

<b>Report title:</b> Adoption of the Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy	
<b>Report to:</b> Councillor Simon Walsh, Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change Action	
<b>Report author:</b> Samantha Kennedy, Director for Environment and Climate Action	
<b>Date:</b> March 2020	<b>For:</b> Decision
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<b>County Divisions affected:</b> All Essex	

## 1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 This report seeks the approval of the Cabinet Member to adopt the Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy following public consultation in May 2019 in order to guide the future protection, enhancement, management and expansion of Green Infrastructure in Greater Essex.

## 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Agree to adopt the proposed Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy in the form appended to this report.

## 3. Summary of issue

### Background

- 3.1 In his Executive Statement at Full Council in October 2019 the Leader announced an independent, cross party commission to help the Council in defining how it can play its part in tackling climate change. In the same speech the Leader outlined a number of actions that ECC was already undertaking, citing developing the Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy (the "Strategy") as one of those actions.
- 3.2 The Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy will be presented to the Climate Commission at one of the foundation meetings in the first year, in 2020 with a detailed Action Plan and Challenges, setting out how we can protect, create, improve and connect Green Infrastructure (GI) to combat Climate Change and improve the environment of Essex. This is only the first of a number of areas the commission will review and where Essex will need to take action to move to a sustainable future.

### **Current Situation/Context**

- 3.3. GI can be defined as a carefully planned network of high quality natural and semi-natural assets and habitat types, of green and blue spaces, and of other strategically planned environmental features that maintain and deliver our ecosystem services. It provides multi-functional benefits integral to the health and wellbeing of our communities and to the ecology and economy of the county. GI is often referred to as a network of these natural and semi-natural assets and spaces, which are joined together connecting urban and rural areas and are strategically planned.
- 3.4. The research undertaken through Business & Local Government Data Research Centre, University of East Anglia indicates that there is 782km<sup>2</sup> of accessible and non-accessible GI in Greater Essex (21% of the total county area).
- 3.5. With the opportunities and challenges Essex faces from continued development and population growth, as well as from the projected impacts of climate change on the county and its economy, and the growing demand on the health and other public services, it is vital that the purpose of our GI is reconsidered so that it is better able to provide the benefits needed by our residents. A well-planned and managed GI can help Essex meet these challenges.

### **Green Infrastructure Benefits from the Strategy**

- 3.6. GI delivered at many scales can have many functions (such as flood management, improved air quality, or recreation) which provide a range of environmental, social and economic benefits as set out in table 1 below.
- 3.7. The seven objectives set out in the Strategy are:
  - **Protect** existing green infrastructure, especially designated sites.
  - **Improve** existing green infrastructure so it is better functioning for people and wildlife.
  - **Create** more high-quality multi-functional green infrastructure, especially in areas of deficiency.
  - Improve the **connectivity** of green infrastructure for people and wildlife.
  - Increase use and **inclusivity** of green infrastructure across all user groups, social groups and abilities.
  - Provide green infrastructure facilities to promote **health** and wellbeing.
  - Working with partners to build and secure funding, effective governance and stewardship for new and existing green infrastructure to ensure their long-term **sustainability**
- 3.8. The aims seek to enhance the urban and rural environment, through creating multi-functional GI that delivers multiple benefits to people and wildlife. It meets the Council's aspirations to improve green space in our towns, cities and villages, especially close to areas of deprivation and contributes to the Essex Organisational Strategy priorities, particularly to:
  - Help people in Essex prosper by increasing their skills

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- Enable Essex to attract and grow large firms in high growth industries
- Target economic development to areas of opportunity
- Help keep vulnerable children safer and enable them to fulfil their potential
- Enable more vulnerable adults to live independent of social care
- Improve the health of people in Essex
- Help to secure stronger, safer and more neighbourly communities
- Help to secure sustainable development and protect the environment
- Limit cost and drive growth in revenue
- Develop the capability, performance and engagement of our people

Table 1: The benefits GI provide

Environment Benefits	Economic Benefits	Social Benefits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Maintains/Restores habitat</li> <li>✦ Improves watershed health/water quality</li> <li>✦ Improves air quality</li> <li>✦ Enhances biodiversity</li> <li>✦ Flood alleviation and water management mitigates storm water/flooding</li> <li>✦ Regulates climate i.e. reduce heat in urban areas</li> <li>✦ Sequesters carbon</li> <li>✦ Improves more sustainable modes of transport and transport links</li> <li>✦ Increasing environmental quality and aesthetics</li> <li>✦ Heritage preservation</li> <li>✦ Increasing habitat area</li> <li>✦ Increasing populations of some protected species</li> <li>✦ Increasing species movement</li> <li>✦ Landscape</li> <li>✦ Intrinsic character and beauty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Attracts businesses and workers</li> <li>▪ Generates revenue</li> <li>▪ Provides access to local businesses</li> <li>▪ Increases land and property values</li> <li>▪ Lowers energy costs through helping to maintain internal building temperatures</li> <li>▪ Lowers health care costs</li> <li>▪ Promotes sustainable renewable energy, through bio products and bio-solar farms.</li> <li>▪ Increases local food production &amp; other products from land i.e. biofuel, timber, chip board and sources of raw materials such as lignin and cellulose.</li> <li>▪ Increased tourism</li> <li>▪ Attracts inward investment</li> <li>▪ Promotes local economic regeneration</li> <li>▪ Enables regeneration of previously developed land</li> <li>▪ Noise/visual screening</li> <li>▪ Passive benefits to building (e.g. shading)</li> <li>▪ sustainable travel opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Enhances the sense of the place</li> <li>○ Enables recreation and leisure – relaxation/ play benefits</li> <li>○ Improves public health</li> <li>○ Promotes equity and access</li> <li>○ Fosters stronger communities: social interaction, inclusion and cohesion</li> <li>○ Connects people with nature, heritage, culture and landscape</li> <li>○ Educates people about nature's role and the heritage, culture and landscape of a place.</li> <li>○ Climate change mitigation and adaptation – community resilience</li> <li>○ Increasing life expectancy and reducing health inequality</li> <li>○ Improving levels of physical activity and health</li> <li>○ Improving psychological health and mental well-being - eco therapy</li> <li>○ Boosts educational abilities</li> </ul>

## Legislative Context and Drivers

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3.9. The provision of GI is supported by a number of national, regional and local policies. The key drivers include:

3.9.1 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) updated in February 2019 requires local planning authorities to make sufficient provision for conserving and enhancing the natural, built and historic environment, including landscapes and green infrastructure, through sustainable development and strategic policies within the local development plans and neighbourhood plans. The NPPF promotes the use of GI to deliver multiple functions and benefits, for example adapting to climate change; to improve air quality and pollution; and to enable healthy lifestyles and the creation of inclusive and safe places.

3.9.2 The 25 Year Environment Plan, 'A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment' 2018 sets out a framework to maintain and improve the environment for the next generation. This includes using and managing land more sustainably; recovering nature and enhancing the beauty of landscapes; connecting people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing; mitigating and adapting to climate change; minimising waste and air pollution; tree planting and woodland creation; and embedding the principle of 'environmental net gain' and upgrading GI standard in the planning system with the aim of developing a Nature Recovery Network.

3.9.3 The emerging Environment Bill will put the 25-year Environment Plan into a statutory basis and create a statutory framework for environmental principles.

3.9.4 Local Plans in Essex take a strategic approach to planning for the creation, protection, enhancement and management of biodiversity and GI networks as required by NPPF. As part of their Local Plans each of the Local Authorities has either a GI strategy, or incorporate GI within their Infrastructure Delivery Plans, Open Spaces, Sport and Recreation strategy or Recreational Access Management Strategy.

3.10 There are several other national and local plans and strategies that also have an influence on planning for GI such as Biodiversity Action Plans, 'Respecting our Past, Embracing our Future: A Strategy for Rural Essex - A new strategy for 2016-2020', the Thames Chase Plan and the Essex Walking Strategy.

### **Consultation**

3.11 Consultation with both internal and external stakeholders have been important in the preparation of the Strategy, through the online group 'Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy Partnership' and one-to-one stakeholder meetings. In creating this Strategy:

- Local and national green infrastructure policy and Local Planning Authorities Green Infrastructure Strategies were reviewed;
- GI mapping was undertaken and updated to form the evidence base for the Strategy which included an area of 10km buffer around the County to capture cross-boundary opportunities;
- There was engagement with key stakeholders.

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3.12 The Strategy went out to public consultation in May 2019 for a period of 9 weeks. This involved:

- An online county wide public consultation and hard copies were made available at various libraries across Essex;
- A stakeholder workshop that was held on 16 May 2019 to review the draft strategy with a focus on the vision, objectives and proposals.
- A mix of media channels including copy for newsletters, placed features and content, news articles, social media, bloggers, chat rooms, internal newsletters and online content, such as newspapers were used to communicate the Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy.
- A further policy strengthening workshop was held on 7 November 2019, led by the Natural Environment Research Council.

3.13 The consultation indicated that many people use green spaces daily for health reasons, for dog walking and horse riding. However, both residents and organisations and community groups felt easier access and feeling safe were important factors in encouraging people to use green spaces more. Fragmentation of habitats, loss of biodiversity following an increase in housing and transport development, alongside deficiencies of green space provisions, coupled with population growth and recreational disturbance to wildlife, (especially at protected sites) were believed to be the main pressures and threats to GI. Other areas of concern raised were the:

- Insufficient funding and resourcing available to deliver new or manage and maintain existing GI.
- Need to raise awareness, communicate, and advertise what we already have.
- Need to work collaboratively with landowners, businesses and communities, whilst finding a balance between providing access for people and protecting wildlife.
- Need to improve and utilise existing green spaces and paths better before investing in new green spaces.

The majority were supportive of the vision and objectives and felt the proposals were deliverable. A more detailed summary of the consultation is in the Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy: Appendix A.

3.14 The draft Strategy was updated to reflect the consultation feedback to address the concerns raised. Whilst the Strategy will not stop development proposed through the local plans, it will aim to guide and shape planning and other services through setting principles that can inform plans and strategies to enhance, protect and create an integrated network of high-quality GI in Essex. The Strategy also helps the Council to understand the values our current GI provides and its potential to provide for the future in terms of environmental, social and economic benefits. These will enable a coherent approach and partner collaboration and maximise funding opportunities in the delivery of multi-functional natural assets. The action plan within the strategy, which sets out

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priority actions will be developed further with partners, identifying a delivery programme upon adoption of the Strategy.

- 3.15 Following consultation with Cabinet Members on 24 February 2020, the Strategy's title was changed from the Green Essex Strategy to the Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy, to provide clarity on the remit of the Strategy.
- 3.16 The Strategy is intended to be a 'live' document similar to the Essex Design Guide that is regularly reviewed so that it can maintain the essential characteristics of the county's environment into the future.
- 3.17 The Strategy will be assessed for the Building with Nature Accreditation which demonstrate how the Strategy can create a framework of principles, clear parameters, for developments and other GI related projects coming forwards. Giving the Strategy further credibility, it aims to have a positive impact on stakeholder engagement to help secure the functions and benefits associated with a high-quality GI, and ultimately support our commitment to delivering and sustaining a flourishing place for people and wildlife combined - <https://www.buildingwithnature.org.uk/>. This Strategy will be the second nationally to apply for the national standard.

## **4. Options**

### **4.1 Option One: Adopt the new draft strategy (Recommended)**

- 4.1.1 It is recommended that the Strategy is adopted as a corporate document as the Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy offers an opportunity to provide an interconnected GI network of natural areas and opens spaces that will provide numerous benefits for people and wildlife as listed in Table 1 above.
- 4.1.2 The Strategy provides a co-ordinated approach through the development and implementation of future action plans that will result in the delivery of Essex County Council's, District, City and Borough Council's Local and partners priorities more effectively which promotes partnership working across Greater Essex and its borders.
- 4.1.3 It also addresses the Council's announcement regarding climate action and meets a number of the corporate strategic aims and priorities, as mentioned in 3.6 above.
- 4.1.4 The Strategy will require further resources in terms of staff and funding for its delivery and there will be cost implications against each of the projects within the action plan, but the Strategy also promotes the opportunity to use existing resources, skills and programmes from across the Council and partners. This Strategy could also be used as a tool working with partners to maximise funding opportunities.
- 4.1.5 There will be cost implications for each of the projects from the Strategy and as part of the next steps once the Strategy is adopted is to develop the action plan in order to map out programme plans, costings and resources. This will be

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managed and monitored via the Council's decision-making process, through the establishment of an appropriate governance framework, such as a Delivery Board, and in consultation with the Climate Change Commission.

4.1.6 There will also be a need to manage people's expectation of the Strategy, recognising its limitations (i.e. not blocking developments in Local Plans). This will require working with the Council's communication team and partners to coordinate the development of a marketing strategy and communication campaign.

### **4.2 Option two: Reject the Strategy (do nothing)**

4.2.1 This option is not recommended as it would mean forgoing the broad range of benefits in terms of environmental (e.g. improved air quality), social (i.e. recreation and improved health) and economic (e.g. attract new businesses) values and benefit outcomes.

4.2.2 By doing nothing it is likely that:

- There will be welfare losses and costs to society through increased environmental, social, and health services costs from the need to provide more services to meet the growing pressures and demand. There is a further risk of not enough money to provide these extra services resulting in more people being impacted.
- Continued fragmentation of our habitats and GI that will lead to degradation of the environment, which will impact negatively on people's health and wellbeing and the economic viability of Essex.
- The Council not meeting its commitment to act on climate change and the strategic priorities within the Organisational Strategy leading to reputational risk.

## **5. Next steps**

5.1. Once the Strategy has been approved and adopted, following the appropriate Council's' decision-making process we will look to:

- Identify and create an appropriate governance process to oversee the operations and delivery of the Strategy, reporting to Climate Change Commission.
- Further develop the action plan, setting out a programme of actions, identifying the resources and funding requirements and opportunities in consultation with the Climate Change Commission.

## **6. Issues for consideration**

### **6.1 Financial implications**

6.1.1 At this stage the financial implications in terms of resources, revenue funding and capital investment are unknown until a further development of the Strategy's action plan. As part of the 2020/21 Organisation Plan and Budget approved by

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Council on 11 February 2020, £5m has been added to the Essex Climate Change Commission Reserve. It is possible that the Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy action plan could justify a call on this reserve once the Commission is established. Where possible, existing resource will be reprioritised to contain any future expenditure but requests for future funding may be required.

6.1.2 The expenditure implications for the delivery of the Strategy are unknown at this stage, but further resources will be required to project manage and administer the delivery and monitoring of the Strategy. The GI approach of the Strategy provides opportunities to add value to existing programmes, by highlighting more sustainable solutions, making optimum use of existing budgets and resources to achieve multifunctional outcomes. ECC will be applying for funding and grants, such as National Lottery, Future High Street Fund, Section 106 and Countryside Stewardship grants. Table 7 in the Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy Appendices B describe the variety of funding sources that will be explored. The successful delivery of the strategy will be dependent on coordinated, targeted activity and strong working relationships with many partners including the local community.

6.1.3 Investing in GI can lead to cost avoidance in the long-term and is usually cheaper than traditional grey infrastructure, bringing great returns on investments from the fact that one GI solution on a single piece of land can provide multiple benefits, such as;

- Mitigating and adapting to climate change,
- Flood attenuation through SuDs,
- Biodiversity enhancement,
- Aesthetic and amenity value, public open spaces,
- It reduces resource consumption by lowering energy use,
- It attracts new investments or new businesses to an area;
- It avoids costs arising on services from negative environmental effects and brings health benefits, including through disaster prevention and mitigation (floods, droughts, air pollution).

## **6.2 Legal implications**

6.2.1 There are no direct legislative implications arising from this Strategy at this stage.

6.2.2 The Environment Bill 2019-2020, if it receives Royal Assent, could result in legally binding targets on improving air quality and enhancing green spaces and other environmental improvement targets.

6.2.3 The Government also proposes the establishment of a new independent Office for Environmental Protection to scrutinise environmental policy and law, investigate complaints and take enforcement action against public authorities, if necessary, to uphold environmental standards.

## **7. Equality and Diversity implications**

7.1 The Public Sector Equality Duty applies to the Council when it makes decisions. The duty requires us to have regard to the need to:

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- (a) Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other behaviour prohibited by the Act. In summary, the Act makes discrimination etc. on the grounds of a protected characteristic unlawful
- (b) Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- (c) Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not including tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.

7.2 The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, gender, and sexual orientation. The Act states that 'marriage and civil partnership' is not a relevant protected characteristic for (b) or (c) although it is relevant for (a).

7.3 The equality impact assessment indicates that the proposals in this report will not have a disproportionately adverse impact on any people with a particular characteristic.

7.4 The assessment concluded that the Strategy will provide opportunities to all residents with respect to wellbeing, health, quality of life and access to green infrastructure assets. No differential impact was identified for any group. The Strategy has two objectives that will 'increase use and inclusivity of green infrastructure across all user groups, social groups and abilities' and 'provide green infrastructure facilities to promote health and wellbeing' by aiming to improving access to GI assets and promote the positive impact of GI related activities tailored to meet their needs.

## **8. List of appendices**

- 8.1 Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy
- 8.2 Essex Green Infrastructure Appendix A - Consultation Summaries
- 8.3 Essex Green Infrastructure Appendix B - Evidence Base
- 8.4 Essex Green Infrastructure Appendix C - Technical Research Papers
- 8.5 Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy Equality Impact Assessment March 2020

## **9. List of Background papers**

Consultation responses

<b>I approve the above recommendations set out above for the reasons set out in the report.</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Cllr Simon Walsh, Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change Action</b>	<b>30.03.20</b>

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**In consultation with:**

<b>Role</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Executive Director for Place and Public Health</b> <b>Mark Carroll</b>	27/03/20
<b>Executive Director for Finance and Technology (S151 Officer)</b> <b>Stephanie Mitchener on behalf of Nicole Wood</b>	20/03/20
<b>Director, Legal and Assurance (Monitoring Officer)</b> <b>Katie Bray on behalf of Paul Turner</b>	17.3.20