

## Wilder Essex Manifesto

**We are dependent on the natural world in every aspect of our lives.** The air that we breathe. The water we drink. The food we eat. Our physical and mental health. We need nature and we need wildlife. Sadly, **nature in Essex is in a state of critical decline and the time to act is now.**

**Essex boasts some of our most important wildlife and habitats in the UK** that deliver real benefits as well as delight us. It is among the last remnant populations of native oysters, each of which is capable of cleaning 200 litres of our water per day, while one hectare of our underwater seagrass meadows can store two tonnes of carbon dioxide a year and hold it for centuries. Essex is one of the UK's last strongholds of the awe-inspiring nightingale, which has declined by 92% since 1970.

Decades of pollution and habitat loss, in large part due to the sheer volume of development in Essex – **so often seen as the UK's 'residential county'** – has depleted our wildlife and wild places.

Nature in Essex is declining at a speed never previously seen – and it shows no sign of slowing. It is no longer enough to simply protect what remains. **We need the next Government to put nature into recovery, on land and sea, for the sake of both people and planet.**

Without urgent action, **we are complicit in irreversible damage.** To secure a future for Essex where both people and nature can thrive, **we're calling on all political parties to commit to three things:**

1. Ensure funding for wildlife-friendly farming → double the current budget
2. Increase access to nature → support the provision of outdoor learning opportunities
3. Protect Essex's Carbon Coast → use nature as the solution to climate change

### **1. Ensure funding for wildlife-friendly farming**

The biggest threats to food security are climate change and the destruction of nature. Food production relies on functioning ecosystems, healthy soils, clean water, and a stable climate. But **farming is too often unsustainable. This is the fault of the system, not the farmers.**

Because **Essex has the highest proportion of agriculture of any county, around 70% of land**, supporting farmers to transition from intensive agricultural practices to regenerative, nature-friendly farming has the potential to deliver a dramatic programme of change in our county. **This is where the biggest gain can be made in Essex.** But funding this on a shoestring means everyone loses.

Many farmers and land managers in Essex have already gone to great lengths to support wildlife, often with our help, but without being adequately incentivised or rewarded. **The real terms value of the budget for environmental farming has fallen by a third since 2010.** To support a just and fair transition for farmers, future budgets must be significantly bigger.

To fund wildlife-friendly farming, **we're calling on all political parties to:**

→ **Double the current budget for wildlife-friendly farming**

To halt the decline of nature by 2030 and secure the UK's long-term food security, **the budget to support wildlife-friendly farming must be increased to at least £6 billion a year.** This will ensure that agriculture in the future is better for wildlife, fairer to farmers, and provides more sustainable and affordable food for all of us.

## **2. Increase access to nature**

**Essex is home to both the wealthiest and the poorest people in the UK.** Irrespective of wealth, all people should have the opportunity to learn in and about wildlife.

Those living in the most deprived parts of the UK are ten times less likely to live in green areas. Lack of **access to nature is denying people of the chance to connect with the natural world and develop a mindset of environmental stewardship** and benefit from improved physical and mental wellbeing.

To secure a better future for the next generations, **we're calling on all political parties to:**

→ **Support the provision of outdoor learning opportunities across Essex**

**At Essex Wildlife Trust, we have many years of experience** and a bank of evidence that demonstrates the impact and importance of outdoor learning across all Key Stages, including the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Statutory guidance and better funding to deliver outdoor education at every age and stage of life would ensure **happier and healthier people who understand their impact on the natural world.**

## **3. Protect Essex's Carbon Coast**

We are **in the midst of a climate and ecological emergency** – and the two are inextricably linked. While climate change drives nature's decline, the loss of wildlife and wild places leaves us ill-equipped to reduce carbon emissions and adapt to change. But we know nature is the solution.

We have nicknamed Essex's 350-mile coastline 'The Carbon Coast'. It is home to carbon-storing saltmarsh and seagrass which are actively fighting climate change and creating internationally important wetland and coastal habitat. Just one hectare of saltmarsh can store four tonnes of carbon per year. **Just by existing, the Essex coast is fighting climate change.**

However, **despite being an iconic part of the Essex coastline, over 60% of our saltmarshes have been degraded by erosion over the last 20 years,** leaving us more vulnerable to coastal flooding and the impact of climate change. Our coast has to be protected as a matter of urgency.

To tackle the climate emergency, **we're calling on all political parties to:**

→ **Use nature as the solution to climate change**

**Further destruction of these sources of 'blue carbon' will worsen the climate emergency** and make it harder to meet Net Zero. It is essential that Essex's unique saltmarsh is protected and there is better support for more seagrass meadows and saltmarsh restoration projects along Essex's coastline to **protect us from flooding and help fight climate change**.