

## Environmental

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### Introduction

Mersea Island boasts a richly diverse built and natural environment. Located in the Blackwater Estuary, the largest estuary on the east coast, Mersea Island is an area of significant conservation importance. The Blackwater Estuary is one of the top ten estuaries in Western Europe for migrant birds, especially wading birds, with a large section designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Additionally, the Mersea saltmarshes form part of the Eastern Atlantic Flyway, a migration route for millions of seabirds stretching from Siberia to South Africa.

Mersea has the largest inshore fishing fleet between Lowestoft and Brixham, alongside numerous charter (rod-and-line) boats. The main catch includes sole, skate, bass, and mullet in the summer, while herring and cod dominate in winter. Second only to fishing is oyster farming, which holds significant cultural, economic, and environmental importance for the island.

The coastal area surrounding Mersea is an irreplaceable natural asset. The ecological importance of the Colne and Blackwater Estuaries is underscored by the numerous marine protected areas (MPAs) in the region, including:

- **Colne and Blackwater Estuary Special Area of Conservation (SAC)**
- **Blackwater Estuary Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)**
- **Blackwater Estuary Ramsar Site**
- **Essex Estuaries Special Area of Conservation**
- **Mid Essex Coast Special Protection Area**
- **Blackwater, Crouch, Roach, and Colne Estuaries Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ)**

The Blackwater MCZ is the most important area for both wild and cultivated native oysters (*Ostrea edulis*) in the southeast region. Extensive oyster beds are located in the Crouch and Roach estuaries and throughout the Blackwater Estuary. However, oysters are vulnerable to threats such as pollution, invasive species, and overfishing. The protected native oyster (*Ostrea edulis*) and its beds are currently designated as "recover to favourable condition."

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### Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) Planning Considerations

Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) are subject to specific planning rules. Authorities must consider the impact of proposed developments on MCZ conservation objectives.

**Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009**, public authorities must adhere to the following duties:

- **Section 125:** Public authorities must exercise their functions in a way that best furthers (or at least does not hinder) the conservation objectives for MCZs.
- **Section 126:** Authorities must assess the potential effects of proposed activities on MCZs before granting authorisations. Activities that significantly risk hindering conservation objectives are restricted.

- **Section 127:** Statutory Nature Conservation Bodies (SNCBs) may provide conservation advice to public authorities regarding MCZs and are required to do so upon request.

These duties are designed to offer MCZs clear, flexible, proportionate, and effective protection.

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### **West Mersea Bathing Water**

Since 1991, the beach at West Mersea has been designated as an "Identified Bathing Water" under the EU Directive 76/160/EEC. However, the beach had previously been affected by discharges from a nearby sewage treatment works.

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### **West Mersea Town Council (WMTC) Concerns**

WMTC acknowledges the need for housing but emphasises that it should not come at the expense of human health or the environment. Environmental objectives should focus on minimising and mitigating the impacts of development, providing net gains for biodiversity. Additional housing will increase sewage loads, the sewerage Water Recycling Centre (WRC) at West Mersea discharges sewage into the estuary, affecting both oyster beds and bathing water, this must be accounted for in light of the Brierley and Cross Lane developments on Mersea.

- **Food Safety Agency (FSA) Statement - 1 March 2024:**  
"The FSA's view, based on evidence from the 2021 Sanitary Survey, is that increased housing in the West Mersea catchment area—especially on Mersea Island—would likely raise bacterial loading in coastal waters. This may negatively affect shellfish harvesting area classification unless improvements are made to the wastewater treatment network."
- **Anglian Water 2024 Survey Findings:**  
Anglian Water's 2024 water quality survey for the Environment Agency has not identified ongoing pollution sources from West Mersea into the estuary. The survey confirms a probable decline in water quality around the island.

Both the FSA statement and Anglian Water survey should be material considerations in future planning decisions.

WMTC are not aware of any recent improvements to the WRC or revision of Anglian Waters waste licence.

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### **Planning and Environmental Concerns**

The plan-led planning system places increasing emphasis on environmental concerns and the role of development plans in protecting and enhancing the environment. **PPG12** highlights that environmental considerations should weigh heavily in planning decisions. The County Council's Structure Plan aligns with this focus, with one of its key aims being the protection and enhancement of Mersea Island's environment. Government guidance underscores the need for sustainable policies to balance development requirements with the protection of the natural and built environment for future generations.