

DECISION-MAKER:	Cabinet
SUBJECT:	Green Infrastructure and Biodiversity Strategy
DATE OF DECISION:	16 January 2024
REPORT OF:	Councillor Keogh Cabinet Member for Environment and Transport

<u>CONTACT DETAILS</u>			
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STATEMENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY
N/A

BRIEF SUMMARY
<p>Southampton City Council (SCC) declared a Climate Emergency in 2019. In its Green City Plan 2030, it made a commitment to create a greener, healthier, and more sustainable city that is better adapted to the various challenges arising from climate change. The Corporate Plan 2022/30 sets a further ambition for Southampton to have an increased amount of connected, good quality green space. A key aim of both plans is to create a more resilient city, one that is healthy, and attractive for people to live in, work in and visit; a city that is designed to benefit people and wildlife.</p> <p>We need to address the commitments in those plans. We also need to meet our new statutory obligations arising from the Environment Act 2021, including a strengthened Biodiversity Duty and a requirement to secure at least 10% Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) from planning developments. SCC will also be required to contribute toward the development and delivery of new Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS), a spatial strategy to aid nature recovery and environmental improvement. Hampshire's LNRS, currently being developed by Hampshire County Council (HCC), focusses on restoring habitats and increasing connectivity in the wider county.</p> <p>The Green Infrastructure (GI) Strategy and Biodiversity Strategy outline how the council will play its part in transforming its own activities in terms of land management and spatial planning. They also set out how improved GI and biodiversity will make the city more resilient to the effects of climate and improve the health, wellbeing and prosperity of Southampton.</p>

The GI Strategy seeks to optimise the full range of benefits that our natural assets can offer. This includes offering outdoor amenity space, safe and attractive routes for travel, local flood management, improving local air quality, capturing carbon and providing the infrastructure to support wildlife. The Biodiversity Strategy complements the GI Strategy by identifying a wider range of opportunities that will specifically support wildlife.

The current versions of the strategies have been developed following a thorough process of internal and external engagement to ensure our approach remains ambitious whilst also being achievable in scale and scope, striking the right balance for SCC and those service areas which have a more direct responsibility for delivering the actions needed to implement both strategies.

The strategies set out a vision and broad priorities that will dictate future delivery plans. Those delivery plans will be subject to a process of due diligence to ensure they are affordable, can be resourced and offer value for money. This in turn will dictate the speed, scale and scope of the outcomes achieved. Work on the delivery plans has commenced and the expectation is that these will be presented to Cabinet in 2024.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- (i) To adopt the Green Infrastructure Strategy and Biodiversity Strategy.

REASONS FOR REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

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| 1. | The GI Strategy and Biodiversity Strategy address the Council’s existing commitments in the Green City Plan 2030 and the Corporate Plan 2022/30. The strategies also set out how SCC will to meet its enhanced biodiversity duty and statutory obligations under the Environment Act 2021, including delivery of BNG, support HCC’s work in the development and delivery of Hampshire’s LNRS and how the SCC will conserve and enhance biodiversity. Adoption of the GI and Biodiversity Strategies will encourage all stakeholders including business, conservation groups and public sector organisations to work together to deliver a shared outcome, making Southampton a cleaner, greener, healthier and a more sustainable environment for people and wildlife. |
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ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

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| 2. | In the absence of a GI and Biodiversity Strategy or, where there is a delay in their introduction, the council will be unable to demonstrate how it intends to deliver its legal obligations under the strengthened Biodiversity Duty or the goals set out in the Corporate Plan or the Green City Plan. Penalties for failing to deliver statutory duties are currently unclear, however, there is a risk of reputational damage in addition to incurring higher future costs in adapting to the impacts of climate change and coping with loss of GI and continued loss and degradation of habitats and wildlife. |
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DETAIL (Including consultation carried out)

3.	<p>The majority scientific consensus is that human induced climate change has already started. Our world is warming causing more extreme weather events, and sea level rise. The consequences include increased loss of biodiversity, flooding, more frequent and severe heat waves, water scarcity and more pollution. There will be a detrimental impact on people's lives including health, and damage to homes and businesses. The UK is already experiencing more frequent and extreme weather events. In February 2020, storms brought devastating floods to large areas of Wales, northern England and the Midlands; in 2015, storms resulted in benchmark levels of flooding in the UK. Droughts were formally declared across much of England in 2022 due to record temperatures and low rainfall.</p>
4.	<p>Our GI and Biodiversity Strategies, together with our Climate Change Strategy, help address our aim for Southampton to be more resilient to the effects of climate change, effects which are particularly felt within a city setting with its hard landscape, sealed surfaces, and higher temperatures. The main current drivers of GI loss in Southampton include pressure from increased development, absence of or poorly designed GI in new development, pollution, increased public pressure and inappropriate management of habitats. Over time, the city's GI has become more fragmented. Small-scale, incremental encroachment on incidental spaces (such as road verges) is eroding the network. Equally, our network of semi-natural habitat is under threat through both direct loss and degradation.</p>
5.	<p>GI, the network of natural and semi-natural areas, is capable of providing a suite of environmental benefits. GI which is linked together in urban settings creates a network, a Green Grid, which is able to provide multiple benefits including supporting a green economy, improving quality of life, protecting biodiversity and enhancing the ability of ecosystems to deliver services (Ecosystem Services) such as, providing space for recreation and relaxation, improving water and air quality, reducing surface water flood risk, lowering ambient air temperatures and capturing and storing carbon.</p>
6.	<p>In Southampton, GI includes open spaces (such as parks and gardens), greenways, allotments, woodlands, grassland, road verges, hedges, lakes, ponds, playing fields, coastal habitats, as well as footpaths, cycleways, railway corridors, streams and rivers. The GI in our city is currently disconnected and is therefore not resilient to climate change. The GI Strategy seeks to create a way forward by increasing the extent of GI, forming stronger links between areas and improving habitat condition to increase resilience to environmental pressures. We need GI that is well designed and multi-functional, GI which helps address local flooding, improves air quality and delivers benefits for wildlife.</p>
7.	<p>Our Biodiversity Strategy complements the aims of the GI Strategy by providing objectives and methods for how the city can address the severe declines in wildlife, improving and increasing the extent and condition of our semi-natural habitats and in turn, improving species populations and increasing biodiversity. Both strategies set out ambitious, but realistic, targets for creating a better city for wildlife and for people.</p>

8.	<p>The GI Strategy deals with GI, our network of green and blue infrastructure. Our Biodiversity Strategy focusses on conservation and enhancement of species and semi-natural habitats. Although different in their objectives, the strategies rely on each other for ensuring our GI network is strong, resilient and delivers Ecosystem Services, services needed by people and wildlife.</p> <p>The Biodiversity Strategy and GI Strategy underwent internal consultation in 2022 and 2023 (respectively). External consultation took place on both strategies in September and October 2023 where over 400 responses were received. Internal and external consultation took place in July 2022 to introduce the concept and need for the Green Grid, over 2,500 responses were received.</p> <p>Delivery plans for our Biodiversity Strategy and GI Strategy are underway with the anticipation these will be in draft ready for Cabinet briefing during 2024.</p>
9.	<p>Geodata (University of Southampton) were commissioned by SCC to analyse socio-economic data alongside maps and other data sets, including priority habitats, designated sites, street trees and public rights of way. The data were brought together to produce a high-level map of the GI in the city, our green and blue network termed our “Green Grid”. The Green Grid is the city’s ecological network that connects a series of core ‘ecosystems’ with corridors and steppingstones of habitats. Parks, open spaces, streams and rivers form the core areas of the network connected by corridors of street trees, highway verges, railway embankments and gardens. We are identifying opportunities to utilise buildings and land to add to the Green Grid through the creation of green walls/facades and roofs, tree planting and wildflower areas. We will work with landowners across the city to assess opportunities for forming links in the Green Grid on non-council land and encouraging the creation of GI wherever possible to create a connected, resilient, healthy, climate change adapted city.</p> <p>Policies and Supplementary Planning Documents within the Local Plan have been reviewed and include guidance on the GI standards we expect as part of any development. Our Green Grid map shows where this GI is most needed. We will provide guidance on what type of GI we expect to be delivered, ensuring it is high quality, effective and suitable for our city setting.</p> <p>A Green Grid Implementation Plan is being developed. The Plan will include how and where GI will be delivered.</p>

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

Capital/Revenue

10.	<p>Both Strategies have been developed using existing internal resources and their completion and adoption generates no additional budget pressures. Neither will they limit services in their ability to deliver any immediate saving targets. Both strategies set out a vision and broad priorities that will dictate future delivery plans. Those delivery plans will be subject to a process of due diligence through existing governance processes to ensure they are affordable, can be resourced and offer value for money. This in turn will dictate the speed, scale and scope of the outcomes achieved.</p>
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Property/Other

11.	N/A
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LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Statutory power to undertake proposals in the report:

	s.1 Localism Act 2011 allows the Council to do anything deemed necessary or desirable to deliver or support its functions and duties providing that action is not otherwise prohibited by statute (the general power of competence). The preparation and delivery of The Strategy and Action Plan is authorised by virtue of s.1.
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Other Legal Implications:

12.	The strengthened Biodiversity Duty, as set out in s.102 of the Environment Act 2021, was enacted in January 2023 and a deadline of 1st January 2024 set for the completion of the first review of what actions the City Council will take to conserve biodiversity. Reporting on these actions is required by 1st January 2026. The Biodiversity Strategy constitutes a review of actions needed to conserve biodiversity within Southampton and will enable the City Council to meet its obligations. From January 2024, the Council will have a mandatory duty to deliver BNG through the spatial planning system. To maximise the benefits of BNG for the city's biodiversity, the draft Biodiversity Strategy includes actions relating to the delivery of BNG within development sites and at other sites within the Local Planning Authority area. The draft Biodiversity and GI Strategies both contain actions aimed at delivering relevant targets from the Hampshire's LNRS which is being developed by Hampshire County Council.
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RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

13.	In the absence of a GI and Biodiversity Strategy or, where there is a delay in their introduction, the council will be unable to demonstrate how it intends to deliver its obligations under the strengthened Environment Act 2021 Biodiversity Duty or the goals set out in the Corporate Plan or the Green City Plan. Penalties for failing to deliver statutory duties are currently unclear, however, there is a risk of reputational damage in addition to incurring higher future costs in adapting to the impacts of climate change and coping with loss of GI and continued loss and degradation of habitats and wildlife.
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POLICY FRAMEWORK IMPLICATIONS

14.	Strategies will assist with delivery of the Corporate Plan 2022/30 and satisfy actions identified in the Green City Plan. They will form part of an integrated policy framework that will ultimately replace the Green City Plan and ensure the council is able to demonstrate an ongoing commitment to address the challenges of climate change and ecological decline by creating a cleaner, greener, healthier and more sustainable city.
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KEY DECISION?	Yes
WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED:	ALL
<u>SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION</u>	
Appendices	
1.	Green Infrastructure Strategy
2.	Biodiversity Strategy
3.	Green Infrastructure Consultation Report and Biodiversity Strategy Consultation Report
4.	Equality and Safety Impact Assessment

Documents In Members' Rooms

1.	N/A	
Equality Impact Assessment		
Do the implications/subject of the report require an Equality and Safety Impact Assessment (ESIA) to be carried out.		Yes (appended)
Data Protection Impact Assessment		
Do the implications/subject of the report require a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) to be carried out.		No
Other Background Documents		
Other Background documents available for inspection at: N/A		
Title of Background Paper(s)		
1.	N/A	