

Forward Plan reference number: FP/366/04/22

Report title: Essex Green Infrastructure Standards	
Report to: Cabinet	
Report author: Councillor Lesley Wagland - Cabinet Member for Economic Renewal, Infrastructure and Planning	
Date: 21 June 2022	For: Decision
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County Divisions affected: All Essex	

1. Everyone's Essex

- 1.1 Everyone's Essex sets out four strategic aims and twenty commitments. Within the strategic aim of economy, it includes a commitment to deliver and maintain high quality infrastructure to improve opportunities for people living in Essex, including investing in green growth. While the strategic aim for high-quality environment, includes a commitment to green communities and enabling local action to reduce greenhouse gas and build climate resilience. Everyone's Essex also makes a commitment to levelling up the environment, promoting health, care and wellbeing for our residents and becoming net zero by reducing Essex County Council's carbon footprint by enhancing our county's green infrastructure (GI).
- 1.2 Contributing to achieving these commitments, this paper seeks the approval of the Cabinet to adopt the Essex Green Infrastructure Standards following stakeholder consultation in June 2021 and stakeholder engagement workshops in 2020 and 2022, in order to guide the future protection, enhancement, management and expansion of GI within new developments and future decision-making in Greater Essex.
- 1.3 The Essex Green Infrastructure Standards and supporting guidance will help improve health and wellbeing of the local community by encouraging active travel and improving accessibility to natural green spaces across the county. This can also make Essex a more attractive place to live, helping Essex to improve the economic prosperity of the county. Access to natural and semi natural green spaces can aid the development of younger people and children to help them fulfil their potential. There will also be significant environmental benefits from the implementation of these standards; particularly in regard to mandatory biodiversity net gain alongside habitat connectivity and creation. Multifunctional GI will also help tackle climate change through carbon capture, especially through additional tree planting as part of new developments.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Agree the proposed Essex Green Infrastructure Standards in the form appended to this report and formally request that local planning authorities consider this when formulating their planning policies.

3 Background and Proposal

- 3.1 GI can be defined as our diverse network of spaces that include our natural assets, wildlife habitats and environmental features. GI includes parks and gardens, amenity greenspace, natural and semi-natural urban greenspaces, green corridors, water (coast, rivers, lakes and ponds) and other public spaces as diverse as allotments and city farms. GI 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 can be joined together connecting urban and rural areas and strategically planned.
- 3.2 The Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy was formally adopted by a decision taken by the then Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change Action in March 2020 (FP/614/01/20). It highlighted the need for GI to be at the heart of decision making, especially within the planning and development design process from the outset, ensuring GI is integral to place-shaping. One of the core actions of the strategy is to recommend the use of planning policy to secure multi-functional green spaces within and beyond development site boundaries.
- 3.3 The Essex Climate Action Commission (ECAC) is an independent body established by ECC in 2020 to advise about how Essex can tackling climate change, through improving air quality, reducing waste across Essex and increasing the amount of GI and biodiversity in the county.
- 3.4 ECAC cited the Essex Green Infrastructure Strategy (The Strategy) as a core climate action that Essex County Council (ECC) was already undertaking. The Strategy was presented at the initial meeting of the Commission on 12 May 2020 and advancement of the strategy was agreed to be an action of the Land Use and Green Infrastructure (LU&GI) specialist interest group that was set up by the Commission to identify recommendations for Land Use and GI climate action. In the July 2021 ECAC published the 'Net-Zero: Making Essex Carbon Neutral' Report, which summaries the recommendations put forward by the Commission to Essex. The recommendations made by the LU&GI specialist interest group concluded that Essex must increase levels of urban and natural GI provision to achieve effective climate action, making the following recommendations: -
 - For 30% of all land in Essex to enhance biodiversity and the natural environment by creating natural GI by 2040. Natural GI (natural and semi-natural habitat) currently covers about 14% of Essex. The

Commission is recommending that this be increased to 25% by 2030 and 30% by 2040.

- To increase urban greening through measures such as tree planting, sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) and green buildings that will improve health and wellbeing of our residents, absorb carbon and lower the “heat island effect” and air pollution in built up areas. It is recommended to deliver 30% greening of our towns, villages, and new developments by 2040.
- To create a Climate Focus Area (CFA) as a pilot to accelerate action on climate change and provide exemplars of best practice in sharing learning and innovation in achieving the LU&GI recommendations for adopting sustainable land use management and delivery of Natural GI.

3.5 ECC Housing refer to the Essex GI Strategy in their Essex Housing Strategy, with the aim to encourage development that increases, improves and joins up GI and promote GI as part of new housing growth, aligned with the objectives of the Strategy. Based on recent activity it appears likely that Essex Housing Developments LLP will ask the Council to take account of the GI standards when agreeing the price that ECC receives for the land, although all transactions are individually negotiated.

3.6 The adoption of the Strategy and the recommendations of the Commission in July 2021 illustrates ECC’s commitment towards the delivery of GI. However, it is core to ensure that policy and development management go beyond the statutory requirements, to create and maintain great places for people and wildlife to thrive through the delivery of high-quality, multifunctional GI.

3.7 HM Government’s 25 Year Environment Plan was partly implemented by the Environment Act 2021 and includes a commitment to develop a National Framework of GI. Between September 2020 and February 2021, Essex trialled the Natural England National Green Infrastructure Standards Framework with the aim to mainstream GI into the Essex planning process and decision making through a more robust planning review process. Currently, GI is mainly identified as a luxury, rather than critical infrastructure to deliver multiple environmental, social and economic benefits. Therefore, there is a need to endorse stronger policy wording and coverage of high-quality and multi-functional GI within Local Planning Authorities’ Local Plans and other planning documents and the development of Local GI standards to set conditions for future planning applications that come forward within Greater Essex.

3.8 Through a programme of collaboration and engagement with a broad range of stakeholders and professional practitioners, nine GI principles for Essex were identified and the associated standards produced as set out in Table 1 of this report (after paragraph 3.8), along with the development of an online Green Essex Story Map, that makes the Essex GI Strategy, 2020 spatial mapping publicly available to provide a visual aid to inform decision making. Together, these standards will ensure quality and consistency in the provision, management, and stewardship of GI as an essential part of place-making (creating beautiful and sustainable places/communities) and place-keeping

(Long-term stewardship, management and maintenance for the benefit of people and wildlife to meet the needs of our county.

- 3.9 The Essex GI Principles and Standards have been developed by planners, policy and decision makers, from the Essex Planning Officers Associations which represents all fifteen planning authorities in the wider Essex area through an officer level engagement. We have also included engagement from key ECC services, for example, Essex Housing Development LLP and Essex Highways and other practitioners (from both public and third sectors) across Essex, (including the Essex Wildlife Trust, the RSPB, the Wilderness Foundation, the Tree Council), Government agencies (Environment Agency, Natural England), Building with Nature and academic experts from University of Northumbria and University of East Anglia. The Essex GI Principles and Standards documents listed under 8- List of Appendices provides a of list all organisations that participated on the acknowledgement page. The collaboration, stakeholder engagement and consultation with a wide range of stakeholders has been vital from the outset in identifying a set of principles and standards to deliver multifunctional and connected GI across Greater Essex. The level of engagement and the approach taken has been set out under 3.16 (consultation).
- 3.10 These GI principles for Essex are the core components needed for delivering better place-making and place-keeping. While the corresponding GI standards define the outcome that is required to ensure the GI principles have been achieved. These principles and standards as set out in Table 1 provide a robust set of useful pointers for good practice in GI (such as collaboration / engagement; and good stewardship).

Table 1: The Essex GI Principles and the corresponding Standards for Essex

Essex GI Principle	Essex GI Standards
1. Mainstreaming and Integration	The Placemaking and Place-keeping policies in Local Plans recognise GI as a key delivery mechanism. GI functions and associated benefits are recognised and valued in key strategic documents and policies, beyond those with an environmental scope.
2. Evidence-led	The planning, design and delivery of GI is evidence-led using natural capital and ecosystem service assessments, and GI GIS mapping to ensure appropriate place-based GI interventions are being implemented and enhanced.
3. Multifunctionality	GI interventions are designed, planned and delivered to enhance multifunctionality and deliver multiple benefits to people and biodiversity in both rural and urban areas.
4. Early Engagement	There is early collaboration and engagement with all relevant stakeholders, partners and communities to support the delivery of effective and connected GI.
5. Managing different expectations	Differing views need to be identified early and managed effectively and in a transparent manner to secure both short- and long-term outcomes.
6. Heath, Wellbeing and Social Equity	GI Is designed to meet different people's needs (including physical and mental health), providing accessibility to GI, green spaces and local amenities, while ensuring GI is inclusive to all. This includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Targeting GI interventions to those groups and areas most in need as part of a place-keeping agenda.

Essex GI Principle	Essex GI Standards
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reducing health and wellbeing inequalities between different populations e.g., access to green space and ecosystem service benefits.
7. Connectivity	GI interventions are designed, planned and delivered and connected across multiple scales; from the wider landscape scale network to more local and neighbourhood scales including green corridors habitat and nature recovery networks to enhance connectivity for people, wildlife and habitats.
8. Strong policy wording and commitment	Policy for GI is strongly worded with a commitment to positive action(s) as reflected in statutory plans and industry/local guidance and supported by incentives and clear guidance about what success looks like.
9. Stewardship	The long-term management and stewardship plans are identified at the early stage with the necessary funding and monitoring components in place.

3.11 Technical guidance accompanies the Essex GI principles and standards, which focuses on the application of the principles and standards and aspects of the planning process. In addition, this guidance demonstrates best practice of what good GI looks like for each of the outlined principles and standards. While a Executive Non-Technical summary has also been produced for those without specialist knowledge of the subject area. These guidance documents provides for each GI principle and standard:

- An Introduction to the Principle and Standard
- Colour coded guidance specifically for Development Management and for Policy, this includes: -
 - Why the principle and standard matters,
 - How to achieve and/or improve the principle's delivery, and
 - Guidance on meeting the principles, including indicators and measures of success.
- Additional resources and further guidance, including: Case Studies and illustrative examples.

3.12 The Essex GI principles and standards will be promoted by the ECC's Green Infrastructure and Sustainable Drainage Team as a recommended approach to GI design, planning and delivery, when talking to Local Planning Authorities, partners and developers and will be the foundation of the team's comments to consultations. It is recommended that the GI principles and standards are applied as early as possible at the design and feasibility stage of policy development and for strategic documents/plans, developments, or projects.

3.13 The ECC's Green Infrastructure and Sustainable Drainage Team, while not a statutory consultee will apply the Essex GI Principles and Standards in our response to consultations. These standards can be applied to major developments as outlined in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Conclusions drawn will inform the responses to planning policy and applications consultations.

3.14 The adoption of the Essex Green Infrastructure Standards and embedding within the Essex Design Guide will demonstrate ECC's commitment and

support Local Planning Authorities to do the same and help them to address several key political challenges, through the delivery of multifunctional GI.

The Context

- 3.15 The research undertaken through the Business and Local Government Data Research Centre, University of East Anglia indicates that there is 782km² of publicly accessible and non-accessible GI in Greater Essex (21% of the total county area).
- 3.16 HM Government has set ambitious targets for around 160,000-180,000 new homes to be built in Essex by 2040 (ECAC, 2021 p30). The Greater Essex Growth and Infrastructure Framework (GIF, 2017) estimates that new developments will generate a demand for 16km² of new urban GI and green space, which is anticipated to cost £251.86m to develop and manage. With the opportunities and challenges Essex faces from this 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.

The Strategic/ Legislative Context

- 3.17 The provision of GI is supported by a number of national, regional and local policies, in which the Essex GI principles and standards will assist ECC, LPAs and partners to respond. The key drivers include:
- 3.17.1 The NPPF updated in July 2021 requires local planning authorities to make sufficient provision for conserving and enhancing the natural, built and historic environment, including landscapes and GI, 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. This aligns with messages of the emerging planning white paper for beautiful places.
- 3.17.2 The Government's 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.
- 3.17.3 The Environment Act 2021 put aspects of the 25 Year Environment Plan into law and creates a statutory framework for environmental principles, mandatory

biodiversity net gain for new developments, including Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSPs) and introducing Local Nature Recovery Strategies that will establish priorities and map proposals for specific actions to drive nature's recovery and provide wider environmental benefits.

3.17.4 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.

3.17.5 There are several other national and local plans, strategies and studies which also have an influence on planning for GI such as Association of South Essex Local Authorities South-Essex-Strategic-Green-and-Blue-Infrastructure-Study, Biodiversity Action Plans, 'Respecting our Past, Embracing our Future: A Strategy for Rural Essex - A new strategy for 2016-2020', the Thames Chase Plan, Net Zero: Making Essex Carbon Neutral, Essex Housing Strategy and the Essex Walking Strategy.

Consultation

3.18 Consultations with both internal and external stakeholders have been important in the preparation of the Essex Green Infrastructure Standards, through the:

- Formation of a project team with representatives from ECC, Planners, University of East Anglia, Northumbria University and a Fellow from Natural Environment Research Council, Environment Agency, Natural England and Brillianto consultancy.
- One-to-one stakeholder meetings with LPA planning managers and officers.
- Presenting the standards at the Essex Planning Officer Association, Policy, Development Management and Chief Officer LPA groups.
- Series of Engagement workshops:
 1. Three workshops called 'Making Better Planning for Placemaking and Place Keeping,' held between September and November 2020 with attendance of over 30 professional practitioners.
 - The purpose of the workshops was to identify the key elements or ingredients for good placemaking and place keeping important to Essex, while ensuring alignment with the national standards being put forward by Natural England.
 - These workshops were part of the Essex project for trialling the Natural England National GI Standards Framework during September 2020 to February 2021.
 2. Two stakeholder workshops which were held on 12th January 2022 (Policy workshop) and 20th January 2022 (Development workshop), with over 40 professional practitioners and stakeholders attending each workshop.

- With the aim to hear about the trial progress and updates to the standards based on the consultation feedback and to explore implementation with LPAs and developers.
- 3.19 The Essex GI Principles and Standards and supporting guidance went out to online stakeholder consultation in May 2021 for a period of 9 weeks. The consultation questions were reviewed and edited by the ECC Strategy, Insight and Engagement team to ensure they were clear and understandable. Although the consultation was intended for those professionals who work in interrelated disciplines such as planning, health and the environment, the consultation received comments from a wide range of audiences - Planning to members of parish councils, private businesses, community groups and individual residents. This feedback from the different types of audiences was very useful in providing an understanding of the level of knowledge of GI and the National GI standards framework and the level of interests of these groups, since the GI standards are a new area of work nationally. This resulted in the production of an accompanying executive non-technical summary. Findings and lessons learnt from this consultation and the Essex trial project have been fed back to Natural England to help them to review the wording of the National GI framework.
- 3.20 The consultation indicated that 81% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed, 7% of respondents neither agreed or disagreed and 12% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposed nine GI principles. While 75% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed, 7% of respondents neither agreed or disagreed and 19% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposed nine standards for Essex. As a result, there were minor changes to the wording of the nine principles and standards based on the suggestions put forward through the consultation in the revised guidance.
- 3.21 Some of the issues raised for consideration for new principles and standards, were out of scope for the Essex GI principles and standards, such as waste incineration, housing targets and realisation of the green belt for development.
- 3.22 ECC will continue to work with LPAs regarding green belt measures, natural habitat protection and housing delivery. Housing targets are informed by government methodology on housing needs and adopted local plans. The Essex GI standards and guidance will support the Essex Local Nature Partnerships (LNP) and Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS), which will identify natural habitats sites to protect and enhance, that may fall within the green belt.
- 3.23 The other suggestions put forward for new principles and standards, fitted within the existing GI principles and standards, therefore they were either added, referenced, expanded upon within the more detailed text for the relevant GI principle and standard within the guidance. There were no comments which were relevant to the GI principles, standards and guidance which were rejected.
- 3.24 There were areas identified which needed improving within the guidance and in response to the wider consultation an action plan was developed in response to the comments provided. These could be categorised into the seven following themes:

1. **Accessibility and language.** Future consultations and workshops to use language suitable for the target audience.
 2. **Information level.** Clear definitions and guidance that is broken down to tailor for Policy, Development Management and community groups.
 3. **Trust.** Accountability and responsibilities for delivery of these standards.
 4. **Enforcement.** Further stakeholder engagement and guidance to develop a support programme for the delivery of the GI Strategy.
 5. **Partnership.** Further collaboration and interaction with external and internal partners and with other plans and strategies to sure this is viable (Link to Essex LNP).
 6. **Complexity.** Exploration and information on specialist habitats and the relationship between these and GI multifunctionality (linked to CFA and LNRS).
 7. **Protecting Nature.** Development of Local Nature Partnerships (held its first meeting on 15 March 2022) and Local Nature Recovery Strategy (is under development).
- 3.25 These GI principles and standards will help elevate the importance of nature in our towns and cities through better design, development, delivery and management of GI, but it cannot inform housing targets. A communication plan to raise awareness of the benefits and limitations of the GI Principles and Standards will be developed. Other concerns raised by respondents that neither agreed or disagreed or strongly disagreed were:
- The Essex principles/standards do not build on existing Natural England principles – through the trial process and working with Natural England we ensured the Essex GI principles and standards align with Natural England’s principles and engaged their support.
 - The standards themselves are quite difficult to “score” against and scoring could be subjective – ECC with stakeholders through further stakeholder engagement are currently exploring how the Essex GI standards will be applied to planning applications and monitoring and evaluation process. It is anticipated there will be two approaches to the application of the guidance, a voluntary approach (where this is supporting guidance only) and a full standards approach. Under the full standard approach, for external verification, building with nature will be signposted to assess and monitor major developments (fees will apply). A monitoring programme and self-assessment will be developed.
 - The impact of waste incinerations on residents and the environment - Waste Incinerations does not fall within the remit of the GI principles and standards. For more details on standards regarding waste, please see the adopted Essex and Southend-on-Sea Waste Local Plan (2017).
- 3.26 The analysis of the consultation and feedback to comments raised were captured in a consultation report along with an action plan to address these comments. A summary of the stakeholder workshops was also summarised within a report and is listed under background papers 9.1.
- 3.27 The draft Essex Green Infrastructure standards and guidance document were updated to reflect the consultation feedback to address the viewpoints raised as categorised in the seven themes in 3.18. All suggested edits to the standards or

text of the guidance document were incorporated, including reference to the links to the Local Nature Partnership, and other key strategies and plans, such as Local Nature Recovery Strategy, Building with Nature and National GI Standards Framework. As a response to the level of information required the guidance document was divided into two sections: The first was to provide more technical detail and clarity on how to apply the GI principles and standards in relation to Policy and for Development Management, and the other produced to provide an executive non- technical summary.

- 3.28 Whilst these standards 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 across Greater Essex. The Standards also help the ECC 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, partner collaboration, and potentially help maximise funding opportunities in the delivery of multi-functional natural assets, especially through the Essex Local Nature Partnership. The standards will be used to assess the quality of GI provision provided as part of larger scale new developments across Essex.
- 3.29 The standards guidance is intended to be a 'live' document similar to the Essex Design Guide that is reviewed on an annual basis, so that it can maintain the essential characteristics of the county's environment into the future. Future changes will be made by the Cabinet Member. Through the approval of the Essex Planning Officer Association to aim to incorporate these standards within the Essex Design Guide.
- 3.30 The Essex Green Infrastructure Standards are supported by Natural England, who has agreed for their logo to be included on the guidance to demonstrate their endorsement as part of the National GI Framework.
- 3.31 The Essex Green Infrastructure Standards will be assessed for the Building with Nature Accreditation which demonstrate how the Standards can create a framework of principles, clear parameters, for developments and other GI related projects coming forward. This will demonstrate the alignment with the Essex GI Strategy and Building with Nature as extra external verification. Giving the Standards 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.

4 Links to our Strategic Ambitions

4.1 This report links to the following aims in the Essex Vision:

- Enjoy life into old age
- Provide an equal foundation for every child
- Strengthen communities through participation

- Develop our County sustainably
- Connect us to each other and the world
- Share prosperity with everyone

4.2 Approving the recommendations in this report will have the following impact on the ECC's ambition to be net carbon neutral by 2030:

4.2.1 The Essex Green Infrastructure Standards will set a framework to guide decision making and future developments to contribute towards meeting the ECAC net zero targets, including the following recommendations set out for ECAC Land Use and Green Infrastructure:

- 30 per cent of all land in Essex will enhance biodiversity and the natural environment by creating natural GI by 2040.
- Increasing biodiversity, including additional tree planting will have a direct impact on carbon sequestration, helping to contribute the county's carbon neutral target by 2030.
- To increase urban greening.
- Develop schemes to increase their flood resilience through nature-based solutions.
- Ensure that adaptation (and mitigation) is integrated into the Environmental Land Management system.

4.2.2 The Essex Green Infrastructure Standards will also benefit the recommendations for Energy, Built Environment and transport through the design of GI to deliver:

- Energy efficiency.
- Walkable neighbourhoods and attractive travel routes and connectivity to encourage more sustainable transport methods such as walking and cycling.
- A reverse in the national decline in urban greenspace and creating accessible greenspaces nearer to where people live and work enhancing health and wellbeing and economic opportunities.

4.3 This report links to the following strategic priorities in the emerging Organisational Strategy 'Everyone's Essex':

- A strong, inclusive and sustainable economy
- A high-quality environment
- Health wellbeing and independence for all ages
- A good place for children and families to grow

5 Options

5.1 Option One: Adopt the new Essex GI Principles and Standards Guidance (Recommended)

- 5.1.1 It is recommended that the Essex GI Principles and Standards, along with the supporting guidance is adopted as a corporate document as the Essex GI Principles and Standards offer an opportunity for a wholistic approach to provide an interconnected GI network of natural areas and open spaces that will provide numerous environmental, social and economic benefits for people and wildlife.
- 5.1.2 To agree the Essex GI Principles and Standards as a framework for guiding ECC's and LPA's decision-making regarding green space, highways, health and wellbeing, climate change, flood management and housing provision and as a material planning consideration setting the principles and standards for the preparation of Strategic Masterplans, providing pre-application advice, assessing planning applications and Local Plans and any other development management and implementation related purposes within the county. By endorsing these Principles and Standards will give planning weight will ensure that development and project proposals will achieve the ECC's ambitions for the provision of Green and Blue Infrastructure, and that clear parameters are established.
- 5.1.3 The Essex GI Principles and Standards are designed by local stakeholders tailored to what is important to Essex, providing a co-ordinated approach through the development and implementation of GI into policy, decision making and the creation of beautiful sustainable places that will result in the delivery of ECC's, District, City, Borough and Unitary Council's and partners priorities more effectively which promotes partnership working (supporting the Essex LNP) across Greater Essex and its borders.
- 5.1.4 They also address ECC's commitment and recommendations set out by the ECAC, objectives within the Essex GI Strategy, the NPPF, Natural England National GI Framework (from 25 Year Environment Plan) and the statutory requirements from the Environment Act to deliver Local Nature Recovery Strategies and support the delivery of biodiversity net gain as mentioned within 3.1 – 3.13 above. It also meets a number of the corporate strategic aims and priorities as mentioned in section 4 above.
- 5.1.5 The Essex GI Principle and Standards will be promoted by the ECC Green Infrastructure and Sustainable Drainage Team, utilising the skills and resources that are already in place within ECC. There are two GI Planning Officers in post who can review major planning applications and implement these standards to improve the provision of natural green space across the county. These Principles and Standards will inform the responses to planning policy and applications consultations. However, we are also working closely with Planning Policy and Development Management teams within the LPAs to embed the GI principles and standards within their working practices.
- 5.1.6 By Essex taking part in the National GI Framework trials, our learnings and our approach have been fed back to Natural England informing the development of their framework, including their baseline national mapping that was launched in December 2021. The Essex GI Principles and Standards align with the new national GI principles, but are tailored to meet more local context, which is

encouraged by the National GI framework. The National GI framework, along with Building with Nature will provide an additional high-level layer of support and external verification, if required, to the Essex GI standards. The Essex GI Principle and Standards are being presented by Natural England and Building with Nature as a national exemplar case study.

5.1.7 There will also be a need to manage people's expectation of the Essex GI Principles and Standards, recognising its limitations (i.e., not blocking developments in Local Plans). This will require support from ECC's communication team and external partners to coordinate the development of a communication plan and support programme with partners.

5.2 Option two: Reject the Essex GI Principles and Standards (do nothing) (Not Recommended)

5.2.1 This option is not recommended as it would mean forgoing the broad range of benefits in delivering good-quality GI 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.

5.2.2 By not agreeing to adopt the Essex GI Principles and Standards and endorse it as a material consideration in the planning and decision-making process would mean that there would be no consistent or coordinated mechanism across Greater Essex to support the delivery of sustainable development proposals and achieve the vision and objectives set out in the ECC's Everyone's Essex, and Essex GI Strategy, or the application of the policies within Local Planning Authorities Local Plans. In addition, there would be no overarching framework in place to achieve the implementation of important initiatives intended to support the ECAC or Essex LNP response to the Climate Crisis.

5.2.3 Without the Essex GI Principles and Standards there is likely to be the continued fragmentation of Essex's habitats and GI, from an inconsistent approach by partners, that will lead to degradation of the environment. As the environment is now recognised as being a valuable contributor for health and wellbeing and other social reasons, environmental degradation could result in increased demand for alternative services for which additional funding would be required.

5.2.4 By doing nothing it is likely that:

- GI would be pursued in its own environmental silo which:
 - limits its impact on other key standards and policies and may lead to disintegrated policy development.
 - results in the submission of planning applications where the delivery of GI is often only proposed at singular locations rather than embedded across the whole site. When existing and new GI components are not part of the integral design for the whole development, this could result in non-sustainable and unattractive places that people will not want to live or work.

- Continued fragmentation of our habitats and GI which in turn will lead to degradation of the environment which will impact negatively on people's health and wellbeing and the economic viability of Essex.
- Poor quality or loss/lack of access to green spaces resulting in future costs implication 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 to service areas, such as health of not having sufficient resources to provide these extra services resulting in more people being impacted.
- There will be a potential risk of future costs from retrofitting GI after developments and highways have been delivered.
- The ECC will not meet its commitment to deliver action against the ECAC recommendations for Land Use and GI and the strategic priorities within the Organisational Strategy and Essex GI Strategy leading to reputational risk.

5.3 Option three: Make changes to the proposed Essex GI Principles and Standards (Not Recommended)

5.3.1 This option is not recommended. The Essex GI Principles and Standards have been developed through a programme of collaboration and engagement with a wide range of partners, as set out under 3.16. This process has drawn on their expertise and knowledge to identify the key principles in an Essex context that are important in the delivery of multifunctional GI for the benefits of people and wildlife.

5.3.2 The Essex GI Principles and Standards and guidance document has gone through a 9-week stakeholder consultation, in which the responses have been incorporated in the updates to the GI principles and standards and resulted in provision of a technical guidance and an executive non-technical summary.

5.3.3 Any further changes to the GI principles and Standards will potentially need to go back out to consultation, be fed back to the stakeholders and these changes to be accepted by those involved in the process of developing these GI Principles and Standards. This will cause a delay in the use of the GI principles and standards by ECC Green Infrastructure and Sustainable Drainage team in providing structured responses to planning applications and Local Plan consultations in strengthening policy to improve the provision of natural green space across the county.

5.4 Option four: Reject the Essex GI Principles and Standards and use the National GI Framework (Not Recommended)

5.4.1 Although, the National GI Framework provides a robust set of principles, ECC and partners have already done significant amount of work with Natural England as part of the national trials during September 2020 and February 2021 on the Essex GI Principles and Standards. The option to just use the National GI Framework is not recommended, as this framework is high-level, and designed to help LPAs county-wide to include GI in Local Plans and developments, rather than a national commitment. This high-level approach

might allow for different interpretations of guidance which would not provide the consistency that is required by the planning process.

5.4.2 The Essex GI Principles and Standards are more locally focused, developed by a wide range of stakeholders, with an Essex-centric view on the delivery of multifunctional GI across Essex. The tailoring of the national GI framework to the local context is encouraged by Natural England, and the Essex approach has been used by Natural England as an example of best practice for using the national GI framework to adapt locally to meet local priorities and use as a high-level external verification.

5.4.3 The National GI Framework is still under development and similar to option three (5.3.3), in that:

- Stakeholders that have been involved in the development of the Essex GI Principles and Standards will need to be notified of any changes to ensure a coordinated delivery of GI across Greater Essex, to avoid GI being delivered in silo and fragmented.
- This will delay the ECC Green Infrastructure and Sustainable Drainage team in providing structured responses to planning applications and Local Plan policy consultations to improve the provision of natural green space across the county.

6 Issues for consideration

6.1 Financial implications

£m	2022/2023	2023/2024	2024/2025	2025/2026	Total
Flood management	1.145	1.193	1.242	1.254	4.834

6.1.1 The Green Infrastructure and Sustainable Drainage Team reside within the Flood management cost centre shown in the table above. This includes 2.0 FTE Green Infrastructure Planning officer roles, 1.0 FTE for the Green Planning Delivery officer and 7 FTE for the Sustainable Drainage team. The Flood management cost centre also includes roles working in areas of flood prevention which are not specific to the implementation of Green Standards e.g. Forestry officer, Project design managers.

6.1.2 Funding for the Green Infrastructure Planning officers (2FTE) and Green Planning Delivery officer (1FTE) have been appointed on a 2-year fixed contract until June 2023. These roles are funded from the £2.5m Essex Climate Change Commission reserve approved in Jan 2021 (FP/898/11/20). A separate business case is required for any extension after June 2023 and will be met from the existing revenue budget. The Sustainable Drainage team are permanent contracts employees with ECC.

6.1.3 It is intended that the implementation of the Essex GI Principles and Standards will be delivered through the existing GI and SuDs Team. It is expected that existing resource will be reprioritised to contain any expenditure associated with this. Additional costs are expected to be retained within the existing budget

envelope within Flood Management or a request for further funding through a separate business case.

6.1.4 The resource requirements are likely to be applied to the communication plan and monitoring of the GI Principles and Standards, workshops/training and updates to the Essex Design Guide.

6.1.5 ECC may see some financial impact where the adoption of these standards exceed the development approach that may have previously applied. An example could be the development of schemes by Essex Housing Development LLP, these will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis as respective business cases are brought forward.

6.1.6 Applying GI standards may lead to cost avoidance in the long-term and may be cheaper than traditional grey infrastructure, providing benefits such as:

flood attenuation through SuDs,

- *reducing resource consumption by lowering energy use,*
- *avoiding costs arising on services from negative environmental effects.*

6.2 Legal implications

6.2.1 The GI standards have not been subject to a strategic environmental assessment. This is because they are primarily relevant as a request to local planning authorities to consider them as part of their planning framework.

6.2.2 The Environment Act 2021 partly implemented the 25 Year Environment Plan, which includes a commitment to develop a National Framework of GI led by Natural England. The Act gives powers to set legally binding targets on improving water and air quality, species abundance, with planning applications to provide a minimum 10% increase in biodiversity (which has been mandated), increase by 3% in tree cover by 2050 and enhancing green spaces and other environmental improvement targets. Other targets are being proposed. Improving Green Infrastructure can help meet these targets.

7 Equality and Diversity Considerations

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

- (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 Essex GI Principles and Standards can provide opportunities to all residents with respect to wellbeing, health, quality of life, social inclusion and access to GI assets. No differential impact was identified for any group. The Essex GI Principles and Standards will make Essex a more attractive place to live, learn and work. It promotes policy and developments to require better connectivity between GI features and where people live and work, to optimise use and enjoyment by all. The GI principles and standards will help policy, developments and projects to contribute to community cohesion and wellbeing by improving access to and providing a wide range of GI features and facilities that promote the positive impact of GI related and community-led activities tailored to meet their needs, to enable inclusive use of GI by all user, social groups and abilities, that will provide health and wellbeing benefits.
- 7.5 There will also be significant environmental benefits from the implementation of these standards; particularly in regard to connecting people to nature, especially younger people in enhancing their concentration and learning in helping them fulfil their potential, through meeting the requirement within the Environment Act and NPPF for mandatory biodiversity net gain alongside habitat connectivity and creation. The Multifunctional GI principle and standards will also help to mitigate health risks such as urban heat stress, climate change mitigation and adaptation, noise pollution, flooding and poor air quality. Early engagement, health, wellbeing and inclusivity have been identified as two of the core principles and standards to help shape policy, decision making and planning proposals to ensure GI delivers multiple benefits to everyone and wildlife.

8 List of Appendices

- 8.1 Essex GI Standards Technical Guidance
- 8.2 Essex GI Standards Executive Non-Technical Guidance
- 8.3 Equality Impact Assessment

9 List of Background papers

- 9.1 Consultation and Workshop summary reports - [Essex GI Standards Framework and Guidance Draft Consultation - Essex County Council - Citizen Space](#)

9.2 List of useful links

9.2.1 Essex Climate Action Commission - <https://www.essexclimate.org.uk/>

9.2.2 Green Essex Story Map - <https://www.placeservices.co.uk/green-essex/>

9.2.3 South-Essex-Strategic-Green-and-Blue-Infrastructure-Study- <https://ca1-jsp.edcdn.com/downloads/South-Essex-Strategic-Green-and-Blue-Infrastructure-Study.pdf>

9.2.4 Building with Nature - <https://www.buildingwithnature.org.uk/>.