Green and Blue Infrastructure

Background

Green infrastructure includes a range of spaces and assets including parks and gardens, playing fields, woodlands, wildlife habitats, street trees, amenity greenspace and other open spaces. Green infrastructure networks also include 'blue infrastructure' features, such as ponds, rivers, canals and other water bodies and may subsequently be referred to as green and blue infrastructure.

Green and blue infrastructure is essential to the success of the county, given its multi-functional benefits. These include the promotion of health and wellbeing through opportunities for recreation, exercise and social interaction. The environmental benefits are multiple and include mitigation against climate change and flooding, the protection of water quality and the provision of sustainable drainage systems; the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity through better ecological connectivity and the enhancement of local landscape character. This will assist economic growth through the creation high-quality environments. The term green infrastructure includes both green and blue infrastructure for the purposes of this topic area.

A variety of benefits can be gained from the inclusion of more green open space, waterways and corridors, connecting people and spaces. All green infrastructure provision works better when they are made safe and accessible by footpaths and cycleways. Green spaces contribute to quality of place, together with buildings, urban spaces and the wider public realm. Quality of place is a key factor in attracting investment, jobs and growth to an area. It is also important in making an area an attractive place to live, work and spend leisure time. So green spaces have real economic value to the surrounding area, in addition to supporting healthy lifestyles and community-wellbeing.

The following sets out how the vision and the objectives of the Spatial Options relate to green infrastructure and how its provision relates to the mission of the County Plan

Herefordshire County Plan

A key environmental ambition of Herefordshire Council's adopted County Plan (2020-2024) is to seek to protect and enhance the county's biodiversity, value nature and uphold environmental standards, and to seek strong stewardship of the county's natural resources.

The County Plan, recognises that healthy, connected and vibrant ecosystems strongly support the local economy, improve health and wellbeing and make the county an attractive place to live and to visit. One of the success of the County Plan will be measured by people's access to green space.

Local Plan Draft Vision

The Local Plan 2021-2041 has an environmentally theme countywide vision, which states:

'*By 2041 Herefordshire will be a place where planning has helped to create an environment where all of its residents have an exceptional quality of life and are able to live and travel in a more sustainable way. In addressing the climate and ecological emergency, the county will be carbon neutral, and biodiversity here will be thriving*'.

The attractiveness of the County as a place where people want to live and work depends in part on the environment. This is affected by landscape, biodiversity and open spaces (green and blue infrastructure), as well as heritage. It is very important that these are maintained to sustain the unique character of the area and its attractiveness.

Local Plan Draft Objectives

Green infrastructure is represented in the Local Plan draft environment objective:

- *To enhance and extend Herefordshire's natural capital, green infrastructure and nature recovery networks to ensure good access and proximity to open and wild spaces for all residents.*

The objective to enhance and extend the natural capital of the county seeks to ensure all residents are able to access nearby open space. Whilst not specifically mentioned in the other social and economic objectives, the need for good environments is recognised in these sections. There is a reference to the support of good health and wellbeing through infrastructure in the community objectives. The economic objectives seek to balance economic growth with the natural environment.

National Guidance

The National Planning Policy Framework describes green infrastructure as a network of multi-functional green and blue spaces and other natural features, urban and rural, which is capable of delivering a wide range of environmental, economic, health and wellbeing benefits for nature, climate, local and wider communities and prosperity.

In national guidance there is a section dedicated to green infrastructure and it sets out the planning goals that can be achieved through green infrastructure. These goals are repeated in elsewhere therefore making green infrastructure a multitasking and important element in plan making. In respect of green infrastructure, areas such as air quality, climate change, design and healthy and safe communities all rely on the importance of green infrastructure. One of the goals identified is about 'building a strong, competitive economy'. It is noted that green infrastructure can drive economic growth and regeneration, helping to create high quality environments which are attractive to businesses and investors.

Local Considerations

As well as having intrinsic value, the environment of Herefordshire is significant in influencing the character of the county and supporting the quality of life of local communities. The landscape of Herefordshire is a complex mix of rural and urban areas, woodlands, wildlife habitats, farmland, water features and other land forms. The landscape has been altered by human activity, so many distinctive features such as field boundaries are of historical interest as well as visual and ecological merit. There is however scope to develop and enhance the county's green infrastructure through improving the diversity and connectivity of landscape and habitats.

This will be through the conservation and enhancement of natural assets including both the Wye Valley and Malvern Hills Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty; the Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Local Nature Reserves, wildlife sites; and the county's trees and woodlands.

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Public Rights of Way provide valuable footpath, cycle and bridleway routes within the urban area and out into the countryside. During the coronavirus pandemic Rights of Way have been prevalent, providing an extensive network to access and recreation within the countryside. Public Rights of Way are an important green corridor for pedestrian access encouraging both activity and more sustainable movement.

Any new development should take into account the importance of the Public Rights of Way running through the site and development should incorporate an appropriate buffer to enhance the existing Rights of Way. Given its importance to the County, it will be vital that all new developments protect existing and incorporate new green infrastructure wherever possible.

For many local communities, securing high quality green infrastructure in and around their neighbourhood is important. Parish Councils and Neighbourhood planning groups across Herefordshire have included policies for green spaces in their Neighbourhood Development Plans and these designations are known as 'Local Green Spaces'. Their designations signifies their importance to the local community and assists in their future.

Green and blue infrastructure can be addressed by developing a robust evidence base, drawing on the latest research and mapping to target green infrastructure creation and enhancements in the places where it will have the greatest impact. Natural England have recently launched their nationwide interactive mapping tool. This will help local planning authorities and developers meet requirements in the National Planning Policy Framework to consider green infrastructure in Local Plans and in new development. It can support better planning for good quality green infrastructure, and help to target the creation or improvement of it, particularly where existing provision is poorest. The mapping tool is also being developed to enable other organisations and groups such as parks and green space managers and local communities to think more about green infrastructure and plan for its creation or improvement.

Trees are a critical component of our green infrastructure, providing a wide range of benefits including support for the biodiversity. They are an essential component in providing habitat and shelter to a variety of wildlife. While offering valuable biodiversity, trees and hedgerows also characterise the landscape and contribute to the local distinctiveness of settlements and towns across the county while also providing amenity value, and improving resident's health and well-being. They are planted in both gardens and streets, they are attractive, and make an area a more desirable place to live. They also provide significant benefits which include noise reduction, shading, cooling, air quality, frame views and vistas, store carbon, and reduce stress and improve mental health. Herefordshire Council is working to deliver more trees through a variety of projects.

Evidence base

- It has been twelve years since the Green Infrastructure Strategy was drafted. Therefore a new Green Infrastructure Strategy is required to bring it up to date to the requirements of current guidelines as there are gaps particularly for health and climate change requirements. This will be commissioned shortly with the draft anticipated to be completed by autumn 2022.

- The purpose of the National Model Design Code is to provide detailed guidance on the production of design codes, guides and policies to promote successful design. They should provide a framework for creating high-quality places, with a consistent and high-quality standard of design to inform development proposals. The document is clear that development should enhance the natural as well as the built environment. The guidance on how to incorporate nature is derived from general principles but there is scope for more locally derived design codes.

Existing Policy

The current Core Strategy policy LD3 green infrastructure, protects the network of green infrastructure across the county, as well as requiring new developments to provide new green space in accordance with adopted standards. This supports national guidance which recognises the value of local access to high quality open spaces, as well as council priorities to maintain the natural environment, support wellbeing and assist in responding to our declared Climate Emergency. However there is scope to improve the policy.

- The policy is used for the larger strategic sites rather than smaller;
- There is no reference to blue infrastructure or developing a vision for a site;
- It does not seek the integration of all disciplines that are tasked with delivering green and blue infrastructure on a site;
- The policy does not currently provide an opportunity to improve areas of poor green infrastructure connectivity;
- The policy is leaning towards improving green infrastructure in housing developments but there is room for improvements in all developments;
- There is a lack of reference to trees/hedgerows and the value they can bring as part of the wider green infrastructure;
- There is still information presented for plans that do not connect with each discipline;
- A revised policy is required;
- Need to question whether there are more localised ways to better incorporate nature through design.

Green and Blue Infrastructure Policy Options

Option GI1 - Update the policy to reflect new evidence and guidance

Inclusion of a new strategic policy seeking to ensure that green infrastructure contributes to and enhances the quality of life in the county. Opportunities to achieve this include:

- Providing improvements that respect existing landscape character that will assist in attracting and retaining inward investment;
- Co-ordinating the use of green space to optimise its use for leisure, biodiversity, drainage, flood management and other socio-economic activities.

Option GI2 - Devolved policy for local areas and small scale details

This option would be additional to Option GI1, there could be locally distinctive aspects to green infrastructure that can happen on a smaller scale. There are a few ways to address these and this could be through policies set out in Neighbourhood Development Plans or guidance set out in a Design Code for a particular area. Pilot work as already begun on this and the council is working with the Woodland Trust to devise how Design Codes could be undertaken at a parish level. The cumulative benefits of small scale habitat and biodiversity improvements should be captured in developments where possible. It can lead to betterment and has potential to have significant overall beneficial effects on the natural environment.

Option GI3 - Include a new specific policy on trees and hedgerows

This option would be additional to Option GI1. There could be an additional specific trees and hedgerows policy. Trees, and hedgerows are an important part of the county's natural assets. There are parts of the county where tree canopy coverage is lacking and hedgerows need better consideration in new developments. There could be a new policy that addresses this issue and sets a net canopy target cover from trees across County. The policy could also seek to retain trees and hedgerows when development is proposed.