

This Report will be made public on 12 September 2022

Report Number **C/22/47**

To: Cabinet
Date: 20 October 2022
Status: Key decision
Responsible Officer: David Whittington Strategy & Policy Senior Specialist
Cabinet Member: Cllr Whybrow, Cabinet Member for the Environment

SUBJECT: GREEN & BLUE INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGY

SUMMARY:

This report introduces the draft Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy Priorities and Opportunities Summary document. This is an evidence base document for the local plan and other future planning documents as well as being a material consideration for planning applications. This report also requests that a public consultation exercise is undertaken in relation to the Priorities and Opportunities Summary document.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS:

So that the council can consult on the draft Priorities and Opportunities Summary document presented in Appendix 1 to provide an opportunity for the public to comment and make suggestions, to identify joint working opportunities and to prioritise actions.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. To receive and note report C/22/47.
2. That Cabinet approves the draft Priorities and Opportunities Summary document (Appendix 1) for consultation, subject to any amendments that Cabinet considers necessary.
3. That Cabinet delegates authority to the Interim Assistant Chief Director of Corporate Services, in consultation with the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for the Environment, to make any amendments identified following consultation.

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 Many environmental features make up green infrastructure, such as parks, gardens and allotments. This also includes water environments (termed 'blue infrastructure'). An important feature of green and blue infrastructure is that networks are strategically planned and that spaces and places are connected. Some green and blue infrastructure is publicly accessible, but it does not need to be accessible to be valuable.

1.2 The importance of green and blue infrastructure in planning is set out in Government policy and guidance. This has been reflected in the Council's own planning policy documents such as the Core Strategy Review and the Places and Policies Local Plan as well as other council documents such as the Corporate Plan and Carbon Action Plan. These are summarised below.

Government Policy

1.3 Positive planning for green infrastructure is a requirement of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Paragraph 20 of the NPPF sets out that strategic planning policies should:

“set out an overall strategy for the pattern, scale and design quality of places, and make sufficient provision for ... d) conservation and enhancement of the natural, built and historic environment, including landscapes and green infrastructure, and planning measures to address climate change mitigation and adaptation.”

1.4 The development of Green Infrastructure Standards was a core commitment of the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan. Natural England are developing a National Framework of Green Infrastructure Standards with the aim to roll these out in autumn 2022. Mandatory biodiversity net gain, as set out in the 2021 Environment Act, will be applied in England through amending the Town and Country Planning Act (TCPA). This part of the 2021 Act is planned to become a mandatory requirement in 2023.

Development Plan Policies

1.5 A range of green and blue infrastructure priorities have been identified in the Council's Development Plan documents, the Core Strategy Review and the Places and Policies Local Plan (PPLP). The principal policies in the Core Strategy Review are CSD4 Green Infrastructure of Natural Networks, Open Spaces and Recreation and Policy CSD5 - Water and Coastal Environmental Management.

1.6 Green infrastructure is also fundamental to the proposed new garden town settlement which is recognised by the Core Strategy Review in policies SS7 New Garden Settlement – Place Shaping Principles and Policy SS8 New Garden Settlement – Sustainability and Healthy New Town Principles.

1.7 In the Places and Policies Local Plan the relevant policies are Policy NE1 - Enhancing and Managing Access to the Natural Environment; Policy NE2 -

Biodiversity; and Policy NE3 - Protecting the District's Landscapes and Countryside.

Corporate Plan & Carbon Action Plan

- 1.8 Green and blue infrastructure are important to service ambitions of the Corporate Plan 2021-30: Creating Tomorrow Together, particularly 'A thriving environment' as well as the Corporate Plan's guiding principles of a 'Greener Folkestone and Hythe', 'Locally distinctive' and 'Working effectively with partners'.
- 1.9 The Corporate Action Plan 2021-24 includes 'Ensure a clean, attractive and safe environment for residents, visitors and businesses', 'Improving cycling and walking routes', 'Take positive measures to encourage biodiversity' and 'Ensure the Garden Town is developed in a sustainable way in line with the agreed Otterpool Park Charter'.
- 1.10 Action 33 in the Carbon Action Plan is to complete this Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy. The Priorities and Opportunities that have been identified in the Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy also provide natural solutions to meeting the challenges of climate change.

Summary of the Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy

- 1.11 Consultants were commissioned to work on an update of the 2011 Green Infrastructure Plan. They have carried out a comprehensive evidence gathering exercise which was followed by an analysis that included mapped datasets and the review of documents and strategies, from both Folkestone and Hythe and other organisations.
- 1.12 The Strategy sets out the district's strategic network of green and blue infrastructure and provides an assessment of the needs and opportunities, strategic priorities and future actions. It provides evidence to support spatial planning in the district. The summary is backed up by a more detailed Main Report.
- 1.13 Five evidence areas are described and assessed in the Strategy. Each area includes a section on "Drivers of Change, Pressures and Threats" followed by a section on "Needs, Opportunities and Priorities". The latter section sets out the projects and opportunities which would apply across the whole district and which are not confined to a particular geographic area. The evidence areas are:
 - Biodiversity, trees and woodlands;
 - Access, recreation and active travel;
 - Health and wellbeing;
 - Blue infrastructure and the coast; and
 - Landscape character and heritage.
- 1.14 The Strategy also considers the areas of the district and in this section the priorities and actions are examined in more detail. The areas reflect the Character Areas in the Core Strategy:
 - Folkestone & Hythe Town;

- Romney Marsh; and
- The North Downs.

Key findings of the Green & Blue Infrastructure Strategy

1.15 The key findings of the Strategy are:

- Due to the variety and extent of important habitats the district supports many specialised and rare species, such as Turtle Doves and Chalk Grassland Orchids;
- Green infrastructure is important in supporting a landscape-scale or 'nature network' approach, through securing biodiversity value in a planned way. Green infrastructure also helps to bring nature into urban centres, which also connects people with wildlife.
- Overall, Folkestone and Hythe's tree canopy is around 8% of its area, less than half of the Kent average of 17%. There is a distinct north-south divide in the district. Romney Marsh ward was reported as having the lowest level of canopy, at 1.1%. However, given the history and character of the area this is to be expected.
- Climate Change vulnerability mapping by Natural England indicates that the fragmented, wetland and low-lying habitats around Romney Marsh are highly vulnerable.
- Development has been identified as the greatest pressure on Kent habitats, through loss of land and increased population. This pressure can be mitigated through obligations on developers to deliver biodiversity net gain;
- The location of new development, especially larger developments, will increase recreational use in new areas of the district;
- The transport corridor of the M20/A20, rail line and Channel Tunnel Rail Link is a significant barrier to access for Folkestone and other settlements to the south;
- Safety is an important consideration for users. Overgrown areas, poor sight lines, vandalism and litter can increase perceptions of lack of safety;
- Evidence shows that spending time in nature is also good for mental wellbeing.

1.16 The Strategy sets out fifteen 'strategic priorities'. These are:

- Protect, enhance and improve the core biodiversity sites and take action for priority species;
- Create an ecologically resilient network to join habitats, allow species to move and to help nature adapt to climate change;
- Link people and nature;
- Adapt and mitigate for climate change impacts;
- Ensure development is sustainable;
- Ensure that greenspace provision keeps pace with population growth and provides for Folkestone and Hythe's future residents;
- Support increased active travel, to relieve congestion and air pollution and encourage healthy living through a strategic cycle network and walking routes;
- Maximise the benefits of recreation and access to Folkestone and Hythe's unique landscapes and green spaces, whilst ensuring that this does not have a negative impact on them or their biodiversity;

- Provide access to green infrastructure close to home and which is inclusive for all;
- Support people in taking healthy exercise and engaging in nature for both their physical and mental health;
- Initiate local evidence-informed research to understand the impact that accessible greenspace has on local health outcomes, especially for disadvantaged groups;
- Incorporate Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) into new development and retrofit into existing green infrastructure where such an approach is appropriate to help address flooding issues;
- Protect water resources and protect and enhance the biodiversity value of water and wetland habitats;
- Strengthen and reinforce landscape character and ensure green and blue infrastructure enhances and fits with local landscape character; and
- Ensure heritage is recognised in green infrastructure planning, interpretation, and tourism.

1.17 Priorities and opportunities are then identified for each of the strategic priorities. These are set out after each of the subject section in a table. As these are wide ranging, there are a number that are not within the control of the district council and will need to be delivered in partnership or by other organisations.

Next Stages

- 1.18 The next stage in the process is to publish the Priorities and Opportunities Summary document for public consultation to seek the views of residents, groups and organisations. The purpose of this consultation is to identify which actions should be prioritised, to identify joint working opportunities with other organisations and to foster public ownership of the document so that individuals may be inspired to undertake their own actions.
- 1.19 Although this is not a statutory document, it is proposed to hold the consultation for the standard six-week period. (If this period runs over the Christmas holiday period, then the consultation will be extended to eight weeks.)
- 1.20 Following the consultation, the strategy will be finalised. It will be used to identify projects to support the development strategy identified in the Development Plan. It will also be an evidence document which developers can draw upon when they are considering new proposals (therefore it will be a material consideration).
- 1.21 It may also be used to allocate funding from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) for local, parish council-led schemes, as well as district-wide schemes, using relevant district or parish council CIL funding streams. (The emerging Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy is referenced in the draft CIL Infrastructure Schedule recently consulted on as part of the review of the council's Community Infrastructure Levy Revised Draft Charging Schedule (2022).)

- 1.22 In the longer term it is proposed to use this for a new Supplementary Planning Document to provide detailed guidance. It will also be the initial evidence base for the development of new policies in the next local plan. It can also be used as an evidence base document for other council strategies such as the developing District-wide Carbon Action Plan.

2. CONSULTATION

- 2.1 At the start of the study, questionnaires were sent to parish councils and organisations (including statutory bodies). This was followed by virtual workshops and meetings to explore green and blue infrastructure priorities with stakeholders, parish & town councils and district councillors. The findings from the workshops and the consultation responses were used to shape the draft Strategy.
- 2.2 The draft Strategy was then subject to a focused consultation with parish & town councils and other organisations in June this year. The summary document was produced as a response to representations during that consultation.
- 2.3 As described in paragraph 1.18 above, a general public consultation is now proposed to seek the views of the wider public.

3. OPTIONS

- 3.1 The Strategy is an evidence base document for the Council's development plan and other future guidance documents. It is also a document that could help the evidence for other Council documents and strategies, such as the developing District-wide Carbon Action Plan. The options to consider are:
- i. Do not consult on the Strategy; or
 - ii. To carry out a public consultation.
- 3.2 The Strategy has been subject to consultation with Council Members, parish and town councils and specific groups and organisations, including statutory bodies. There is no legislative requirement for the district council to hold a further public consultation on this Strategy.
- 3.3 However, as some of the recommendations go beyond the Council's remit, or would require further partnership working for their implementation, it is important to understand how and if the actions identified could be implemented. This would also be an opportunity for any other actions to be identified and for the general public to shape the Strategy and help foster a sense of ownership of the document. Engagement with the community on evidence base documents is also highlighted in the emerging Statement of Community Involvement, which is currently out for consultation.
- 3.4 For these reasons it is recommended that the council undertake public consultation, the second option.

4. RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES

4.1 A summary of the perceived risks is as follows:

Perceived risk	Seriousness	Likelihood	Preventative action
That the strategy has limited impact on the green and blue infrastructure in the district	high	medium	<p>Consultation would help foster ownership with the public.</p> <p>Identifying and working with partners would ensure successful implementation.</p> <p>Using the strategy for general evidence for planning applications and for basis of a future SPD.</p>

5. LEGAL/FINANCIAL AND OTHER CONTROLS/POLICY MATTERS

5.1 Legal Officer's Comments (NM)

There are no legal implications arising directly from this report.

5.2 Finance Officer's Comments (RH)

There are no financial implications at present but any future costs relating to professional and public consultations will need to be covered by an appropriate budget.

5.3 Diversities and Equalities Implications (GE)

There are no equality and diversity implications directly arising from this report. The Green and Blue Infrastructure Action Plan will be subjected to a public consultation, if agreed by Cabinet to encourage a wider range of views on the 'priorities and opportunities' documented within strategy. The council should ensure suitable awareness is raised of the public consultation through its communication channels at the appropriate time.

5.4 Climate Change Implications (DW)

The issue of climate change is considered throughout the Green & Blue Infrastructure Action Plan both in terms of as a driver of change and potential solutions. It helps to identify natural solutions to the various impact of climate change and as such contributes both to the aims of the reducing the Council's and District's carbon emissions to net zero by 2030.

6. CONTACT OFFICERS AND BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Councillors with any questions arising out of this report should contact the following officer prior to the meeting

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The following background documents have been relied upon in the preparation of this report:

Appendices:

Appendix 1: Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy Priorities and Opportunities Summary document