

BRIEFING REPORT

Environment and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny

Date of Meeting: 20 March 2018

Report Title: Green Infrastructure

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1. Introduction and Policy Context

- 1.1. The purpose of this briefing report is to outline how the Council intends to develop and deliver a Green Infrastructure (GI) plan for the Borough as part of its policy development on the Environment. This will provide a strategic overview, mapping out the opportunities to gain the green infrastructure benefits related to Connectivity, life chances, environment and economy.
- 1.2. In a Cabinet report (6th December 2016), principles relating to Quality of Place were adopted as an overarching strategy for the Council. Quality of Place is a measure that focuses on the connection of environment and place, the quality of the built and natural environment and its interaction with people living in the area. A Green infrastructure Plan will contribute to protecting and enhancing the environment that makes Cheshire East special which is an important contributor to our Quality of Place and the economy it supports.
- 1.3. The Local Plan has a number of policies that specifically deal with Green infrastructure and identifies a strategic need to secure improvements to the built and natural environment.
- 1.4. Recent research undertaken by the Cheshire & Warrington LEP, when developing the Strategic Economic Plan, also supports the economic argument for the importance of our environment and green infrastructure as part of Quality of Place.
- 1.5. A Green Infrastructure plan also relates to national policy. For example, the Government recently published 'A Green Future', its 25 year plan to improve the environment. The development of a Green Infrastructure plan is therefore timely, both in the context of the Cheshire East Local Plan and emerging Government policy.

2. Background

- 2.1. Green infrastructure encompasses all the 'green' (such green spaces and green ways) and 'blue' (such as waterways) elements that contribute to the wellbeing of people and environment, quality of place and the economy. A Green infrastructure plan would enable the prioritised delivery of a network of multi-functional green spaces, both urban and rural, that are capable of delivering a wide range of environmental and quality of life benefits for local communities. It is an approach that is already embedded in the Cheshire East Local Plan and at a national level in the National Planning Policy Framework. Cheshire East already has a distinct natural environment that contributes to the creation of an attractive and successful place.
- 2.2. The Council published its Green Space Strategy in 2013. It stated that Cheshire East Council would like to achieve: 'A network of clean, green, sustainable, attractive, well maintained, safe areas for all ages, for formal and informal recreational activities, more formal outdoor sports or for sitting and relaxing, which are easily accessible and are well designed to avoid conflict and build community cohesion, whilst enhancing our day to day environment'.
- 2.3. Local Plan strategic priorities on promoting economic prosperity, protecting and enhancing environmental quality and creating sustainable communities identified that these would be delivered by '...securing improvements to the built and natural environment', 'improving links between existing and new neighbourhoods by giving priority to walking, cycling...' and 'providing new and maintaining existing high quality and accessible green infrastructure to create networks of greenspace for people, flora and fauna and allow species adaptation and migration'.
- 2.4. Green infrastructure provides an approach that promotes the value of the natural environment (which can be defined through 'Natural Capital') to Quality of Place, wellbeing of communities and the wider economy.

3. Briefing Information

- 3.1. Green infrastructure relates to multi-functional spaces, both urban and rural, which are capable of delivering a wide range of environmental and quality of life benefits for local communities.
- 3.2. The Local Plan has a number of policies that specifically deal with Green infrastructure. For example, Policy SE6 seeks to link the various assets of Cheshire East's unique landscape, safeguarding a network of green infrastructure assets that should be retained and enhanced. This includes the need to create or add to the networks of multi-functional Green Infrastructure and securing new provision to help address identified shortages. There are also policies related to a number of specific sites regarding the creation of green spaces and green infrastructure links that should be integrated into development proposals. Further work is now on-going as part of the second stage of the Local Plan to develop a Landscape Strategy and to refresh the Greenspace strategy. The Green Infrastructure Plan will be part of the evidence base underpinning a GI policy within stage two of the Plan, the Site

Allocations Development Plan Document. It may also lead in the future to Supplementary Planning Documents, should that need be identified and can help identify any evidential gaps that might support future plans.

- 3.3. A Green Infrastructure Plan will be linked to existing Council plans and strategies, particularly in the context of economic strategy, Health and Wellbeing and Regeneration plans. It will also link into key spatial strategies including the emerging Crewe Masterplan where the re-establishment of green infrastructure within the town is key to the vision for the town. It also needs to take account of Green infrastructure planning at sub-regional level and integrate with partners that could help to 'join the dots' in a collaborative approach. To do this effectively and to increase the resource available, opportunities will be sought to find potential partners with whom the Council can collaborate or to identify complementary projects that support wider delivery.
- 3.4. In developing a plan for Cheshire East that takes account of opportunities for collaboration and partnerships, a GI plan can provide a strategic context for other organisations that have influence over or are providers of Green Infrastructure. It can also address the part that Cheshire East Council plays in policy and delivery. The council clearly has a direct role in delivering and influencing Green Infrastructure in the borough, not only through planning policy and strategy implementation, but through responsibility for and management of its own estate.
- 3.5. This provides a direct stake in our ability to maximise long-term benefits for the environment, economy and communities of Cheshire East. However, the process of Green Infrastructure planning can also give Cheshire East Council a strategic leadership role in working with other organisations that share the same goals and aspirations, providing a framework that is of value to those interested in our green infrastructure, from conservation organisations, developers, businesses and council services to individual households and neighbourhood groups. It will also highlight opportunities for further engagement, such as the Northern Forest, that might otherwise be missed.
- 3.6. The Green Infrastructure plan would therefore serve to integrate the Local Plan policies with other existing strategies and plans while providing a strategic context for partners. This would assist the Council to deliver its objectives and the full range of benefits available. It will create a delivery plan that helps to focus resources and delivery to best effect. Priorities for action would be addressed across a number of themes with their perceived benefits (fig 1). These are likely to include:
- Connectivity: Green corridors to connect areas of habitat that provide multifunctional benefits including biodiversity, access, informal recreation, health & wellbeing, landscape value, risk mitigation and economic.
 - Life Chances and Choices: Linking people to places closer to nature through walking and cycling, perceived access and interpretation. Improved

contribution of to air, water, soils and personal wellbeing. Securing opportunities for outdoor recreation and getting closer to nature with associated health and wellbeing benefits. Promoting these benefits to health commissioning bodies.

- Environment: Bridging any distinction between 'urban' and 'rural' in the quality and benefits available to residents, wildlife and landscape. Raising awareness of the value of the landscape of Cheshire East, increasing people's interest in its future. Addressing the need to improve 'carrying capacity' or 'spreading the load' for existing 'honeypot' sites. Securing green infrastructure in support of landscape improvement or improved design quality for new developments across the borough.
- Economy: Securing and enhancing investments by connecting them into a wider environmental benefits network. Maintaining and enhancing perception of place as a reason to live, work, visit or invest. Valuing 'Natural capital' as part of economic strategy or investment decisions.

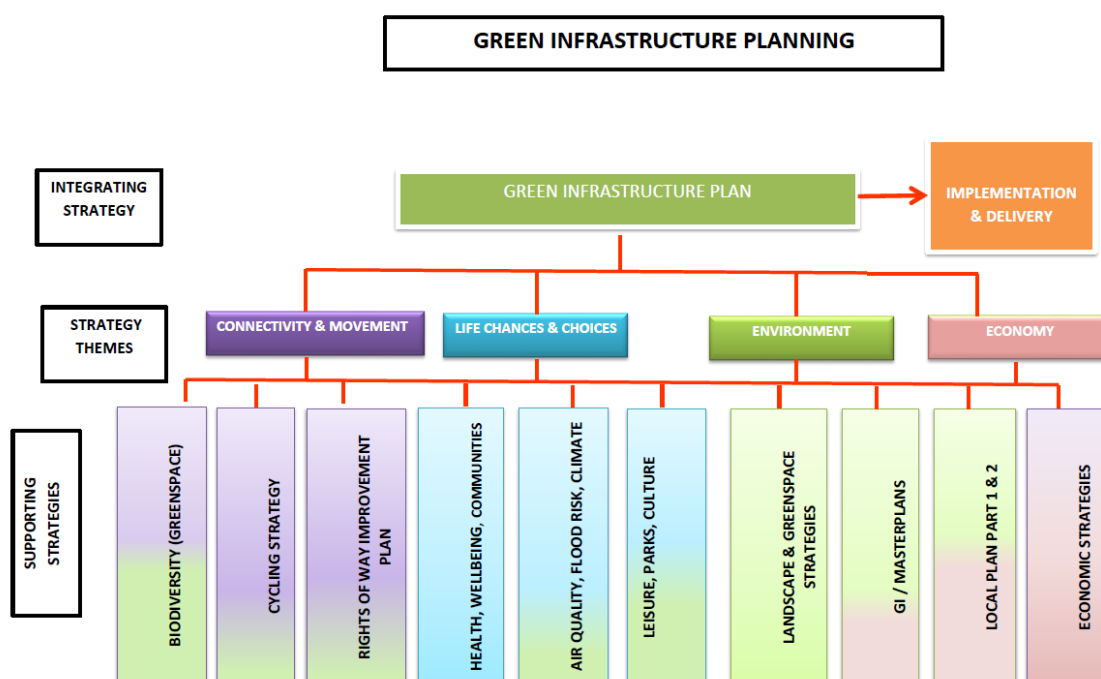


Figure 1: Green Infrastructure planning

- 3.7. Some of the contributing strategies and plans are already in place, including the Cycling Strategy, Health and Wellbeing Strategy, Parks Strategy and Rights of Way Improvement Plan and stage 1 of the Local Plan. There are a number of other work streams currently in hand, which will help to inform the Green Infrastructure plan including the emerging Crewe Masterplan. There is a need therefore to identify and complete all contributing reports and strategies and also to fill any substantial gaps that may exist.

- 3.8. To ascertain how the Council can work with others to integrate strategies and projects, work has commenced on identification of potential 'partner' or cross-boundary projects that could contribute to or be linked through a Green Infrastructure Plan. This will lead to the development of a high level, strategic plan that takes into account other work streams and addresses any gaps in order to assist implementation, mapping the potential to achieve improvements in Green Infrastructure and identifying priority areas of focus. This plan would be consulted on prior to seeking Council approval.
- 3.9. A Green Infrastructure Plan would provide a strategic framework to address known needs and opportunities to gain the green infrastructure benefits related to the themes of connectivity, life chances, environment and economy. It can establish principles that would contribute to the evidence base for the second stage of the Local Plan. It will map the distribution of green infrastructure and incorporate defined proposals and priorities for areas of intervention, retention or enhancement that can be addressed as and when resources become available. It will also strengthen the case for high quality design, mitigation and public benefit related to development proposals to ensure that the borough's Quality of Place aspirations are met.
- 3.10 It is intended that for each of the themes it will be possible to understand where the Council, its partners and other stakeholders may be able to make contributions to retain or enhance Green Infrastructure and its related benefits. The Plan is likely therefore to include a range of proposals and actions, covering commitments from the Council and a range of potential partners.
- 3.11 In some cases funding might already have been committed for an action. In other instances the action may highlight the need for a new area of work, part of which will be to identify and secure funding for its delivery. This will involve reviewing funding opportunities that already exist or opportunities that emerge throughout the life of the Plan. For some other actions, however, there will not be an existing or identified source of funding. In this case, while an action may be identified as part of a 'menu of opportunities', implementation may wait on new funding becoming available or be reliant on the Council and its partners working together to establish new funding mechanisms.
- 3.12 In order to complete a Green Infrastructure Plan, a number of pieces of existing work must be completed. This includes completion of a refreshed Greenspace strategy and the Landscape Character Assessment together with the related Landscape Strategy and Local Landscape Designation review. Initial consultation with potential partners will also be undertaken during March/April 2018 in order to align this work with other related initiatives. It is hoped therefore to complete the Plan once the first draft of the Local Plan stage 2 has been completed for consultation. The current timescale therefore assumes that a Green Infrastructure Plan would be completed by the end of 2018.

4. Implications

4.1 Legal Implications

There are no direct legal implications.

4.2 Financial Implications

There are currently no additional costs in developing the Green Infrastructure plan. The only costs are staff time and work related to the evidence base, which are contained in existing base budgets of Place directorate.

The implication of developing a strategic plan will highlight needs and opportunities that will guide priorities for expenditure in the future (and not just from one service) or may require funding/budgets to be reorganised to have better effect.

4.3 Human Resources Implications

None

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