

# **Essex Country Parks & Essex Outdoors Update**

**October 2020**



Essex County Council



October 2020

# Essex Country Parks

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## Summary Overview

- Essex County Council manages 8 Country Parks, and 30 woodlands across the county.
- We also maintain multiple heritage sites including Cressing Temple Barns, the Jaywick Martello Tower and 5 Mills.
- We usually have an estimated 900,000 visitors annually to the parks, monitored via car parking (note we are unable to record walking visitors, nor do we record visitors to woodlands).
- We deliver a variety of educational and outdoor activities such as Wild Wednesday at Danbury Country Park as well as themed walking trails at Thorndon and Weald Country Parks.
- Cressing Temple Barns is our main event site and we host a variety of seasonal events there.
- We also deliver weddings and conferences at Cressing Temple Barns.





**Belhus Woods**  
South Oxendon RM15 4XQ

**Cressing Temple**  
Braintree CM77 8PD

**Cudmore Grove**  
East Mersea CO5 8UT

**Danbury**  
Danbury CM3 6AW

**Great Notley**  
Great Notley CM77 7Y5

**Hadleigh**  
Hadleigh SS27 2SP

**Marsh Farm**  
South Woodham Ferrers  
CM3 5WY

**Thorndon North**  
Brimwood CM13 3RZ

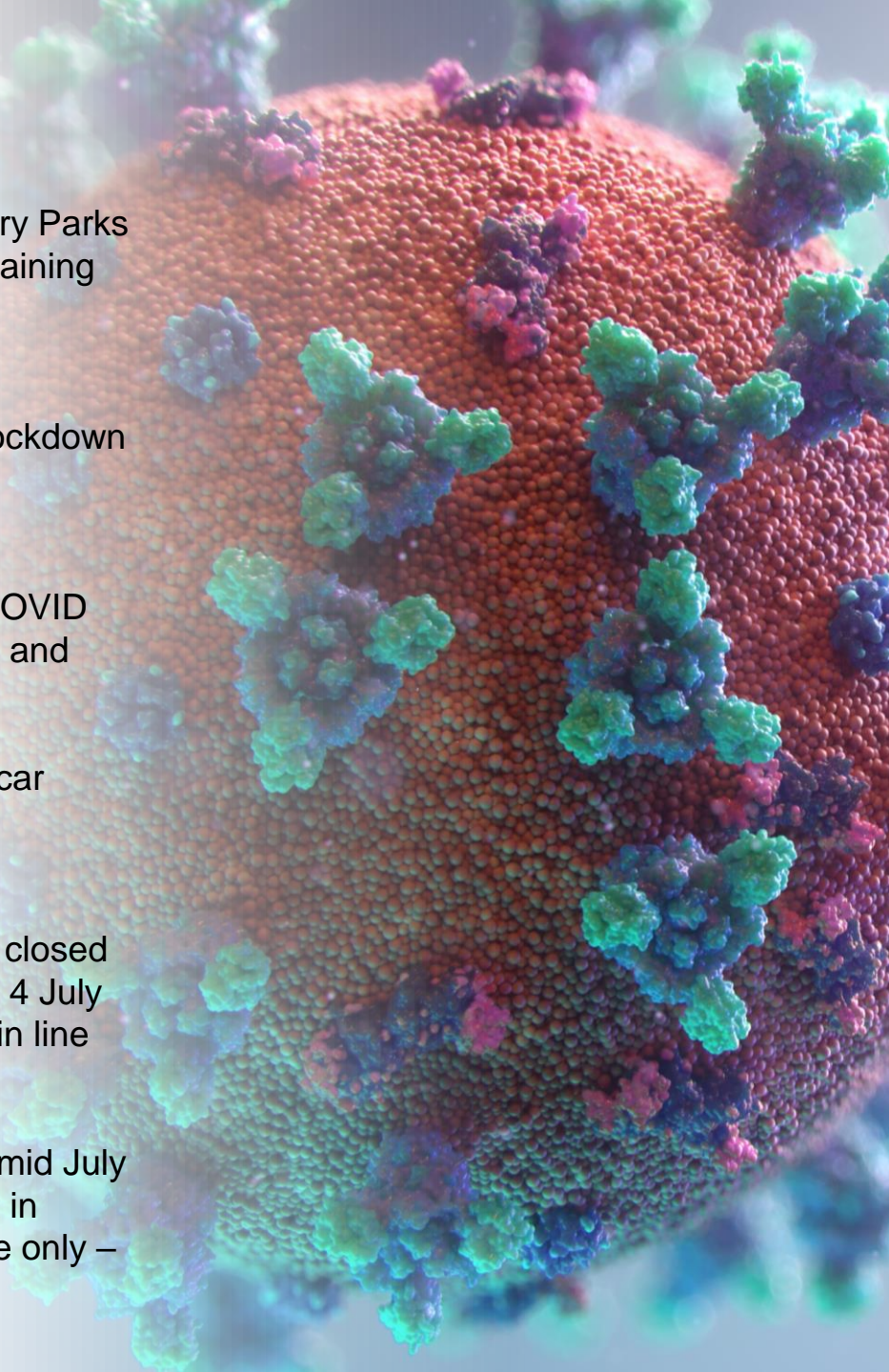
**Thorndon South**



# Essex Country Parks

## Impact of COVID-19 pandemic

- On 22 March 2020 all ECC owned or managed Country Parks were closed. They remained closed for 8 weeks. Containing the spread of the virus and the safety of our staff and volunteers was our top priority.
- Public Rights of Way remained open throughout the lockdown for people to walk and run through the parks.
- Reopening the parks when it was safe to do so was uppermost in our planning. On 21 May 2020 - when COVID safe measures had been put into place for our visitors and staff, all 8 Country Parks were reopened.
- Additional cleaning was undertaken of toilet facilities, car parking machines and high touch areas. Signage was displayed throughout the parks and on social media.
- Access to play equipment was restricted and facilities closed off in order to support social distancing guidelines. On 4 July 2020 play areas in the Country Parks were reopened in line with wider government guidance on play equipment.
- In-park cafes and snack kiosks remained closed until mid July when a COVID safe operating procedure could be put in place. Cafes are currently offering a take-away service only – this has impacted park income.

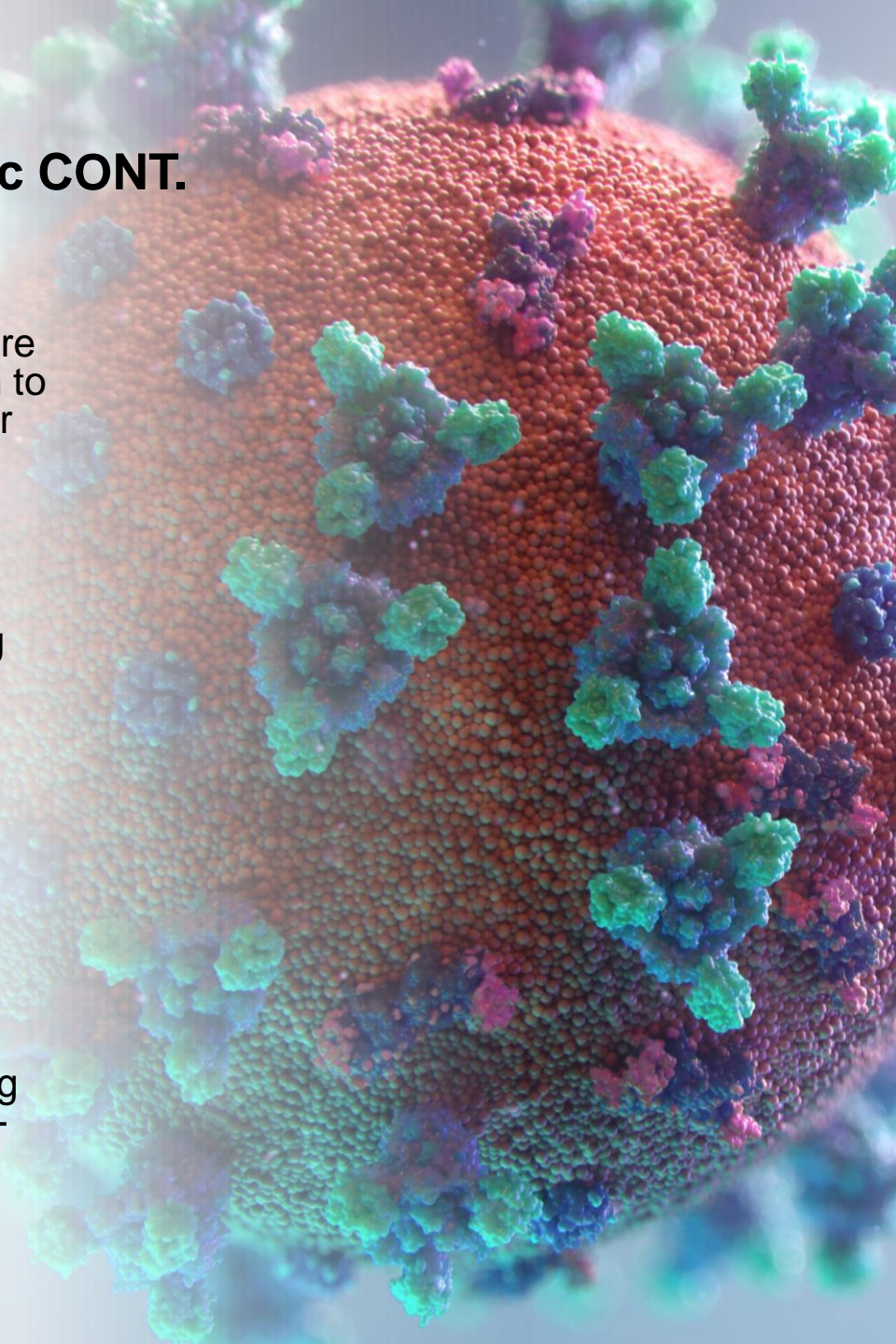




# Essex Country Parks

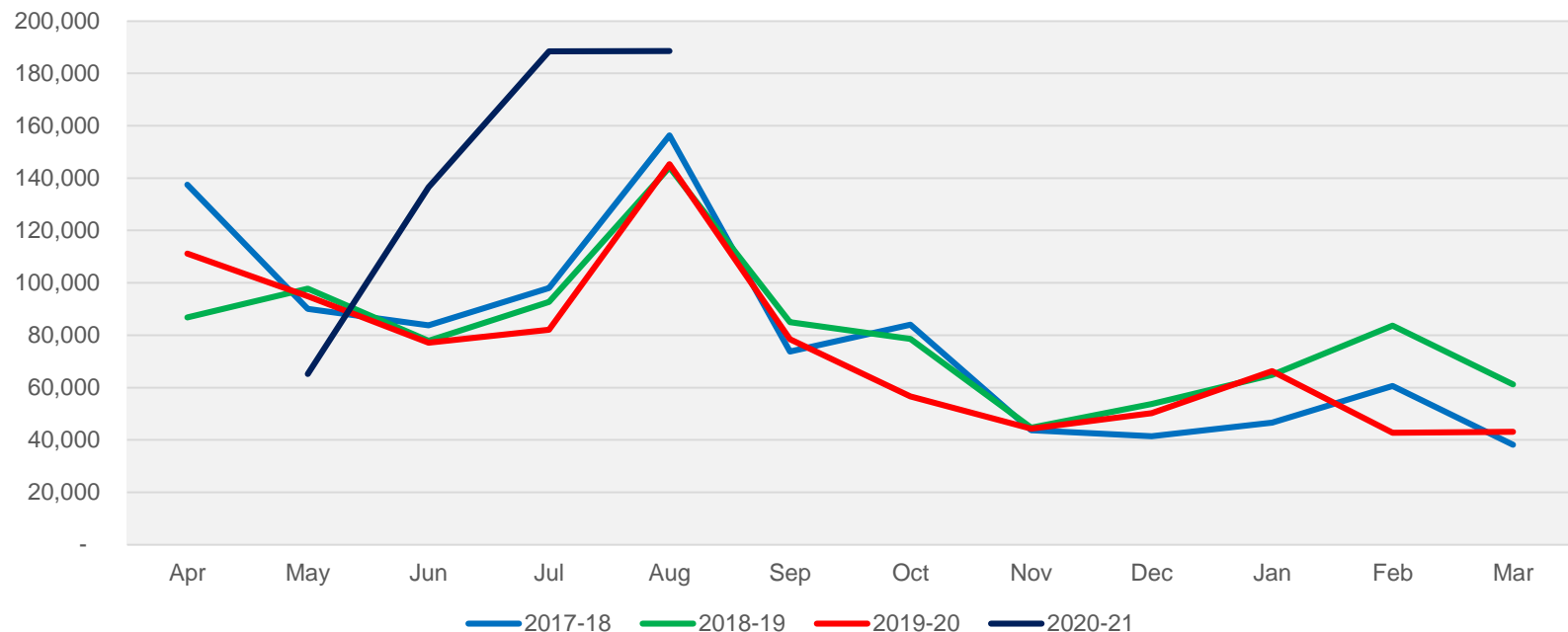
## Impact of COVID-19 pandemic CONT.

- Explorer Pass car parking season tickets were suspended, and an additional 8 weeks given to permit holders to compensate for the time for which the parks were closed.
- Public reaction was positive to the parks re-opening. Many residents had been commenting on social media and messaging us to request that the parks be re-opened to them for exercise and leisure.
- Car parking income from the parks was lost due to the 8-week closure but has been mitigated in part by the exceptionally high number of visitors over the late summer months.
- No Country Park staff were furloughed during the height of the pandemic. Rangers and on-site staff continued to undertake their roles, carrying out maintenance work on buildings and the woodlands.



# Country Park Visitors

Country Parks Estimated Visitor Numbers from car parking  
All Country Parks Combined



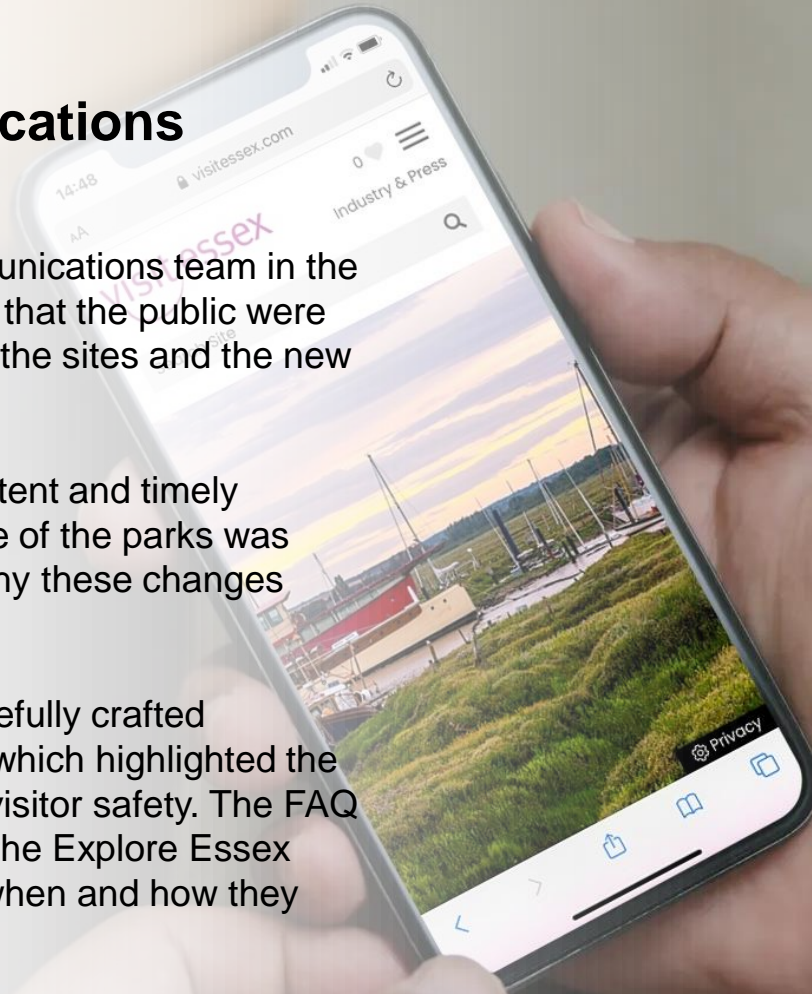
- Our Country Parks and green spaces have become increasingly important for communities during the COVID-19 pandemic



# Essex Country Parks

## Marketing & Communications

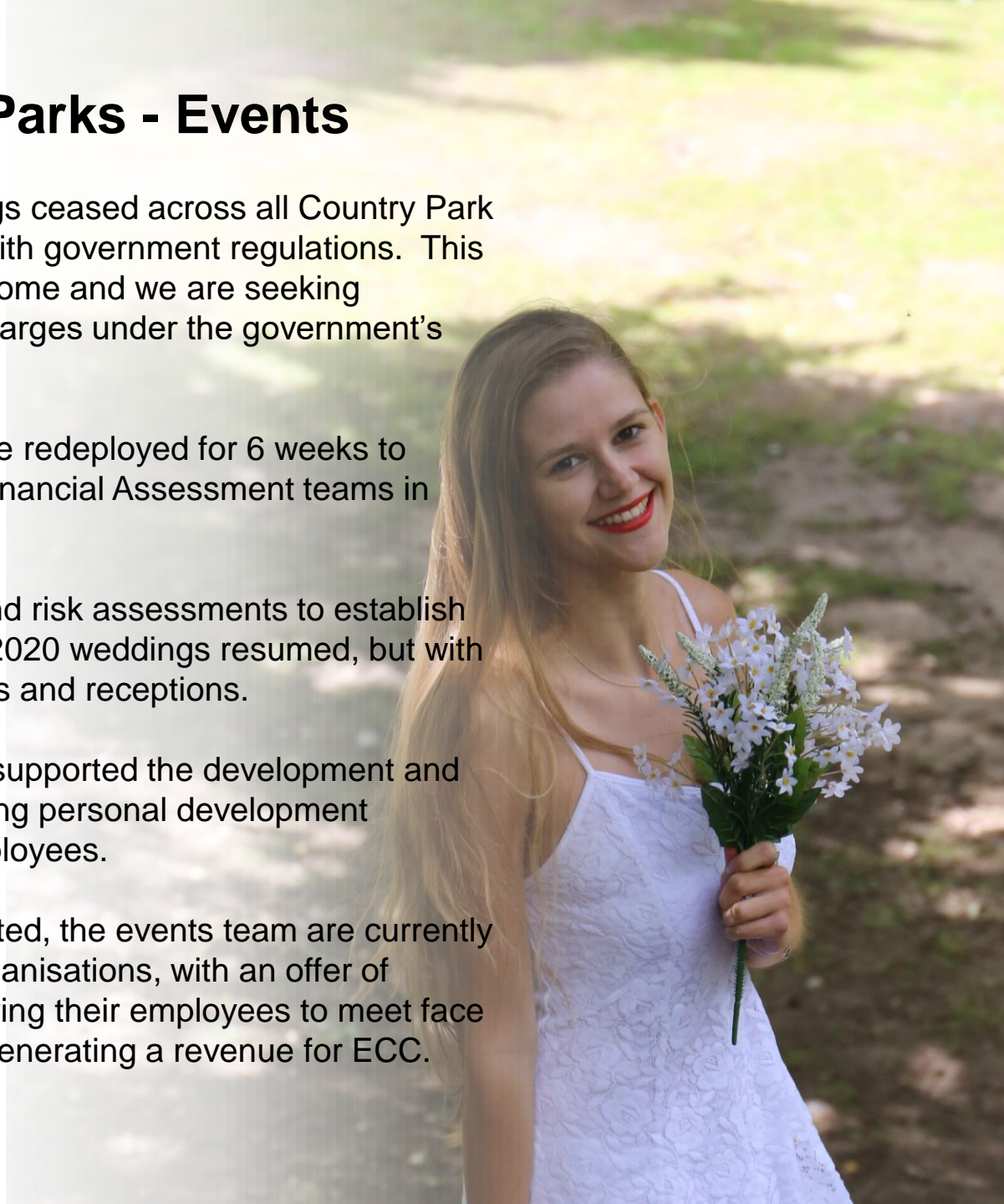
- In March 2020 the marketing and communications team in the service were at the forefront of ensuring that the public were kept up-to-date regarding the closure of the sites and the new restrictions that were in place.
- Throughout the lockdown period, consistent and timely messaging around the continued closure of the parks was updated frequently, including reasons why these changes were critical.
- In May, when the parks re-opened a carefully crafted programme of messages was released which highlighted the restrictions in place to ensure staff and visitor safety. The FAQ page was the most visited web page of the Explore Essex website as residents sought advice on when and how they could visit safely.
- To support the recovery of the county as destination, the marketing and communications team have supported the launch of a Visit Essex campaign and new website. Spearheaded by a video featuring Essex based celebrities, the campaign achieved national press coverage – making the BBC breakfast news on 14 October 2020.





## Essex Country Parks - Events

- In March 2020 events and weddings ceased across all Country Park and heritage sites in accordance with government regulations. This has had a significant impact on income and we are seeking reimbursement for lost fees and charges under the government's scheme.
- The wedding and events team were redeployed for 6 weeks to support the Welfare Service and Financial Assessment teams in response to the COVID-19 crisis.
- Following government guidance and risk assessments to establish venues as COVID safe, on 4 July 2020 weddings resumed, but with limitations in place around numbers and receptions.
- In October 2020, the events team supported the development and deployment of LearnFest - a leading personal development programme offered to all ECC employees.
- With large event activity still restricted, the events team are currently rolling a proposition targeted at organisations, with an offer of external event space for hire, allowing their employees to meet face to face in a COVID safe way and generating a revenue for ECC.



# Essex Country Parks - Capital projects 2020/21

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- **Thorndon South Country Park:**
  - Toilets refurbishment completed.
  - Play area addition decision pending.
- **Capital maintenance projects:**
  - Belhus Woods – car park resurfacing works delivered.
  - Cudmore Grove – toilet refurbishment completed.
  - Gt Notley – pathway works in progress.
  - Thorndon North – pathway works in progress.
  - Thorndon North – sewage system being procured.
  - Weald – resurfacing works in progress.
  - Weald – damp works being procured.
- **Land of the Fanns match funding with NLHF:**
  - Thorndon new pathways in progress.
  - Weald new pathway in progress and bridge repaired.





# Essex Outdoors Overview

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# Summary Overview

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The four Essex Outdoors centres offer high quality outdoor learning opportunities and activities for children and young people across the county and beyond, supporting mental and physical well being.

The service is mainly used by Essex schools, many of whom come every year, valuing the experiences and skills that Essex Outdoors can offer. Last year the service was used by 129,961 visitors.

All of the centres are accessible to, and well used by, children with disabilities and special educational needs; we also provide opportunities through ECC's Short Breaks for Disabled Children (SBDC) scheme.

Throughout the year Essex Outdoors also delivers Forest School sessions, First Aid courses, and various professional and technical courses on behalf of national governing bodies including the Royal Yachting Association, British Canoeing, Mountain Leader Training, National Indoor Climbing Award Scheme.



# Essex Outdoors

## Impacts of COVID-19

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- On 20 March 2020 all Essex Outdoors activity centres and The Lock Climbing Wall were closed. Unlike some other activity day suppliers, Essex Outdoors offered those groups or individuals who had to cancel due to COVID-19 with a full refund or option to postpone their booking. Approx. 70 staff were furloughed from June.
- From 25 July 2020 and following advice from Public Health colleagues the activity centres began to re-open to the general public for school holiday activity club bookings and to schools for educational activity days. However activity levels were low across the summer. Bradwell, which focuses on sailing has remained closed throughout as it is not possible to offer socially distanced sailing.
- Residential stays are still restricted under government guidance and day activities only are being offered until further notice. COVID-safe measures around social distancing and additional cleaning of equipment have been put into place and a groups/ pods system introduced to limit numbers. Signage was displayed throughout the activity centres and a handwashing regime enforced. Three sites have successfully hosted schools in September and October though access to some activities is restricted.
- The peak season for Essex Outdoors runs between May-July so that loss of these weeks has had a significant financial impact this year. We are seeking lost fees and charges under the government's reimbursement scheme.

# Essex Outdoors Impacts of COVID-19

- School and education bookings are being taken for Summer 2021 for residential trips.
- Summer holiday options such as camping for the general public will be offered during August 2021 for residents as an affordable and low travel option for holidays and short breaks.
- Bookings for next year are currently about the same as previous years but we are awaiting guidance from DfE to confirm whether these will all be able to go ahead.
- Essex Outdoors continue to offer the *Book with Confidence COVID-19 cancellation guarantee*.

Book with  
confidence



Part of Essex County Council

cancellation guarantee



# Essex Outdoors

## Capital projects 2020/21

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- **Harlow high ropes:**
  - Suppliers for high ropes, climbing wall and office procured.
  - Planning permission application submitted.
  - Expected completion 2021/22.
- **Mersea accommodation / swimming pool development:**
  - Feasibility study completed.
  - Scope being revisited.
  - Moved in capital programme to 2022/23.