

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL
RECORD OF DECISION OF THE CABINET

Decision Made: 04 December 2013

GREEN AND BLUE INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGY

Issue for Decision

Approval of Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy for public consultation (to be undertaken at the same time as the Maidstone Borough Local Plan).

Decision Made

- a) That the draft Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy, as attached at Appendix 1 to the report of Head of Planning and Development, be agreed for targeted stakeholder engagement.
- b) That the recommendations of the Planning, Transport and Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee be noted and the proposed responses, as set out in Appendix A to this decision, be agreed.
- c) That officers investigate the methodology for estimating the economic value of green and blue infrastructure.

Reasons for Decision

Terminology

For the purposes of the decision, open spaces, green spaces and green and blue infrastructure (GBI) are interchangeable terms.

The draft Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy

The draft GBI strategy is a strategic level document. The core content of the document deals with principles, but does not examine GBI with site specific detail. The document comprises:

- **Policy context** – understanding how the existing international, national, regional and local policy structure already addresses GBI issues and how this affects what the council is aiming for with the GBI strategy.
- **Existing green and blue infrastructure resource** – an overview of the resources already present in the borough and the key issues facing them.
- **Vision and objectives** – a proposed vision and set of objectives for how the borough will address GBI issues in the next 20 years.

- **Opportunities and draft proposals** – strategic proposals for GBI, taking on board best practice examples from relevant local schemes not necessarily located in the borough.
- **Next steps** – further work that is necessary to give the strategy detail and make it measurable. This report discusses necessary next steps.

The purpose of the GBI strategy is to:

- Bring increased certainty about the importance of this key part of the borough's environment.
- Maximise the number of overlapping benefits of green and blue infrastructure by looking holistically at each area to ensure it is delivering as many benefits as possible.
- Co-ordinate a wide range of stakeholder interests and focus limited resources on a number of interlinked proposals to maximise the benefits for green and blue infrastructure.
- Act as a basis for attracting resources including grant funding and the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) – where qualifying infrastructure projects are identified.
- Form the basis for GBI delivery, through policies in the emerging Maidstone Borough Local Plan and an SPD, which will set quantitative and qualitative standards for different types of green [and blue] space and provide detailed guidance to developers, partners and decision makers on its future provision.

The draft strategy therefore works not only within the remit of planning – planning will be an equal partner, certainly with other sections in the council, e.g. Parks and open spaces, or Community and leisure._

Green and blue infrastructure in planning

Development is considered sustainable if it is in line with the guidance found within the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The three broad topic areas which the framework seeks to guide are the economy, society and the environment.

GBI relates specifically to the environmental aspect of these three topics. The infrastructure itself is the identified green space, water and ecological environment essential to maintaining the quality of people's lives. This is covered in more detail below.

Types of green and blue infrastructure

GBI is commonly considered to be:

- **Natural and semi-natural green spaces** – including woodlands, scrub, grasslands (e.g. downlands, acid grasslands, commons and meadows), wetlands, open and running water and rock areas (e.g. quarries).
- **Green and blue corridors** – including river corridors, river and canal banks, cycleways/bridleways and rights of way.

- **Outdoor sports space** – (with natural or artificial surfaces and either publicly or privately owned) including pitches for football, cricket, rugby, tennis courts, bowling greens, golf courses, school and other institutional playing fields.
- **Parks and gardens** – including urban parks, country parks and formal gardens.
- **Amenity green space** – (most commonly, but not exclusively in housing areas) including informal recreation spaces, greenspaces in and around housing, domestic gardens and villages greens.
- **Provision for children and teenagers** – including play areas, skateboard parks, outdoor basketball hoops and other more informal areas (e.g. 'hanging out' areas, teenage shelters).
- **Allotments and community gardens.**
- **Cemeteries and churchyards.**
- **Accessible countryside and nature reserves.**

The benefits of green and blue infrastructure

The benefits that green and blue infrastructure can bring are:

- Maintaining and enhancing biodiversity, water and air quality.
- Promoting a distinctive townscape and landscape.
- Achieving a quality environment for investment and development.
- Providing opportunities for sport, recreation, quiet enjoyment and health.
- Integrating sustainable movement and access for all.
- Providing community involvement and opportunities for education.
- Mitigating and adapting to climate change.

How the council currently delivers green and blue infrastructure

The Green Spaces for Maidstone Strategy (GSS), adopted in 2005, sets the strategic green infrastructure direction for the council. For planning purposes, the GSS is interpreted by policy OS1 – Open space, adopted as the single policy of the Open Space Development Plan Document (DPD) in 2006. This policy requires the contribution of open space, based on standards defined in the GSS. The draft GBI strategy would replace the GSS and update many of its objectives.

Interpretation of the Green and blue infrastructure strategy in the Maidstone Borough Local Plan

For planning purposes, the draft strategy supports policies within the emerging MBLP – DM9 – Historic and natural environment and DM10 – Open space and recreation.

Supplementary planning document

A Green and Blue Infrastructure Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) will be produced that expands on the proposed Maidstone Borough Local Plan (MBLP) planning policies – the SPD will:

- Take forward the aspirations for green spaces and the water environment set out in the local plan and GBI Strategy and provide detailed guidance to developers, partners and decision makers on future provision
- Promote the provision of quality green space and water environments which are readily accessible to all
- Set quantitative and qualitative standards for different types of green space provision
- Explain whether the green space/ water environment should be provided on site – critical thresholds of the scale of development for on-site provision and the relationship with CIL when developer contributions may be appropriate instead of on-site provision, and the appropriate financial contributions sought, including for longer term maintenance, and
- Establish at what stage of a development green space and water environments should be provided (trigger points on large scale developments).

To inform the SPD, the GBI strategy will develop an action plan, with a timeframe for action. Necessary further work, detailed below, will provide the basis for the action plan and the SPD.

The continuity of strategy and planning policy

For comparison, the equivalent strategies and planning policies are:

	Current	Proposed replacement
Strategic level	Green spaces strategy, 2005.	Green and blue infrastructure strategy, 2013/14. (Proposed adoption 2014).
Planning policy level	OS1 – Open space, 2006.	DM9 – Historic and natural environment. DM10 – Open space and recreation. (To be adopted as part of the Maidstone Borough Local Plan).
Supplementary guidance level	None.	Green and blue infrastructure SPD. (To be adopted following in due course following adoption of the Maidstone Borough Local Plan).

Next steps – further evidence work

The council is commissioning an audit of existing open spaces, this is due to be completed in April 2014. The purpose of the audit is to update the baseline knowledge of open space resource in the borough and to refine it with knowledge gained since 2005 and 2007.

Next steps – refining open space types

Officers are proposing that for the audit of open spaces, the eight categories of open space outlined in the GSS, for which provision is currently sought by policy OS1, should be examined to understand their on-going relevance in terms of provision requirement. There is an issue to address between the relevance of open space types in their everyday usage/function and what is realistic to seek provision for through development. Specifically, three categories are proposed to be reviewed:

Open space type	Reason for review
Green (and blue) corridors	These serve an important function, linking in particular the centre of Maidstone with the surrounding countryside and providing routes for sustainable travel. However, it is difficult to measure the corridors in terms of provision standards, they are a more conceptual feature of GBI than physical, and as such it is questionable if development can provide new corridors. Corridors should continue to be recognised as such but their value is qualitative rather than quantitative.
Parks and gardens	There is a question of whether the true value of parks and gardens is being recorded. In Mote Park a significant portion of the park could be recorded as natural and semi-natural green space, which provides a significant resource to the local community, yet if the parks and gardens categorisation remains, this and other resources might not be adequately recorded. Outside of the urban area, parks and gardens are already assessed in terms of provision by their component green space types.
Cemeteries and churchyards	Cemeteries and churchyards provide an important resource, not least for bereaved relatives. The issue, however, is how these are planned for and whether their provision is truly a matter for an open space policy. It is proposed that cemeteries and churchyards be recorded as amenity green space.

Next steps – defining standards

The results of the open space audit will inform an iterative process where officers will be able to determine new provision standards. When these standards have been developed and agreed with members, they will be subject to a topic specific public consultation, which would need to take place before being included in policy DM10 – Open space and recreation, in the emerging MBLP. This inclusion will be at the regulation 19 stage consultation of the local plan.

Next steps – stakeholder engagement

While the audit of open spaces is being undertaken, the GBI strategy will need to be refined through targeted stakeholder engagement. The

proposed list of stakeholders is detailed below, this has been determined through topic expertise/local knowledge.

Key stakeholders

Maidstone Borough Council (cross-departmental)
Kent County Council
Kent Downs AONB unit
Environment Agency
Medway Valley Countryside Partnership
Mid Kent Downs Partnership
Kent Wildlife Trust
Maidstone Borough parish council representatives
Neighbouring authorities
Friends of parks and Allotment Association representatives
County, Borough and Parish Councillors
Resident Associations

It was proposed that the stakeholder engagement would take place over a six week period prior to regulation 18 MBLP consultation. This would be tailored to fit within the time allowed, and may take the form of a stakeholder event, or requests for comment on the strategy document.

The general public and local businesses will be invited to comment on the strategy for the duration of this period.

The results of the stakeholder engagement and public consultation will provide the basis for proposed amendments. These results will be reported back to members in February 2014. When the results of the open space audit are available, they will be integrated into the strategy.

Next steps – action plan and adoption of GBI strategy

The completion of the next steps elements will provide the foundation for an action plan, which will be prepared and agreed with members and key partners. The important element of any action plan is for the actions within it to be measurable and realistic, with timescales, resources and key partners identified. When the action plan has been agreed, the next stage would be for the council to adopt the document as strategy.

Next steps – supplementary planning document

Preparation of an SPD is reliant on an adopted policy to add detail to. These policies will be adopted with the Maidstone Borough Local Plan. However, early engagement with stakeholders to set the foundations for the SPD will take place later in 2014.

At the meeting, the Cabinet considered the recommendations of the Planning, Transport and Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee and agreed the responses, which are set out in Appendix A attached to this decision.

Alternatives considered and why rejected

The alternative action is that the council continues to rely on the Green spaces strategy to set its strategic direction. This action is not recommended because the document is now almost nine years old. In the time since the GSS was adopted, there have been changes to the planning system, including the abolition of structure plans and regional plans, the reversion to local plans, and the publication of the NPPF, which presumes in favour of sustainable development.

There is a need therefore to understand what has changed in the national and local policy environment. The last audit of green spaces in the borough was in 2005 (updated in 2007) and since then, there has also been a significant amount of development. The council could choose to rely on the data which it has, allied with the local knowledge of members and officers to determine where changes have occurred. However, it is recommended that a comprehensive review is undertaken which builds on this information, rather than relying solely on it.

The GBI strategy [and SPD] will provide greater certainty to developers about which infrastructure is expected as part of their proposals.

Background Papers

None

Should you be concerned about this decision and wish to call it in, please submit a call in form signed by any two Non-Executive Members to the Head of Policy and Communications by: 13 December 2013
