

The Colchester Orbital Project Origins, Aims and Objectives



(Fig. 1 Colchester Inner Orbital, linking key green spaces)

1.0 What is envisaged?

An 'Inner Orbital' (above)

- 1.1 Approximately 14-15 miles in length, the Colchester Orbital is a planned circular multi-user route around the town's periphery, connecting where possible with cycle routes and bridleways, and aiming to appeal to the widest range of walkers and non-motorised users. The route has been chosen to take advantage of some of the town's loveliest green spaces and off-road pathway networks along its urban fringe, whilst also connecting with key walking routes into and out of the town centre. It follows existing public rights of way however over almost all of its course (no new pathways have been created to achieve it).
- 1.2 It is anticipated that the Orbital will be supported by strategic 'spokes' out from the town centre (Fig. 2), creating a network of linked green walking routes.

protection, for a project primarily aimed at enhancing green links this may be seen as less than ideal.

- 1.6 However, where the outer orbital does coincide with new development, its existence as an established route and as a component of CBC's green infrastructure planning should have the advantage of creating planning leverage. New developments coinciding with the route might be expected to contribute proactively to strong walk/cycle/ride infrastructure development and/or enhancement as a part of planning gain.
- 1.7 It is intended that the interests of horse riders will be given greater priority in the route planning of the Outer Orbital where practicable (see 9.3), since the Inner Orbital - being closer to the urban centre - includes very few stretches currently designated as bridleway.

2.0 The Orbital Aims

- 2.1 To encourage people to engage with the local landscape on foot and via other car-free means (walking, cycling and horse-riding), both for leisure and for health, through the identification, mapping and promotion of a key pathway network.
- 2.2 To create a route that celebrates and links Colchester's most beautiful and important green spaces, supporting environmental arguments for good connectivity between them as wildlife habitats, and creating a sense of green corridor around the town.
- 2.3 To expand the walking horizons of mobility-restricted walkers by: identifying meaningful journey sections with higher levels of accessibility; extending the range of walk options available by identifying accessible bus-walk-bus journeys from the town centre; providing comprehensive route information, enabling would-be walkers to make informed advance choices.
- 2.4 To encourage walking in the service of tourism by connecting with environmental and heritage points of interest along the Orbital route. The project will also encourage the engagement of local people who run e.g. cafes, pubs or existing visitor attractions around the Orbital, so that there is an exchange between the two, each helping to promote the other.
- 2.5 To encourage and support walking as a means of making genuinely useful (car-replacing) journeys on foot where possible. To this end, to identify strategic supporting routes between the town centre and the Orbital, in this way turning a bidirectional, principally leisure route into a set of more purposeful ones.
- 2.6 To strengthen walking links between Colchester, its suburbs and surrounding villages.
- 2.7 To promote key bus routes linking with the Orbital, thereby enabling whole journeys from home that are non-car-based.

3.0 Who is involved?

3.1 The early stages of the Orbital project have been progressed by members of local action group CGLOS (Colchester Green Links and Open Spaces), whose members are drawn from a number of organisations in Colchester sharing an interest in and concern for the town's green environment, including:

- Walk Colchester
- Essex Local Access Forum
- Colchester Ramblers
- Colchester Natural History Society
- Myland Community Council
- Essex Bridleways Association

The project is also supported by:

- Cycle Colchester
- Colchester Green Party

3.2 Colchester Borough Council have been active partners in the project since 2015, and the Orbital project is incorporated within the CBC Draft Local Plan, 2017-2032 (see 7.0)

3.3 In July 2016, a recruitment drive resulted in the beginnings of a volunteer team, drawn from across a range of interest groups, to help with route auditing and description. A 'samepage' online forum to aid communications and support the next phases of the project has been established: <http://tinyurl.com/j7h7g3e>

4.0 The Inner Orbital route so far...

Clockwise from High Woods Visitor Centre (Turner Road)

- Eastwards across High Woods country Park
- Via St John's and Magdalen Wood; then farmland footpaths to edge of Welshwood Park
- Along the length of Salary Brook nature reserve
- Via Elmstead Road towards the Hythe; along King Edward Quay
- Along Distillery Lane, via Distillery Pond and Bourne Valley
- Via road to Abbots Road playing fields, across to Mersea Road and along edge of Birch Brook
- Via playing fields to school, and right along School Road to allotment.
- Via cycle path to Berechurch Road, Layer Road and Shrub End playing fields
- Across Maldon Road towards Phillip Morant school
- Via alternate routes left and right of St Benedicts/Girls' High school grounds
- Via alternate routes to Spring Lane i) via Lexden Park and Spring Lane Park, ii) via Hilly Fields and southern section of Cymbeline Meadows
- Via northern section of Cymbeline Meadows to railway crossing and Bergholt Road
- Across open land to Mile End and right along Mile End Road.
- Via Oaks Hospital, to A133, to Colchester General, Turner Road and High Woods Country Park

5.0 Principles guiding route design

- 5.1 Decision-making on the route has been concerned with i) the desire to appeal to multiple users (though taking the needs of walkers as its starting point), balanced by ii) an understanding that the interests of different user groups conflict at times.
- 5.2 The overall length of the main circuit inevitably compromises the extent to which the Orbital can be all things to all travellers over its full distance. Nonetheless the choice of route has been guided wherever reasonably possible by the desire to:
- Link Colchester's existing green public spaces, prioritising off-road paths.
 - Link with points of heritage and environmental interest.
 - Identify and connect with existing cycle paths and bridleways.
 - Maximise accessibility to walkers and chair users across the spectrum of ability.
 - Identify alternative routes along sections of the Orbital where competing routes exist (in terms of *route interest*), or are necessary (in terms of *route suitability* for different user groups)
- 5.3 In addition, route publicity and promotion will seek to:
- Provide comprehensive route information in different formats (e.g. text and visual, online and hard copy)
 - Address the needs of different user groups as appropriate.
 - Longer-term, consider directional signage and interpretation along the route itself (e.g. environmental/heritage information boards).

6.0 National and local policy drivers

National drivers

- 6.1 For more than a decade, government policy and rhetoric has supported the pressing need to do more to support walking, to recognise it as a form of sustainable transport, and to design in ways that make people *want* to walk:

In 2000, the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) stated 'We want to create conditions in which people will choose to walk rather than walking only if there is no alternative'. They called for 'clear, connected networks of walking routes' and the identification of 'important journey origins and destinations'. In 2001, the Commission for the Built Environment (CABE) proposed that 'walkers should be given primacy in the urban environment'. In 2007, the Department for Transport (DfT) advocated 'a user hierarchy [...] with pedestrians at the top'.

Local drivers

- 6.2 In 2014, the national 'Car Dependency Scorecard' (Campaign for Better Transport') ranking towns and cities on a range of criteria, scored Colchester last for 'accessibility and planning' and car dependency.

6.3 Colchester has been identified as one of the UK's fastest growing towns over a number of years; housing development that is set to continue under the National Planning Policy framework. Proactive and collaborative green infrastructure planning is more necessary than ever to ensure that such development is sensitive to existing green spaces and established rights of way. The strengthening of walking routes on Colchester's urban fringe helps draw attention to the value of the landscape, and to support arguments for maintaining strong green 'connectivity' in the face of this ongoing development drive.

7.0 Alignment with Colchester Borough Council Local Plan Objectives (2017-32)

Colchester Borough Council has recently completed its 'Preferred Options' consultation stage for its forthcoming Local Plan. The Orbital maps closely on to key LP objectives, as indicated:

7.1 ENV3 Green Infrastructure

The Orbital is already identified in the draft plan under 'Green Infrastructure', with reference to the town's potential new developments and the possible gains to be made here where these connect with the Orbital (for example in the funding of barrier removal, signage etc); also the contribution the Orbital network may make in helping to connect new developments and existing villages on the outskirts of town to the town centre. Relatedly, mentions to the Orbital are also made under Section 6 'Places', beneath subheadings North Colchester NC1 and NC2, and East Colchester, EC1).

7.2 Section 7 'Development Management Policies'

The Orbital vision is not fully set out in the draft Plan, but the project Aims and Objectives (see 2.0) align closely with and could usefully be cross-referenced to a number of other CBC strategic goals, in particular:

- DM1 Health and Leisure
- DM5 'Tourism, Leisure, Culture and Heritage'
- DM17 'Retention of Open Space and Recreation Facilities'
- DM20 'Promoting Sustainable Transport and Changing Travel Behaviour'

8.0 The Advantages of the Orbital as a means of encouraging walking, cycling and horse-riding, and engagement with the local landscape

8.1 The Orbital creates no new right of way or path. The project capitalizes instead on a distinction between *pathway* (the physical thing) and *route* (chosen paths towards a destination). The strength of the Orbital lies not in the creation of new off-road opportunities – these already exist - but in the recycling of *existing* opportunities through the creation and promotion of new routes.

8.2 The problem with getting people walking is most often *not* that there aren't nice paths to walk upon already, it's *knowing* about them (Ramblers may, but the general public don't necessarily), and being *motivated* to use them. The creation of new walking routes offers people a new geography of their old town, encouraging them to engage with familiar

landscapes in new ways. In this way, we hope the Orbital will attract and enable new walking interest, to encourage people to walk in and to places they previously haven't; perhaps even simply to walk, where previously they didn't...

- 8.3 The most obvious advantage of utilising existing paths to form new routes is that unlike the building of new paths it is cost-free and requires no permissions, both obstacles that may otherwise consume months and years of multi-party negotiations. The Orbital project can go straight ahead, subject only to community discussions that are an intended part of the process. At the outset it costs nothing but people's time.

9.0 Actions needed going forwards

The principal Inner Orbital circuit has been identified and mapped. The following further tasks could now usefully be progressed:

- 9.1 Galvanising a supporting community - generating a larger body of interested people, and a volunteer team, both with a view to raising the project's public profile, and taking specific tasks forward.
- 9.2 Ongoing route auditing - walking and checking the route/s with reference to a range of access criteria, using shared walk auditing criteria/guidance. In particular, in the short-term, the identification of man-made *obstacles* for negotiated removal (with CBC/ECC), improvement or alternative management, to maximise inclusivity.
- 9.3 Plotting of the Outer Orbital route: at the present time, members of Essex Bridleways Association are involved in the first stages of route planning.
- 9.4 Consideration and mapping of route 'spokes' - key walking routes out to the Orbital from the centre and beyond.
- 9.5 Identification and mapping of local, environmental and heritage points of interest.
- 9.6 Identification of bus-walk-bus leisure journeys of varying length starting from the town centre (and taking advantage of specific bus routes/times etc).
- 9.7 Creation of route publicity materials - describing and photographing the route/s; design of hard copy publicity materials..
- 9.8 Creation of an online interactive map/interface for the Colchester Orbital, enabling layered walk-based information: route information, description, access features and obstacles, heritage and environmental interest etc.
- 9.9 Liaison with CBC and ECC to consider how to make greatest and most creative use of the Orbital framework longer-term; in particular, with regard to the current planning of the Outer Orbital, how best to develop both (Inner and Outer) to create a highly connected green walk/cycle network for the town.