sedge bed and provide an additional freshwater habitat.

An area not suitable for public access or recreation, it is an increasingly rare habitat in Essex, and these locations are crucial for Common Lizards, Great Crested Newts, small mammals, bats and birds.

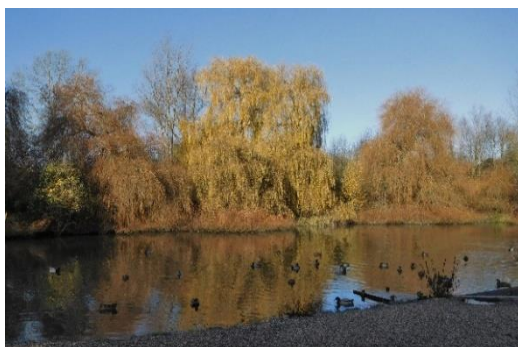
Located in Glebelands and Howbridge areas

Ponds



The River Walk supports at least 12 varied species of Dragonfly. Although the site contains abundant habitat for hunting dragonflies, the creation of new ponds would provide potential breeding habitat for these and other freshwater invertebrates. Careful excavation within existing low and damp areas within sedge beds could provide small areas of standing water that retain sufficient levels to support amphibians and breeding dragonfly species. Careful consideration by the Open Spaces Management Sub-Committee will be given to areas that could be subject to small-scale trials.

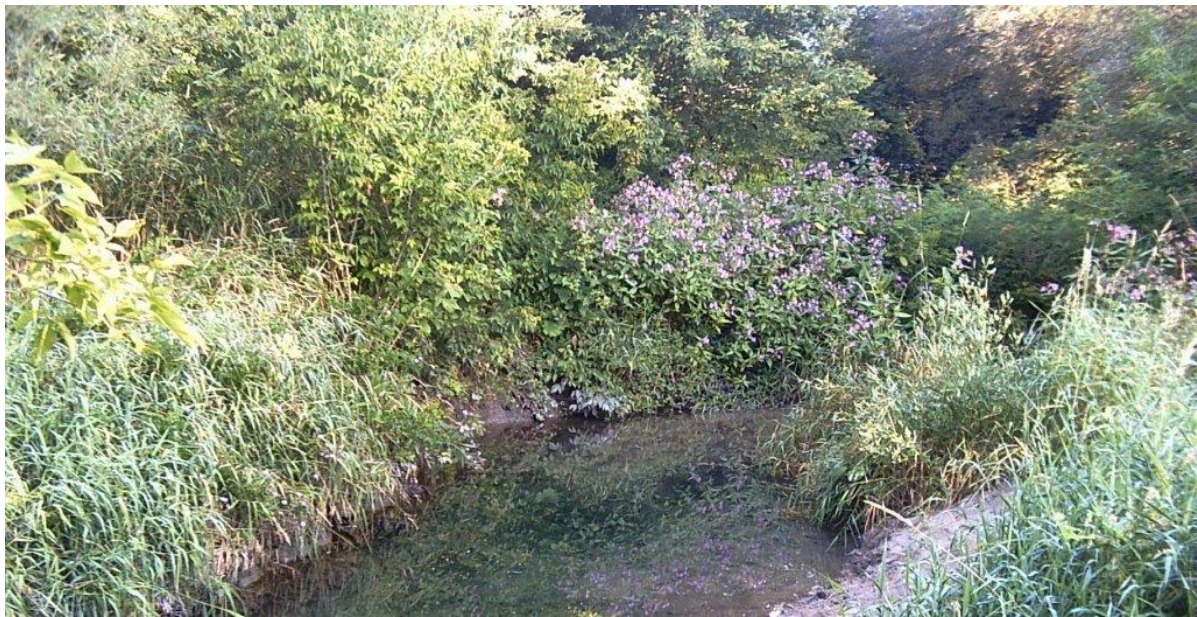
Proactive management of the Witham Duck Pond which forms a central location of the River Walk in Guithavon Valley is a key element to the management of ponds within these plans. Measures to ensure embankments are not eroded by the large number of waterfowl will be proactively managed in addition to providing improved information to visitors concerning the feeding of ducks.



Located in Guithavon Valley



Riverview Meadows



Riverview Meadows has suffered in the past more than other areas of tall swamp and sedge from scrub encroachment and drying out. A previous lack of management resulted in increasingly rank cover of nettles and coarse grasses. Prevention of the succession of scrub and stimulation of diversity of marshland remains a priority. This area not accessible by the public benefits from a regular maintenance regime particularly in piling up rank vegetation and cuttings well away from the River Channel.

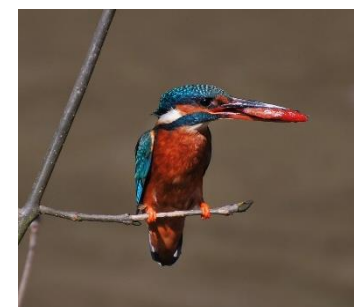
Priority will remain with not increasing public access to this secluded area and operating a 3-5 year rotation of cutting to encourage regrowth of fen vegetation, retaining habitats for Kingfishers and Grey Wagtails.

Manual brush cutting will take priority as the preferred methods of management as the nature of the ground makes access with heavy machinery both difficult and undesirable, with attention being paid to the care of this delicate area.

The completed back channel restoration will be maintained and further work performed, in consultation with Essex Wildlife Trust as appropriate, to ensure this channel remains clear and functioning and yields the desired results of inundation via high river flow.



Grey Wagtail



Kingfisher

Located in Howbridge

Hedgerows, Scrubland & Encroachment Control



Management of this feature is largely aimed at limiting its spread onto sensitive grassland / sedge habitats and pathways. The mosaic of dense and scattered scrub represents important habitat for breeding birds and invertebrates; selective coppicing of shrubs will help prevent this area developing into tall, woody scrub.

The units of scrub within the site however represent an important wildlife resource and buffering habitat and should be managed to maintain the structural diversity. The aim should be to maintain the current and varied structure and composition of scrub whilst controlling scrub where it is encroaching onto existing grassland or tall swamp vegetation. This is a high priority in the Local Wildlife Site compartments where areas of sedge and grassland have become overgrown. Areas of a scattered scrub can generally be left as non-intervention areas. Some occasional coppicing would improve the structure and increase the lifespan of old and leggy shrubs. A long-term rotational coppice would prevent the continued succession to tall and homogenous scrub and provide a diversity of age structures and species composition. Scrub management should be focussed on marginal areas.

Hedgerows on the River Walk should be managed much as the units of scrub described above, cutting back twice-yearly outside of bird nesting season should prevent hedgerows from spreading into adjacent habitats. New hedge planting should comprise of native species including Hazel, Wild Privet, Spindle, Blackthorn, Field Maple and Holly.

Located in Glebelands, Chipping Hill, Guithavon Valley and Mill Lane Meadows areas.

Woodland



Existing secondary woodland will generally be retained as existing, with management focussed on making safe any trees overhanging tracks and in selective tree removal to enhance the structure and wildlife value. Standing dead wood will be left where possible, providing habitat for invertebrates as well as potential nesting and roosting opportunities for birds and bats.

The wildlife value of the woodland areas in the River Walk is great, providing additional habitat and buffering areas for adjacent fen and grassland. An emphasis on stasis is therefore employed ensuring minimal disturbance of woodland areas save for necessary inspections for safety and progress.

Some woodland compartments may benefit from selective thinning out and planting of native shrubs to increase the structure of the understorey. Consideration to new bird and bat boxes should be at the forefront of woodland management.

Located in Glebelands, Chipping Hill, Guithavon Valley, Mill Lane Meadows and Howbridge areas.

River Corridor



The River Brain will be maintained as part of the Council's riparian duties for the benefit of existing wildlife and freshwater invertebrates. Areas of bankside vegetation will be left to develop in disturbance free zones along parts of the river corridor to increase the cover for wildlife. The retention of old willow pollards and both standing and fallen deadwood will also benefit otters by providing potential refuges to be used as holts, with the fencing of some areas increasing the amount of undisturbed cover. Invasive alien plant species such as Indian Balsam will be controlled to prevent them becoming well established.

Management of the river corridor should concentrate on maintaining and improving areas of cover and bankside vegetation. Bramble, willow pollards, nettles and tall ruderals provide habitat and cover for a range of wildlife species. Some willow trees should be re-pollarded and others left to collapse to provide potential new otter holts. Standing and fallen deadwood, retained where possible is desired.

Additional consideration should be given to restoration projects similar to the 'back channel' project identified and carried out as part of the first-generation River Walk Management Plan. As with most rivers in Essex, the River brain has been highly modified with several canalised sections, steep banks, silty substrate and homogenous channel. The reinstatement of more stony riffles, berms, gradually sloping banks and widened pools would help restore some of the natural characteristics and correspondingly increase diversity in aquatic invertebrates and macrophytes.

Recording & Monitoring

Monitoring surveys will aid the assessment of the effectiveness of this management plan and create a structured evidence base for informed future decision making. Neglected taxa should also be surveyed to promote regular recording of as many taxonomic groups as possible. Particular regard should be paid to:

- **Badgers:** signs of activity, particularly setts, should be reported to an ecologist if this occur within 30 metres of areas of scrub being cleared or disturbed.
- **Botany:** surveys for indicator species within damp grassland and sedge.
- **Bats:** detector surveys are likely to yield new records for the site. There are likely to be bat roosts in some of the site's trees. Any trees proposed for works should be assessed for bat roosts and form part of the Council's tree stock records. The linear walking route through the River Walk would provide an interesting route for a bat survey transect and scope for public guided walks to kindle interest in this site should be considered.
- **Glow Worms:** a small group of volunteers carry out annual surveys to monitor and count the numbers of 'glowing' males. The results are submitted to a national database.
- **Birds:** various individuals submit records of sightings to Essex Birdwatching Society, whose data is shared with Essex Field Club. Members of the public are encouraged to visit their respective websites at www.ebws.org.uk and www.essexfieldclub.org.uk.
- **Otters and Water Voles:** sightings are reported by various individuals to Essex Wildlife Trust and from 2024 Witham Town Council's Operations Manager participates in the annual water vole survey reporting to the People's Trust for Endangered Species.

It will remain the duty of the Open Spaces Management Sub-Committee to review the progress of the management plan on an annual basis as a standing agenda item to ensure that all desired outcomes are being achieved and decisions are being taken in accordance with these plans.



Litter & Dog Control

Litter Control

Numerous litter bins are provided across the site confirming that there is adequate provision for users of the River Walk to dispose of their waste responsibly. Daily patrols of the River Walk, regular bin maintenance and a schedule of litter picking ensures that the site is presentable and safe for all users. The bins are kept in a well-maintained condition and are emptied daily to avoid overflowing with rubbish.

Consideration will be given in the near future for the introduction of providing bins with recycling facilities so as to meet our commitment to environmental sustainability.

Dog Control

The River Walk is enjoyed by numerous dog walkers in the local community every day. It is a popular open space in the town for dogs and owners to have their regular exercise. Their presence does not affect the enjoyment of the open space for others and there is not currently a problem with them causing a nuisance but this is regularly monitored. Consideration for instigating a Public Spaces Protection Order on the River Walk will be given should the control of dogs become an issue in the future and implemented by having areas where dogs are required to be kept on leads.

Dog fouling is controlled by the provision of eighteen dog waste bins across the whole of the River Walk updated in 2020. Witham Town Council also provide free dog waste bags for members of the public which can be obtained from the Town Hall during office opening hours. The area is regularly inspected for dog fouling and the bins are frequently emptied and maintained. The introduction of a dog bin sponsorship during 2020 encourages the importance of clearing up dog waste and disposing of it responsibly. Individuals can sponsor a dog waste bin and in return a poster of their dog will be placed on the bin advertising the scheme and reminding owners to clean up after their dogs.



Promoting responsible dog ownership ensures that uncollected dog fouling and uncontrolled dogs do not upset other users or become a danger to other animals and wildlife.

Accessibility & Creating a Welcoming Place

The principal aim is to create a welcoming place for members of the community of all ages and backgrounds as well as providing inviting habitats for wildlife.

The River Walk can be joined via numerous entry points as paths connect from various housing developments and roads along the whole of the linear route. The main entrances are located either end of the Chipping Hill, Guithavon Valley, Mill Lane Meadows and Howbridge sections. There are plans to install new signs to provide appealing access points encouraging visitors to enter.

Interpretation boards are similarly positioned at popular areas offering information about wildlife and habitat in the location in addition to a map of the main route. Measures are in place to review and update these, periodically, should the contained information become obsolete. A noticeboard is also installed close to the duck pond with relevant council notices and event advertising displayed. Fingerposts can be discovered at interlinking paths signposting popular routes through the town and these are due to be reviewed to consider updating.

Cycling is permitted with a fully-surfaced dual footpath and cycleway found on the majority of the route through the site and there are plans to resurface these as necessary. Clear entry and exit points for cycleways are maintained. The main route is fully accessible for all types of visitors comprising of paths wide enough for a combination of users. The River Walk also includes a network of natural unmarked paths which are not manageable for all but allows those that can to get closer to nature.

Car parking is not available on site but a public car park is located close to the entrances of Mill Lane Meadows and Howbridge sections. Unauthorised vehicle access is controlled by knee railings fully enclosing the whole site and drop-down posts ensuring visitors' safety.

Seating is provided at various locations throughout the River Walk, as well as picnic benches in Mill Lane Meadows, enabling users to sit and enjoy the surroundings.

Open Spaces staff wear recognisable uniform and are familiar with many of the regular visitors making a welcoming community environment.

Maintenance Programme

	Glebelands	Chipping Hill	Guithavon Valley	Mill Lane Meadows	Howbridge
Amenity Grassland	March to November grassed areas are cut weekly, weather permitting and dependant on the previous winter				
Rough (Non-Amenity Grassland)	Unofficial paths throughout Spa Springs in rough grassland are cut monthly March to November, weather permitting.	Area is cut annually in October	Area is cut annually in October	Area is cut twice a year during late summer and late winter/early spring. Unofficial pathways through rough grassland are cut two-weekly from June.	Area is cut annually in October
Nettle Beds & Ruderal Habitat	From June they are trimmed two-weekly if necessary to stop encroachment onto paths.	From June they are trimmed two-weekly if necessary to stop encroachment onto paths, this also includes cutting back nettles surrounding memorial trees in this area	A section of nettle beds are known to be the habitat of glow-worms so are treated sensitively. The nettles either side of an unofficial path at the back of the duck pond are cut two-weekly from June.	From June they are trimmed two-weekly if necessary to stop encroachment onto paths.	From June they are trimmed two-weekly if necessary to stop encroachment onto paths.
Sedge Beds & Tall Swamp Habitats	Sedge beds are cut every three years with the next cut due in 2021.				Sedge beds are cut every three years with the next cut due in 2021.
Ponds			Culvert at the pond is cleared on a daily basis to remove debris and rubbish		
Riverview Meadows					3-5 year cutting rotation of area during winter period with phased cutting of sections. Next cut due in 2021
Scrubland & Encroachment Control	Coppice of scrubland required every three years with the next cut due in 2021	New growth on perimeter hedge is cut back twice a year outside of bird nesting season (March to August). Spinneys located in the area are also cut back twice yearly from June to prevent encroachment onto amenity grassland.	Coppice of scrubland required every three years with the next cut due in 2021. Spinneys located in the area are cut back twice yearly from June to prevent encroachment.	Trimmed back as and when necessary to stop encroachment on to the two footbridges in this area	New growth on perimeter hedge is cut back twice a year outside of bird nesting season (March to August). Spinneys located in the area are also cut back twice yearly from June to prevent encroachment onto amenity grassland.
Woodland	Maintenance of trees is carried out on an as and when basis determined by risk assessments and/or health and safety issues. Scheduled maintenance to be carried out between September to March. Periodic tree surveys are carried out by qualified arboriculturalists				

Wildlife Sightings

(Based on observations since 2005)

Birds

Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
Canada Goose	<i>Branta canadensis</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Mandarin	<i>Aix galericulata</i>
Harris's Hawk	<i>Parabuteo unicinctus</i>
Red Kite	<i>Milvus milvus</i>
Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Hobby	<i>Falco subuteo</i>
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Red-legged Partridge	<i>Alectoris rufa</i>
Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Water Rail	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>
Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
Snipe	<i>Gallinago</i>
Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>

Mammals

Grey Squirrel
Rabbit
Muntjac
Otter
Stoat
Weasel
Water Vole
Bank Vole
Mole
Common Shrew
Brown Rat
Wood Mouse
Daubenton's Bat
Pipistrelle sp.

Dragon/Damselflies

Brown Hawker
Four-spotted Chaser
Ruddy Darter
Common Darter
Migrant Hawker
Southern Hawker
Banded Demoiselle
Common Blue Damselfly
Azure Damselfly
Blue-tailed Damselfly
Red-eyed Damselfly
Emerald Willow Damselfly

Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>
Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>
Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>
Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>
Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridus</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
Pied Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba yarrellii</i>
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
Nightingale	<i>Luscinia megarhynchos</i>
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>
Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>
Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>
Reed Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i>
Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>
Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapillus</i>
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>

Butterflies/Moths

Essex Skipper
Large Skipper
Large White
Small White
Green-veined White
Brimstone
Orange Tip

Small Tortoiseshell
Peacock
Painted Lady
Comma
Red Admiral
Common Blue
Holly Blue
Meadow Brown
Gatekeeper
Small Heath
Ringlet
Speckled Wood
Cinnabar moth & caterpillars
Lackey moth caterpillar
Yellow Shell moth
Magpie moth
Blood vein moth
Clouded Border moth

Fish

Dace
Rudd
Chubb
Roach
Minnow
Gudgeon
Stickleback

Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Nuthatch
Treetreeper
Magpie
Jay
Jackdaw
Rook
Carrion Crow
Starling
House Sparrow
Chaffinch
Brambling
Linnet
Lesser Redpoll
Goldfinch
Greenfinch
Siskin
Bullfinch
Reed Bunting

Parus major
Periparus ater
Cyanistes caeruleus
Aegithalos caudatus
Sitta europaea
Certhia familiaris
Pica pica
Garrulus glandarius
Corvus monedula
Corvus frugilegus
Corvus corone
Sturnus vulgaris
Passer domesticus
Fringilla coelebs
Fringilla montifringilla
Linaria cannabina
Acanthis cabaret
Carduelis carduelis
Chloris chloris
Spinus
Pyrrhula pyrrhula
Emberiza schoeniclus

Pike
Stone Loach
Bullhead
Perch
Goldfish
Golden Orfe

'Others'

Common Lizard & juveniles
Slow Worm
Grass Snake
Dark Bush cricket
Field Grasshopper
Red & Black Frog hopper
Thick-thighed Flower Beetle
Rose Chafer
Glow Worm
Various bees & hoverflies
Various ladybirds
Various spiders
Various beetles & weevils

BACK PAGE



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