

## **The Approach to the Natural Environment through the Local Development Framework**

### **Summary**

1. The purpose of this report is to inform Members and ask for their comment on the proposed approach to the natural environment and Green Infrastructure in the LDF. The report sets out the overall framework in terms of the existing evidence base documents, how these link together and how they will feed into the LDF process. The approach will have broader implications in terms of the Council's approach to its wider natural environment duties.

### **Background**

2. The Council has a duty to protect and enhance the natural environment of York. The proposed approach to the natural environment through the LDF centres on Green Infrastructure which aims to bring together all the existing evidence and in some cases result in new or updated studies being undertaken in order to provide a comprehensive, robust evidence base for the LDF and Natural Environment work as a whole. This evidence base and subsequent work is important in order to ensure that York's natural environment is treated with an equal level of consideration as the existing and emerging built environment.

### **Green Infrastructure**

3. The term used for the overarching framework related to all "green" assets is "Green Infrastructure". There are a number of definitions for Green Infrastructure (GI) available, generally reflecting these three principles:
  - a) that GI involves natural and managed green areas in both urban and rural settings;
  - b) is about the strategic connection between open green areas; and
  - c) that GI should provide multiple benefits for people and wildlife.
4. Green Infrastructure is the physical environment within and between our cities, towns and villages. It is a network of multi-functional open spaces, including formal parks, gardens, woodlands, green corridors, waterways, street trees, nature reserves and open countryside. Well designed and

integrated Green Infrastructure can deliver a range of benefits, often in combination, these could include:

- opportunities for sport, recreation and access;
- improvement in environmental quality e.g. better air and water quality, local climate control;
- contribution to sustainable drainage and flood mitigation;
- enhanced environmental backdrop that will assist in attracting business and inward investment;
- opportunities to maintain and enhance biodiversity; and
- help in the establishment of local identity or sense of place.

5. The increased level of importance attached to the natural environment and in particular, Green Infrastructure is reflected in the emerging Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) which includes a Green Infrastructure policy requiring Local Authorities to address Green Infrastructure in their LDFs. The intention is to include a Green Infrastructure policy in York's Core Strategy and to produce a Green Infrastructure Strategy that will bring together all of the "green" components in York. Following an assessment of their coverage and quality, it will set out an action plan outlining the key projects and pieces of work required to maintain, enhance and, improve and extend the city's Natural Environment. The important point to note is that a Green Infrastructure Strategy is an on-going process and as things progress or change it can be updated accordingly.

6. The production of a Green Infrastructure Strategy will take place in three key stages highlighted below.

Stage 1: This will begin with a general collation of all the existing information which will be mapped using a Geographical Information System (GIS). The purpose of electronically mapping the data is to allow for the information to be updated, manipulated and used for various pieces of work.

Stage 2: The next step will be to identify where there are gaps in the existing network and to identify where the quality of assets is in need of enhancement. This would include the consideration of access for certain types of green space. In terms of biodiversity, 'gaps' would be where the lack of wildlife corridors/'stepping stones' mean that wildlife are unable to travel between areas.

Stage 3: The final action plan stage will identify the Council's objectives for the Natural Environment and will set out how they will be delivered in the future. These objectives will be derived from the evidence base such as the recommendations set out in the Open Space Study and the targets identified in the Biodiversity Action Plan.

## **Green Infrastructure Assets**

7. The section that follows identifies the main types of green infrastructure in York and the evidence base that will be used to support the production of the green infrastructure strategy. Some elements of the evidence base will also have a key role in the development of the Council's Spatial Strategy which will be delivered through the Core Strategy. Those documents which are complete are available from the author of this report. Those documents/projects which are currently underway, are referred to in the 'analysis' section at the end of this report.
8. Key Green Infrastructure assets addressed in this report are:
  - Nature Conservation Designated Sites (Biodiversity Audit, Biodiversity Action Plan and Review of Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation procedures)
  - Landscape (Landscape Appraisal, Green Belt Appraisal and Historic Landscape Characterisation)
  - Open space (PPG17 study)
  - Flood Risk Areas (Strategic Flood Risk Assessment)
  - Greenways (Public Rights of Way and Cycle Network)

## **Nature Conservation Designated Sites**

9. An key part of protecting York's wildlife heritage is by designating important nature conservation areas. York has 12 sites of national or international interest which include eight Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI's). SSSIs are the responsibility of Natural England. In addition, York has 44 sites of regional or local interest which includes 42 Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) and 3 Local Nature Reserves (some SINCs are also LNRs). These were originally designated by the Council as part of the Local Plan process and this will continue as part of the LDF. Further work is being undertaken in relation to the designation of sites (see paragraphs 10-17 below), early indications show that upwards of 50 further sites could be designated as SINCs and some existing sites could be extended.

## **Biodiversity Audit and Biodiversity Action Plan**

10. In order to designate and effectively conserve York's nature conservation sites, an up to date comprehensive evidence base is required. The Council completed a Biodiversity Audit in November 1996 which essentially is a survey of all existing sites, species and habitats of nature conservation in York, the results of the audit formed the basis for the Local Plan's policies.
11. A new Biodiversity Audit is currently being undertaken to review biodiversity across York; this will be a site-based assessment as opposed to being desk-based like the 1996 version. The audit will be carried out in two phases; Phase 1 will identify species and habitats that we are not currently aware of and will provide the basis for Phase 2 which will assess whether the sites have sufficient value to be designated as a SINC. Phase 2 will also assess whether existing SINC sites still have sufficient value to continue to be

designated. The Biodiversity Audit will provide updated baseline information on which to prioritise further action through a Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP).

12. The BAP acts as a framework for biodiversity issues within York. It is a strategic document which sets out what needs to be done to address threatened species and habitats and is designed to protect and restore biological systems. The principal elements of a BAP typically include:
  - a) preparing inventories of biological information for selected species or habitats;
  - b) assessing the conservation status of species within specified ecosystems;
  - c) creation of targets for conservation and restoration;
  - d) establishing budgets, timelines and institutional partnerships for implementing the BAP; and
  - e) a monitoring process to establish whether we are achieving the targets.
13. The first phase of the Biodiversity Audit will be completed by March 2008, with the second phase taking place over the summer, and due for completion in autumn 2008. Both stages will be reported back to the LDF Working Group in due course. The BAP is currently underway and a draft for consultation is anticipated for late summer 2008. These documents will form an important part of the LDF evidence base and will be updated as and when new sites are discovered or if the quality of existing sites changes.

#### Review of the Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) Procedures

14. The Council's criteria for the designation of Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) and the procedures used to identify and ratify such sites are no longer sufficient for present day needs. Recent changes brought about by Planning Policy Statement 9 (PPS9) on Biodiversity and Geological Conservation, new guidance from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the LDF process mean that a review of the current process is required.
15. It is proposed that the Council adopt the 'Guidelines for the Selection of Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation in North Yorkshire' as devised by North Yorkshire SINC Panel and work with the Panel in the review of thresholds and criteria. The North Yorkshire system has been developed over a period of 10 years and is based on an extensive set of threshold-based criteria prepared by local ecologists and naturalists. A report setting out the full proposal will be presented at Full Planning Committee on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2008.
16. The intention is to establish a SINC Partnership made up of members of the Council, local individuals and local organisations to put forward sites for consideration as SINCs for inclusion within the LDF. Their judgments will be based on the information on sites derived from the Biodiversity Audit.
17. The LDF is the main tool for protecting SINCs as they do not have the statutory status of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The inclusion of

SINCs in the Local Development Framework could be in the form of a Supplementary Planning Document which would then link to a Green Infrastructure policy in the Core Strategy. The benefit of this approach is that it will allow for a flexible approach where updates to the SINC database take place when new sites are discovered without altering a development plan document which could take up to three years.

### **The Landscape of York**

18. There are three key pieces of work which will provide the evidence base for considering landscape through the LDF:
- Landscape Appraisal/Character Assessment;
  - Green Belt Appraisal; and
  - North Yorkshire Historic Landscape Characterisation.

#### Landscape Appraisal

19. The Landscape Appraisal is a baseline survey and assessment of the landscape character of the City which was undertaken by external consultants, ECUS (Environmental Consultancy University of Sheffield) in 1996. The report identifies twelve landscape character types:
- Flat open arable farmland
  - Rolling diverse arable farmland
  - Low lying arable plain
  - Woodland arable lowland
  - River Derwent floodplain
  - Undulating arable farmland
  - Semi-enclosed heathland
  - Flat diverse arable farmland
  - River Ouse floodplain
  - Mixed fringe farmland
  - Race course stray
  - River Foss corridor
20. The report notes pressures for change and outlines a landscape strategy for each character type. The document provides guidance on landscape and countryside management, landscape conservation and opportunities for enhancement, and landscape design. The report was completed and approved in December 1996 and is used as evidence base to inform planning decisions and landscape related strategies. Due to the emergence of the Countryside Agency 'Landscape Character Assessment' guidance which came out in 2002, the City of York Council is currently looking at whether the existing study needs updating and have been involved in discussions with Natural England. If further work is required this will be reported to Members in due course.

## Green Belt Appraisal

21. In 2003, the Council carried out a Green Belt Appraisal which sought to identify those areas of open land outside York's built up areas that are most valuable in terms of the historic character and setting of the city. The work consisted of three main component parts; a desk top study, field analysis and data collection and analysis. The exercise identified categories of green belt type which were then mapped.
22. These categories are:
  - areas which retain, reinforce and extend the pattern of historic green wedges;
  - areas which provide an impression of a historic city situated within a rural setting;
  - the setting of villages whose traditional form, character and relationship with the surrounding agricultural landscape of which is substantially unchanged; and
  - areas which prevent the coalescence of settlements to retain their individual identity.
23. These mapped areas and associated analysis will play a key role in influencing the spatial strategy as part of the LDF Core Strategy.

## Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC)

24. A HLC project is currently being carried out for York and North Yorkshire. The project is managed jointly by City of York Council, North Yorkshire County Council, English Heritage, Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority, North York Moors National Park Authority and Tees Archaeology.
25. HLC identifies historic aspects of the current landscape, it increases understanding of past human activity and provides a basis for managing change. The primary focus of HLC is the historic character of the current landscape; the most important characteristic of landscape is its time-depth; change and earlier landscapes exist in the present landscape.
26. The approach to HLC begins with the systematic identification and description of many of the historic attributes of the contemporary rural and urban landscape. These attributes include aspects of the natural and built environment that have been shaped by human activity in the past.
27. Examples of these attributes include:
  - Current land use
  - Past land use
  - Field morphology (size, shape, group patterns)
  - Boundary types
  - Distribution and types of buildings

- Place names and earliest references
- Settlement types and patterns
- Modern OS mapping (usually GIS based)
- Comprehensive historic mapping
- Aerial photographs

28. Mapping plays a central role in historic characterisation, both in the process of defining Character Types and Areas, and in the presentation and manipulation of the results. The use of GIS, including digital historic maps, ensures flexibility and will provide detailed information about the form and nature of the present landscape.
29. Phase one of the project which covers the Yorkshire Dales National Park and Nidderdale has been completed and it is anticipated that the work covering the York area will be completed by the end of 2008.

### **Open Space, Sport and Recreation Study (PPG17 Study)**

30. As Members are aware, during November 2006 the Council appointed PMP to undertake an assessment of the City's open space, outdoor sport and outdoor recreation facilities, together with an assessment of local needs and the production of local standards. The report will outline the proposed local standards and provisions and will inform an important element of the Council's LDF and will directly inform the Core Strategy. It is proposed that the final report will be taken to the LDF working group in Spring 2008.
31. The study was undertaken in accordance with the requirements of Planning Policy Guidance Note 17 (PPG17) 'Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation', and its companion guide and therefore considers nine typologies of open space, namely:
- parks and gardens;
  - natural and semi natural open space;
  - amenity greenspace;
  - provision for children;
  - provision for teenagers;
  - outdoor sports facilities;
  - allotments and community gardens;
  - green corridors; and
  - churchyards and cemeteries;
32. The key outputs of the study will include:
- a full audit of all accessible open spaces across the City categorised according to the primary purpose of the site (in line with the typologies highlighted above). This audit is stored on a GIS layer and a linked Access database;

- an assessment of the open space, sport and recreational needs of people living, working and visiting the City of York derived from a series of consultations;
- production of local provision standards (quantity, quality and accessibility) for each type of open space where appropriate, in accordance with local needs;
- application of local standards to the existing open space provision, enabling the identification of surpluses and deficiencies based on the quantity, quality and accessibility; and
- recommendations to address the key findings and drive future policy.

33. The outputs of the study will feed directly into the Green Infrastructure Strategy in terms of the audit of open spaces being available on GIS and the identification of local standards and subsequent deficiencies.

### **Strategic Flood Risk Assessment**

34. The Strategic Flood Risk assessment (SFRA) assesses the different levels of flood risk in the York Unitary Authority area, and maps these to assist with statutory land use planning. It provides concise information on flood risk issues, which will assist in the preparation of the Local Development Framework (LDF) and in the assessment of future planning applications. It is also intended that this document may be used by the general public and those wishing to propose developments as a guide to the approach that Local Planning Authorities will follow in order to take flood risk issues into account in a sustainable manner. The SFRA has been produced in response to Planning Policy Statement (PPS25) 'Development and Flood Risk'. This document was approved for use in September 2007.

35. The mapping element of the SFRA will be used in relation to Green Infrastructure planning to illustrate the areas of land in York that should remain open to alleviate flood risk. In some cases, these open areas could have potential for biodiversity enhancement, for example through the creation of washlands or tree planting. These land use changes could have a biodiversity benefit whilst also contributing to the alleviation of flood risk.

### **Greenways**

36. Greenways are an essential Green Infrastructure asset as they potentially could connect together key open space, nature conservation sites, providing enhanced access for people and wildlife. A Greenway is a network of largely off-highway routes connecting people to facilities and open spaces in and around towns, cities and the countryside. They are for shared use by people of all abilities on foot, bike or horseback, for commuting, play or leisure. Greenways link to other networks for non-motorised users - such as the National Cycle Network, towpaths beside inland waterways, National Trails and other rights of way.'

37. The proposed Greenways network will include York's Public Rights of Way (PROW) network and Cycle Network. Both of these are currently being



reviewed but once complete, will enhance the existing network of footpaths, cycleways, and bridleways. York is working with Leeds City Region (LCR) on a sub-regional approach to greenways.

38. It should also be noted that that Greenways have the potential to be beneficial to wildlife as well as acting as essentially a transport corridor. Whilst they will connect areas of open space for pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders, they will also act as a wildlife corridor/stepping stones for species travelling from one habitat to another. These multi-functional greenways will be in addition to sites identified for wildlife corridors/stepping stones through the wider Green Infrastructure Strategy (where gaps in the network are recognised).

#### Public Rights of Way (PROW)

39. There are approximately 260km of legally recorded PROWs within the York area, the majority of which run over land owned other than by the Council. PROW in York include public footpaths and bridleways, there are currently no recorded byways open to all traffic (BOATs) or restricted byways within York. Each local authority in the country is required to produce a legally conclusive document called the definitive map and statement showing all recorded PROW in the area. The definitive map and statement is the cornerstone of all PROW work and it is crucial that it is up to date and that it is accurate.
40. York's definitive map is currently split into 3 separate areas. These consist of extracts from the definitive maps for:
  - The former West Riding of Yorkshire (relevant date of December 2000);
  - The former North Riding of Yorkshire (May 1956); and
  - The former East Riding of Yorkshire (July 1953)
41. Work is currently ongoing to bring York's definitive map and statement up to date. Both the former North and East Riding maps need to be revised and there is currently no definitive map for the former County Borough area of York (FCB) as it was excluded from the Definitive Mapping process under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. The deadline for producing a definitive map is 2026.
42. In addition there is a statutory requirement for the Council to produce a Rights of Ways Improvement Plan (ROWIP), which is intended to be a mechanism for improving York's network of PROW and other non-motorised routes in light of the needs of all types of users. It is not designed to provide detailed solutions to access problems in every locality, but to take a strategic approach to managing public access. In short the ROWIP assesses the needs of all types of users and also the current provision of access, which includes not just the PROW network but also a wide range of other types of access including, permissive routes, cycle tracks, green corridors and open access land.
43. In 2002 the Council was selected to produce an 'Exemplar' ROWIP as part of the Countryside Agency's ROWIP Demonstration Project. A draft 'Exemplar'

ROWIP was published in 2004 and the Council is currently working to deliver the objectives identified within it. It is hoped to be able to produce a final ROWIP for York by February 2009.

### York's Cycle Network

44. Cycle routes enhance the connectivity of open spaces and green infrastructure in general. The Council adopted a proposed network of both on and off-road cycle routes in 1996 and has steadily been implementing this in the intervening period. To date we have somewhere in the region of 150km of cycle routes in the administrative area of which approximately 90km are off-road. These off-road routes comprise both shared use footways alongside the carriageway and routes completely away from the carriageway and the latter form the majority of York's current Cycle network.
45. Since the proposed network was adopted York itself has changed with many new developments being built, or in the pipeline, and employment patterns altering due to closures of many of the city's traditional manufacturing sites. As a result of these changes a review will shortly be undertaken of the proposed network to assess whether it is still "fit for purpose" and whether routes need to be added or altered to better reflect current land uses and travel patterns. This review will involve consultation with ward committees, Parish Councils any other relevant stakeholders. Once all the comments and suggestions have been collated the resulting revised network will be brought before members for adoption. This process should take approximately six months to complete so is likely to be completed by autumn 2008.
46. In addition to the local routes within York, two national cycle routes, namely Route 65 and Route 66 run through York and provide connections to the wider Sustrans National Cycle Network (NCN). The Council will look at opportunities in the future to provide further linkages to the NCN.

### **Consultation**

47. Ongoing internal officer discussions are taking place to ensure that the most up to date information in relation to existing and emerging studies feed into the Green Infrastructure Strategy.
48. Natural England continue to be involved in discussions in relation to the Landscape Appraisal and general Green Infrastructure Work. They also take an active role in the consultation process of the LDF which links in with this report.
49. Sport England have been involved in the wider LDF process in relation to the approach to open space taken through the LDF. Additionally, they were consulted on the PPG17 study and are very supportive of the work we have undertaken to comprehensively map and analyses open space within the city of York.
50. The Historic Landscape Characterisation work which is being undertaken jointly with other organisations, including North Yorkshire County Council, has

meant that external discussions have been held in relation to York's approach to landscape assessment and the LDF process.

### **Options**

51. Members have the following options to consider in relation to the Approach to the Natural Environment:

Option 1: To accept the proposed approach to the natural environment subject to any comments or changes recommended by the Working Group; or

Option 2: To request that further work is done to develop an alternative approach to the natural environment.

### **Analysis**

52. An up to date, robust evidence base for the natural environment is important for the LDF process in order to ensure that York's natural environment is treated with an equal level of consideration as the existing and emerging built environment.
53. This report outlines all the key pieces of work that the Council is currently undertaking and as mentioned previously, these will be brought together under the proposed Green Infrastructure Strategy.
54. It is envisaged that the Green Infrastructure Strategy will be adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) which will link to a Core Strategy policy either in the environment section or the wider spatial strategy. This approach will allow for the flexibility that is needed for this ever-changing area of work.
55. Habitats and species identified through the Biodiversity Audit which would be listed within the initial section of the Strategy could be updated when required and the SPD revised within a short period of time. Similarly, the actions derived from the Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) would sit within the overall Green Infrastructure action plan and again, as the BAP is monitored and reviewed and as targets are achieved, the Green Infrastructure action plan can be reviewed accordingly.
56. The Landscape Appraisal, Green Belt Appraisal, Historic Landscape Characterisation work, Strategic Flood Risk Assessment and PPG17 Study are key evidence base documents as their content will feed directly into the Green Infrastructure Strategy as well as other LDF documents.
57. The PROW Definitive Map and Cycle Network, once complete will be adopted Council documents and will feed in future LDF work.

## **Corporate Priorities**

58. The proposed approach to the Natural Environment accords with the following corporate priorities:
- Reduce the environmental impact of council activities and encourage, empower and promote others to do the same
  - Improve the actual and perceived condition and appearance of the city's streets, housing estates and publicly accessible spaces
  - Improve the health and lifestyles of people who live in York, in particular among groups whose level of health are the poorest

## **Implications**

59. The following implications have been assessed:

- Financial - None
- Human Resources (HR) - None
- Equalities - None
- Legal - None
- Crime and Disorder - None
- Information Technology (IT) - None
- Property – None
- Other - None

## **Risk Management**

60. In compliance with the Council's risk management strategy, there are no risks associated with the recommendations of this report.

## **Recommendations**

61. It is recommended that Members:

i) Note the proposed approach to the natural environment in terms of the LDF highlighted in the report and provide comments and views.

Reason: So that the natural environment evidence base work for the LDF can be progressed.

## Contact Details

Author:  
Rebecca Marcus  
Development Officer  
Forward Planning  
City Development  
City Strategy  
01904 551482

Chief Officer Responsible for the report:  
Bill Woolley  
Director of City Strategy  
City Strategy  
01904 55 1330

Report  
Approved

Date

Specialist Implications Officer: None  
Wards Affected:

All

For further information please contact the author of the report

## Background Papers:

Biodiversity Audit (CYC, 1996)  
York Landscape Appraisal (ECUS, 1996)  
Green Belt Appraisal (CYC, 2003)  
Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (CYC Engineering Consultancy, 2007)

## Annexes:

None