



Colchester Borough Council

**COLCHESTER BOROUGH
LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT**



November 2005

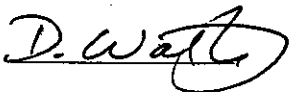
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Environment Landscape Planning

Colchester Borough Council

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November 2005

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Date: 25 November 2005

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

1.1.1 In September 2004, Colchester Borough Council commissioned Chris Blandford Associates (CBA) to prepare this borough-wide assessment of landscape character. The need to conserve and enhance the distinctive character of Colchester Borough's countryside and its settlements is recognised by the adopted Local Plan. This report will help inform the review of landscape policies as part of the new Local Development Framework (LDF) preparation process, and provide a useful context for planning decisions and land management activities in the Borough.

1.1.2 The general study area and context is shown on Figure 1. The area characterised by this study includes all the rural parts of the Borough (and the Dedham Vale AONB), up to and including the urban edge but excluding the principal urban conurbations (Colchester, Tiptree, Wivenhoe and West Mersea). A townscape characterisation study of these settlements is being undertaken as a separate exercise.

1.1.3 In addition to this Landscape Character Assessment report, the following separate technical reports have also been prepared by CBA:

- Landscape Capacity of Settlement Fringes in Colchester Borough;
- Review of Countryside Conservation Areas in Colchester Borough.

1.2 The Importance of Landscape Character

1.2.1 'Character' is defined as a distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements that make each landscape or townscape different. Character is influenced by particular combinations of visual, ecological, historical, settlement, built components, and other intangible aspects such as tranquillity and sense of place.

1.2.2 The distinctive character of our surroundings has a fundamental impact on our quality of life. Identifying, protecting and enhancing those natural, historic and cultural elements that contribute to character are key aspects of achieving sustainable development (meeting the needs of today without compromising the needs of tomorrow). A 'character approach' to sustainable planning and land management is therefore about accommodating change in

ways that reflect the opportunities, constraints and conditions posed by the character of places where change is planned.

1.3 Planning Context

1.3.1 Much of the advice contained in national Planning Policy Guidance and Statements are concerned with character. In particular, the new *Planning Policy Statement 7 (PPS7): Sustainable Development in Rural Areas* recommends the character approach as a means of accommodating necessary change without sacrificing local character. There are strong links to the Government's design agenda which sees good quality design as critical to fostering local distinctiveness and sense of place.

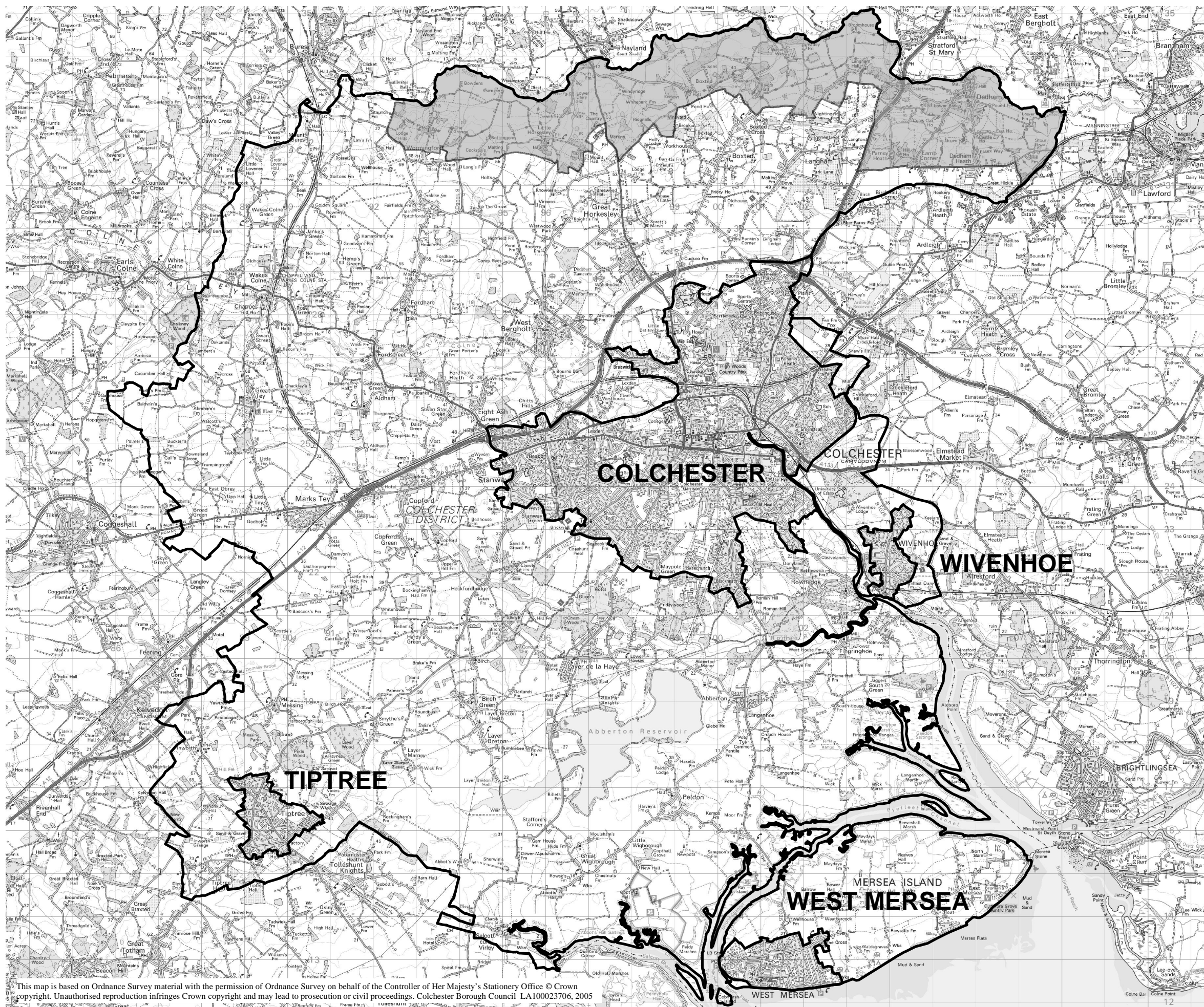
1.3.2 The need to protect landscape character has been recognised by Essex County Council, and the need to protect the distinctive character of the towns, villages, countryside and coast of the County is set out in the Structure Plan. The Structure Plan specifically encourages district and borough councils in Essex to prepare Landscape Character Assessments to inform land use planning and land management in their areas.

1.4 Purpose and Objectives of the Study



1.4.1 The key purpose of the study is to inform the preparation of wider planning policies and proposals within the new development plan, and other strategies and plans concerned with environmental protection and land management.

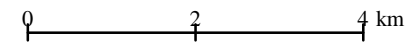
1.4.2 The key objectives of the study are to:

- Provide a consistent 'database' of landscape character information across the Borough;
- Provide a robust basis for underpinning justification for retaining existing/updated CCAs within the new development plan (see separate technical report);
- Provide planning guidelines to inform decisions about the potential scale and location of urban expansion around the fringes of Colchester and other identified settlements;
- Provide landscape management guidelines to inform land management actions by farmers, estate owners and other major land owners/managers;
- Incorporate the issues and concerns of key stakeholder organisations.



KEY

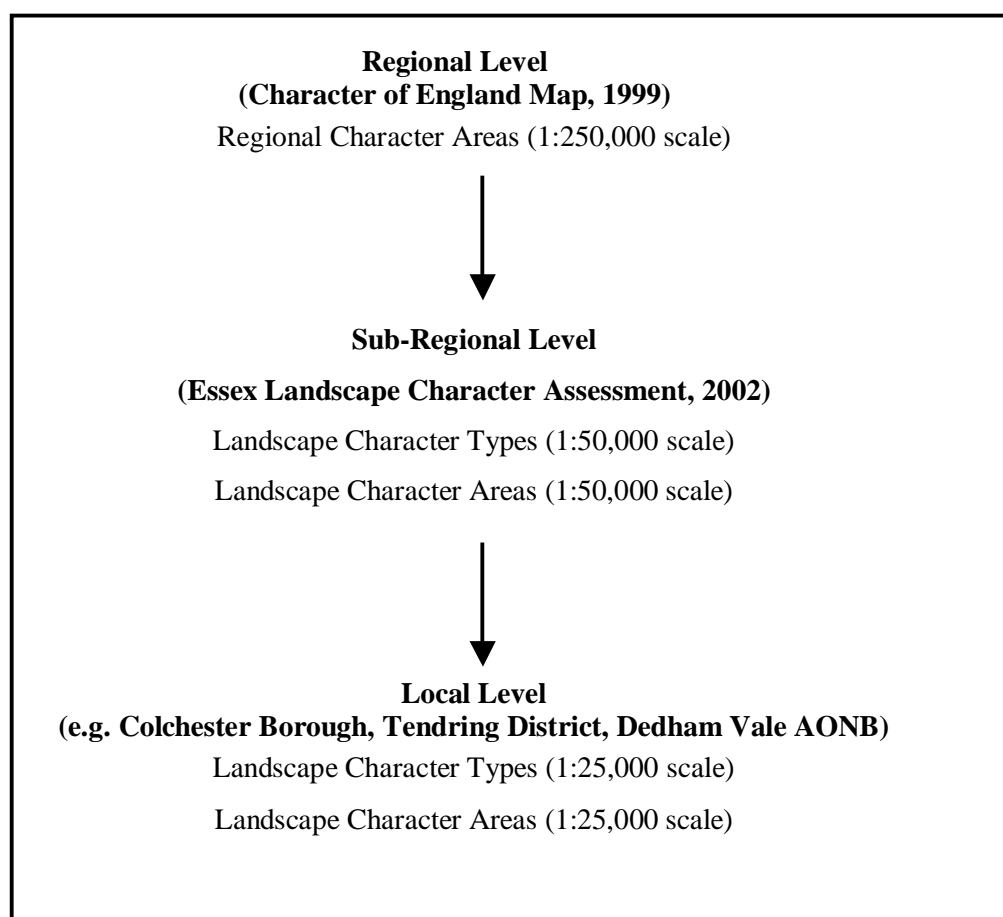
-  Dedham Vale AONB
-  Colchester Borough Boundary



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1.5 Relationship to Other Character Assessments

- 1.5.1 The Colchester Borough Landscape Character Areas have been developed to nest within the national and county assessments, and to coincide with assessments of neighbouring authorities where these exist.
- 1.5.2 The Countryside Agency and English Nature, with support from English Heritage have produced the Joint Character of England Map. This combines English Nature's Natural Areas and the Countryside Agency's Countryside Character areas into a map of joint character areas for the whole of England ('Regional Character Areas').
- 1.5.3 Colchester Borough is covered by three Regional Character Areas, namely the South Suffolk and North Essex Claylands, Northern Thames Basin and the Greater Thames Estuary. These provide a broad framework for the county level assessment contained within the Essex Landscape Character Assessment (CBA, 2002).
- 1.5.4 In turn, the county assessment provides a framework for local level assessments, of which Colchester is one. The relationship of the assessment hierarchy is shown in the box below.



3.0 BOROUGH-WIDE LANDSCAPE CHARACTER PROFILES

3.1 General

3.1.1 This section provides a detailed inventory and description of the Borough's landscape character types and areas.

3.2 Landscape Character Types

3.2.1 'Landscape Character Types' are broad tracts of land that share common characteristics of geology, landform, vegetation, land-use and settlement. They are generic landscapes which reoccur throughout the Borough.

3.2.2 The distribution of the seven Landscape Character Types defined within the Borough are shown on Figure 6, and their key characteristics are summarised below:

A - River Valley

- V-shaped valley landform which dissects Boulder Clay/ Chalky Till plateau;
- Main river valley served by several tributaries;
- Flat or gently undulating valley floor;
- Intimate character in places;
- Wooded character in places.

B - Farmland Plateau

- Elevated gently rolling Boulder Clay/ Chalky Till plateau landscape;
- Network of narrow winding lanes and minor roads;
- Medium to large-scale enclosed predominantly arable fields;
- Long distance views across valleys from certain locations;
- Well wooded in places (with several areas of semi-natural and ancient woodland), interspersed with orchards.

C - Estuarine Marsh/Mudflats

- Flat, low-lying and open landscape;
- Areas of saltmarsh, mudflats, shingle spits and tidal creeks adjacent to the coast;
- Generally tranquil and undisturbed character;
- Feeling of remoteness and wilderness on the open beaches and salt marshes;
- Visible sea walls separate drained former marshland and current saltmarsh/ mudflats;
- Lack of trees or hedgerows.

D - Drained Estuarine Marsh

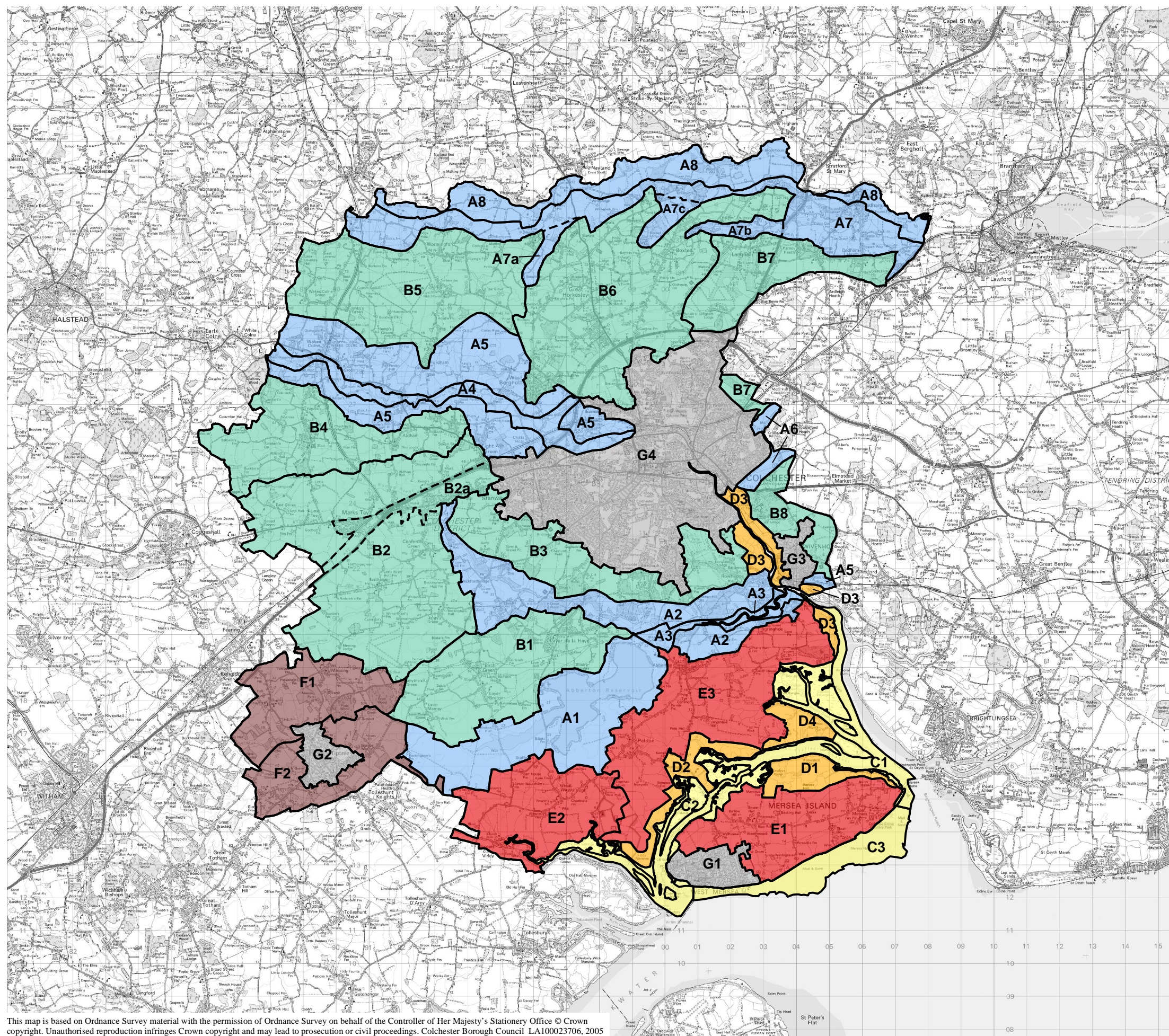
- Areas of flat, artificially drained former salt marsh currently grassland and cultivated fields;
- Visible sea walls separate drained former marshland and current saltmarsh/ mudflats;
- Lack of large areas of trees or woodland;
- Network of visible drainage ditches.










E - Coastal Farmland

- Predominantly flat, low-lying landscape, sloping gradually upwards to the north;
- Framed views of Blackwater Estuary and coastline from several locations;
- Arable farmland on underlying heavy clay soils;
- Lack of large patches/ areas of woodland;
- Sparse settlement pattern with small, relatively isolated settlements.

F - Wooded Farmland

- Elevated broad ridge landform (part of SW-NE aligned ridge);
- Mixture of arable and pasture farmland;
- Several nucleated settlements, with a clustered settlement pattern;
- Well wooded with woodland blocks (including areas of ancient and semi-natural woodland); copses and hedges;
- Framed views of the Blackwater Valley through gaps in hedgerows;
- Enclosed character in places.



- KEY**
-  Landscape Character Area
 -  **A River Valley**
 - A1 Abberton Flooded River Valley
 - A2 Wooded Roman River Valley
 - A3 Roman River Valley Floor
 - A4 Colne River Valley Floor
 - A5 Colne River Valley Slopes
 - A6 Ardleigh River Valley
 - A7 Stour River Valley Slopes
 - A8 Stour River Valley Floor
 -  **B Farmland Plateau**
 - B1 Layer Breton Farmland Plateau
 - B2 Easthorpe Farmland Plateau
 - B3 Southern Colchester Farmland Plateau
 - B4 Great Tey Farmland Plateau
 - B5 Rochfords Farmland Plateau
 - B6 Great Horkesley Farmland Plateau
 - B7 Langham Farmland Plateau
 - B8 Wivenhoe Farmland Plateau
 -  **C Estuarine Marsh/Mudflats**
 - C1 Fingringhoe Estuarine Marsh/Mudflats
 - C2 Strood & Salcott Estuarine Marsh/Mudflats
 - C3 West Mersea Estuarine Marsh/Mudflats
 -  **D Drained Estuarine Marsh**
 - D1 Mersea Island Drained Estuarine Marsh
 - D2 Feldy Drained Estuarine Marsh
 - D3 Colne Drained Estuarine Marsh
 - D4 Pyefleet Drained Estuarine Marsh
 -  **E Coastal Farmland**
 - E1 Mersea Island Coastal Farmland
 - E2 Great & Little Wigborough Coastal Farmland
 - E3 Langenhoe Coastal Farmland
 -  **F Wooded Farmland**
 - F1 Messing Wooded Farmland
 - F2 Tiptree Wooded Farmland
 -  **G Principal Urban Areas**
 - G1 West Mersea Urban Landscape
 - G2 Tiptree Urban Landscape
 - G3 Wivenhoe Urban Landscape
 - G4 Colchester Urban Landscape
 -  Colchester Borough Boundary
- 0 2 4 km

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B8 WIVENHOE FARMLAND PLATEAU

Key Characteristics

- Small, irregular patches of woodland;
- Plateau, predominantly arable farmland consisting of medium to large arable irregular fields with gappy field boundaries;
- Well-connected network of lanes and footpaths traversing the area;
- Distinctive Wivenhoe Park and Lodge adjacent to the University of Essex site.

Overall Character

3.3.66 This plateau character area rises gently to the east, and encompasses the eastern slopes of the Colne River Valley extending eastwards outside the Borough boundary into Bromley Heaths plateau (Tendring District Council LCA). Predominantly arable farmland encircles Wivenhoe Urban Area and is interspersed with features such as Wivenhoe Park (on the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens) and Lodge. Disused workings to the east of Wivenhoe provide a contrast with the surrounding arable landscape. Enclosure pattern consists of medium-sized irregular fields, interspersed in places with small, irregular patches of woodland. Wivenhoe Woods is a distinctive larger linear area of deciduous woodland that separates the western boundary of Wivenhoe settlement from the beginning of the Colne Valley estuary to the east. Field boundaries are gappy, with some single mature trees. The Sixpenny Brook runs north south through the area, feeding the Colne to the south and providing diversify to the farmland landscape. A network of well-connected lanes and footpaths cross the plateau and link with Wivenhoe settlement edge in the north.

Visual Characteristics

- Views of the Colne Estuary from the western edge of the settlement are limited by Wivenhoe woods;
- Open views of the diverse and intriguing Colne River as it reaches its estuary, can be gained from the sloping eastern valley sides and from eastern parts within the farmland plateau.

Historic Features

- Visible structure of ditch and bank surrounding medieval deer park within the University of Essex campus.

Ecological Features

3.3.67 The ecological character is of marsh and woodland adjacent to urban areas. This is a small area bordering both towns of Colchester and Wivenhoe dominantly farmland with pockets of marsh and woodland. There are three SINCS:

- Home Wood comprising ancient oak woodland with a species rich ground flora;
- Cambridge Brook Marsh SINC comprised of fen, wet grassland and scrub with a rich flora including common spotted orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*; and
- the grounds of Essex University (approximately 30 hectares) that support relict acidic grassland, scrub and lakes that form a complex mosaic of habitats with an extremely rich invertebrate fauna. These include white letter hairstreak *Strymonidium-w-album* (has undergone decline when its foodplants were reduced by Dutch Elm Disease, but it seems to be recovering in some areas (Asher *et al.* 2001: The Millennium Atlas of Butterflies in Britain and Ireland purple hairstreak and numerous bumble-bees and cuckoo bees).

Key Planning and Land Management Issues

- Pressure from expansion of Colchester settlement along the urban fringe (at Greenstead) and also from the northern edge of Wivenhoe;
- Pressure from expansion of the University of Essex Campus;
- Potential changes in farmland management and expansion of horse paddocks, impacting upon landscape character;
- Visual intrusion from the railway corridor and pylons running through the adjacent Colne Valley corridor;
- Visual intrusion from the tall tower blocks associated with the University of Essex campus.

Landscape Strategy Objective

3.3.68 Restore and Enhance.

Landscape Planning Guidelines

- Conserve the landscape setting of Wivenhoe and southern Colchester (Greenstead);
- Ensure that any appropriate new development responds to historic settlement pattern and uses materials, which are appropriate to local landscape character (refer to the Essex Design Guide for Residential and Mixed Use Areas, Essex Planning Officers Association, 1997, for further information);
- Conserve open views along the Colne Valley and towards Wivenhoe.

Land Management Guidelines

- Conserve and enhance existing hedgerow network by planting hawthorn and strengthening elm;
- Establish arable field margins as an important nature conservation habitat;
- Seek ways to mitigate the visual impact of the railway corridor, for example introducing shelter belt planting;
- Seek ways to reduce the visual impact of tall tower block buildings within the campus, through structure planting;
- Ensure that disused mineral workings are restored to benefit wildlife and enhance local amenity.