

WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL
CABINET HOUSING & PLANNING PANEL – 20TH JULY 2016
REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR (GOVERNANCE)

GREEN CORRIDOR STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK PLAN – STAGE 1 REPORT

1 Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report updates members on progress with work looking at opportunities to enhance green infrastructure, specifically with reference to the Council's proposal to develop a green corridor running east to west across the borough between Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield (as identified in the previous Local Plan consultation document January 2015). This is being undertaken in the context of proposals for major housing development sites in this area.
- 1.2 A copy of the Stage 1 Green Corridor document is at Appendix A to this report. The document explains the policy and area context for the green corridor, identifies the results of consultation with land owners and key stakeholders, and then sets out the vision and objectives for the green corridor, identifying projects and proposals that will help to deliver these. Once fully developed, it is intended that this document will provide a framework for taking forward the Council's plans for a green corridor to support the Local Plan, and provide an important element for the masterplanning of the strategic growth sites around Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield.

2 Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Panel recommends to Cabinet that it approves the content of the Stage 1 Green Corridor document (at Appendix A) for informal consultation alongside the draft Local Plan, with a view to proceeding to Stage 2 of the Green Corridor proposals, once any responses to the consultation have been taken into account.

3 Explanation

- 3.1 The Green Corridor Strategic Framework Plan - Stage 1 Report outlines proposals to create a green corridor running East-West across the borough between Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield. The document explains the policy and area context for the corridor, summarises the findings of a consultation event and discussions with key stakeholders, identifies aims and objectives for the corridor, and outlines high level projects and proposals that would help to achieve these aims.
- 3.2 The realisation that significant areas of Green Belt would need to be allocated to accommodate housing growth around Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City, increased the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach to protecting and enhancing Green Infrastructure. Consequently, Policy CS19 of the Local Plan Consultation Document set out the Council's intention to work with key

stakeholders to deliver green infrastructure, including a green corridor between Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield.

- 3.3 WHBC decided to test the proposal further, at a consultation workshop held at the Focolare Centre in July 2015 during which key stakeholders were invited to discuss their ideas and aims and objectives for the corridor. The concept of the green corridor was viewed favourably by those involved, and so the project was carried forward and further developed via discussions with landowners and key stakeholders including HCC and the Herts and Middlesex Wildlife Trust.
- 3.4 Proposals for the green corridor have been developed from the vision and objectives that were identified during consultation, and subject to analysis and evaluation:
- 3.5 The green corridor will be a wide area of countryside stretching from west to east across the borough, running between Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City. It will connect existing green infrastructure, footpaths and cycleways, and has the potential to provide new strategic connections to Ellenbrook County Park, Symondshyde Great Wood and through to Heartwood Forest in the West, and Panshanger Park, the Mimram Valley, and the Lee Valley to the East.
- 3.6 The green corridor will provide an area of natural green space for recreation and relaxation that is welcoming and safe to use. It will contain accessible routes that are appropriately signed and surfaced to encourage use by a range of non-motorised users. The corridor will be subject to planting and environmental enhancement to create rich habitat for a range of species. It will provide opportunities for wildlife projects; play, leisure, education and cultural heritage facilities, and will help to encourage healthy lifestyles.
- 3.7 To build on this work and help secure the future of the green corridor. Policy SP12 of the Proposed Submission Local Plan promotes the creation and enhancement of green infrastructure across the Borough, aiming to link existing spaces for the benefit of wildlife, biodiversity, leisure and recreation. The policy makes specific reference to the green corridor, noting its location, aims and objectives, as well as the intention to use developer contributions to help secure delivery. The Stage 1 Framework Report supports policy SP12 and the recommendations of the NPPF, to set out the context, vision and objectives of the green corridor along with high level proposals for projects that will enable its delivery.
- 3.8 The wider policy context for creation of the green corridor is very positive. Proposals would be in line with recommendations of the NPPF and could help in achieving the aims of a number of county wide and local strategies including: *the Hertfordshire Strategic Green Infrastructure Plan (2011)*, the *WHBC Green Infrastructure Plan (2011)*, the *Hertfordshire Rights of Way Improvement Plan (2011)*, and the *Hertfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan (2006)*.
- 3.9 The physical / area context for development of the green corridor is also favourable, despite the challenges of accommodating housing growth, the corridor already contains a number of Public Rights of Way (PRoW) that can be enhanced and improved, and there are significant opportunities to connect to surrounding routes. HCC rights of way team have raised no objections to such route additions and enhancements, and have expressed a willingness to work cooperatively with WHBC. Although there are a number of major access barriers,

including the A1(M), A414 and the railway line, there are opportunities to improve existing pedestrian/cycle infrastructure such as underpasses and pavements at a relatively low cost in comparison to needing new bridges over such carriageways. The crossing of small streams and brooks can be done with relative ease by inserting footbridges, whilst signage could be used to improve navigability for all users.

- 3.10 The corridor already contains areas of significant landscape and habitat value that can be enhanced and connected, including the Commons Wood Nature Reserve, the River Lea Corridor, the River Mimram, Stanborough Lakes and Symondshyde Great Wood. Additionally, there is no significant risk of flooding, something which is important for maintenance in the long term.
- 3.11 Whilst the corridor does contain a number of potential major housing development sites, if planned carefully these can incorporate green corridor principles by including appropriate planting, generous areas of green space and footpaths, cycleways and bridleways.
- 3.12 Very unusually, the area covered by the green corridor is mostly owned by just four major land owners and the local authority. Whilst there are small pockets of land owned by others, none of these include existing PRoW or potential new routes. This extremely unusual situation is highly advantageous for implementation as there are far fewer land owners to work with than would ordinarily be the case.
- 3.13 Support of landowners is vital to the delivery and ongoing maintenance of the green corridor. Council officers will work closely with land owners and, where appropriate, developers, to ensure new rights of way and areas of ecological enhancement are created and maintained. Options for long term management will be developed at Stage 2 of this report.
- 3.14 From the range of objectives identified through various stages of consultation, and analysis of policy initiatives and physical constraints and opportunities, a high level set of action plan proposals have been identified to address the areas of:
 - 1.) **Rights of way and path creation** – addressing where new PRoW should be created to link existing PRoW and where existing PRoW need upgrading to make them more suitable for accommodating a variety of users;
 - 2.) **Key Accessibility improvements** – including options for improving accessibility across major infrastructure barriers such as the A1(M), A414 and the railway line, the potential to upgrade existing infrastructure, and the use of signage and mapping to ease the navigability of the corridor;
 - 3.) **Ecology and biodiversity** – identifying which areas are most suitable for biodiversity enhancements and habitat creation and suggestion of projects that could improve biodiversity within the corridor such as provision of bat and bird boxes, wildlife passes;
 - 4.) **Community recreation, education and wellbeing** – which discusses potential community facilities such as interpretation boards and trails,

community gardens and creation of an educational facility / outdoor classrooms for use by local schools.

- 3.15 The green corridor project presents an exciting opportunity to provide a valuable wildlife, amenity and recreation facility for Welwyn Hatfield which will help to counteract the impacts of new major development sites within the borough. In order to take the green corridor project forward, action plan proposals will need to be further developed, refined and costed as part of a Stage 2 report. The Stage 2 report will build on Stage 1 to identify green corridor programme areas and specific projects within them, which could be undertaken in isolation or alongside other projects in order to deliver the aims and objectives identified in Stage 1. Projects within each programme area will be prioritised and set against a timeline to ensure ground works are undertaken in a sensible, effective and timely manner. Opportunities for joint working, and / or to implement several projects at one time will be identified, and sought, in order to maximise efficiency and reduce overhead costs and disturbance caused by works.
- 3.16 Implementation of the green corridor will be dependant upon suitable funding coming forward. Given the significant need for housing in the Borough, and the likelihood of new major development, there is a potentially a very timely opportunity to secure S106 or CIL monies from development of major sites. To make the most of this potential funding source, and any other such monies that may become available, it will be vital to have a robust strategy and action plan against which money can be allocated and works undertaken in a sensible and effective manner. With this in mind, it is imperative that both the Stage 1 and Stage 2 reports be produced in line with the Local Plan and have full support by members to allow use in the negotiation process.
- 3.17 For the green corridor to become a long lasting success it will be necessary to identify and agree a suitable management plan which includes funding for long-term maintenance. The Stage 1 report briefly identifies potential options for management, including use of a Trust to both manage monies and appoint appropriate organisations to undertake works, something which could further provide opportunities for volunteering and community development programmes. The exact arrangement will very much depend upon the outcome of the planning process and agreement from landowners regarding what is a suitable management regime, however given the highly unusual and beneficial status of having just four major landowners, there is the potential to secure a relatively straightforward and complementary regime across the entire corridor.
- 3.18 The green corridor project provides a unique and timely opportunity to provide a valuable wildlife, amenity and recreation resource that could be enjoyed by a wide range of the community with relatively little cost. Given the excellent set of opportunities which currently present themselves in terms of land ownership, existing access routes, wildlife and habitats plus the support from key stakeholders, it would seem appropriate to now develop proposals further in a Stage 2 report so that such opportunities can be pursued as part of the implementation of the Local plan and the development of major sites.

4 Link to Corporate Priorities

- 4.1 Proposals to create a green corridor across the Borough complement, and will help to fulfil the following corporate priorities:

1. Maintain a safe and healthy community - the corridor will provide a valuable leisure and recreation facility that will help encourage residents to take more exercise and improving health and wellbeing.
2. Protect and enhance the environment – projects within the corridor will help to deliver environmental enhancements within the Borough.

Implications

5 Legal Implication(s)

- 5.1 The Localism Act 2011 introduced the Duty to Cooperate. This is a legal requirement which the examination of the Local Plan will need to consider. Green space, public amenity and biodiversity have been identified as strategic issues which have duty to cooperate implications.

6 Financial Implication(s)

- 6.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report at this stage, further stages of the report may require the use of specialists to accurately cost projects and for Graphic Design. Implementation of the projects will chiefly be funded by monies obtained through S106 or CIL.

7 Risk Management Implications

- 7.1 Proposals for development of a green corridor have received support from the local community and may be perceived as particularly important if large areas of Green Belt land are to come forward for development; failure to deliver the corridor in a timely manner could potentially be met with significant opposition.
- 7.2 Delivery of projects within the green corridor will be dependant upon monies from S106 and CIL coming forward as a result of major housing developments in the borough. Should this development not take place, or be delayed, alternative funding would need to be found for the projects to progress.

8 Security & Terrorism Implication(s)

- 8.1 There are no security and terrorism implications arising directly as a result of this report.

9 Procurement Implication(s)

- 9.1 There are no procurement implications arising directly as a result of this report.

10 Climate Change Implication(s)

- 10.1 Green space can play a positive role in mitigating the impacts of climate change. Indeed, Policy CS19 of the Local Plan consultation document (January 2015, see 8.2 below) was subject to a Sustainability Appraisal, the outcome of which stated that the policy could have significantly positive or positive effect on a number of environmental and social objectives, with no significant negative effects identified.

11 Policy Implications

- 11.1 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that local planning authorities should set out a strategic approach in their Local Plans, planning positively for the creation, protection, enhancement and management of networks of biodiversity and green infrastructure. It recognises the role of green infrastructure in managing the risks arising from climate change, and its potential to deliver a wide range of environmental and quality of life benefits. The NPPF states that planning policies should protect and enhance rights of way and access, and that Local Authorities should seek opportunities to provide better facilities for users, such as adding links to existing networks.
- 11.2 Policy intention CS19 of the Council's Local Plan Consultation Document (January 2015) sets out the Council's approach to strategic green infrastructure provision within the borough and includes a diagram identifying the broad location of the green corridor.
- 11.3 This approach is being taken forward in the latest Proposed Submission version of the Local Plan. Policy SP12 Strategic Green Infrastructure promotes the creation and enhancement of green infrastructure across the Borough and makes specific reference to the green corridor proposal, noting its location, aims and objectives, as well as the intention to use developer contributions to help secure delivery.

12 Equalities and Diversity

- 12.1 As this is an initial Stage 1 Framework Report, which does not include detailed schemes or policies, it was deemed unnecessary to carry out an Equalities Impact Assessment.

Name of author: Jennifer Smith
Title: Senior Planner (Projects)

Appendices

Appendix A: Green corridor Strategic Framework Plan - Stage 1 Report (July 2016)

Background Papers: As referred to in the Policy review contained within the Framework Report.

(Note: Please click on link below to access the Appendix).

http://democracy.welhat.gov.uk/documents/s1890/2016.07.20_Item%2008_Green%20Corridor%20-%20Appendix.pdf