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Report of	Assistant Director Environment	Author	Rosa Tanfield Group Manager, Neighbourhood Services
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Title	Colchester Landscape, Nature and Waterways Strategy development proposal		
Wards affected	All Wards		

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The current Parks and Open Space Strategy was launched in 2008, and the Council's Green Infrastructure Strategy was launched in 2011. Since then, how residents, visitors and the public use, view and engage with the spaces, and the ambitions of the Council have changed. The timing is right to review and implement a new strategy, using learning from the Woodland and Biodiversity Project, and ahead of a new in-house grounds maintenance service.
- 1.2 It is proposed that the Policy Panel oversee the development of a new Landscape, Nature and Waterways Strategy which will set the direction for numerous activities and developments covering all aspects of open space and all areas of the borough, including rivers, lakes, and coastline. This, having a direct contribution to the social, environmental, and economic outcomes for the Borough.
- 1.3 It is proposed that a new strategy is developed with the Policy Panel working alongside officers and the Portfolio Holder to develop this piece of work.
- 1.4 A pilot project has been undertaken to trial a new approach to strategy development in collaboration with the University of Essex – Participatory Governance and Budgeting. This could form the basis of the strategy development, depending on the outcome and assessment.

2. Recommended Decision

- 2.1 To agree to undertake work to develop a new strategy through a series of workshops.

3. Reason for Recommended Decision

- 3.1 The Council has the opportunity to undertake a considered review and develop a new strategy for Colchester to guide future decision making ahead of changes that could impact on service delivery in the future.

4. Alternative Options

- 4.1 If no review is undertaken, the service delivery continues under the existing vision and strategy which moving forward will not be fit for purpose as it will no longer align to the

ambitions of the Council, or the use, views and needs of communities and users. This could potentially limit the ability for successful service delivery in the future and impact on income to the Council.

5. Background information

- 5.1 The Council previously developed a Green Infrastructure Strategy in 2011. However, this is now dated and requires review as the Borough has changed significantly over the last decade. The current Parks and Open Space Strategy is dated 2008 and therefore is out of line with the Council's current aims and objectives, nor is it aligned to how residents, visitors and the public use, view and engage with spaces now.
- 5.2 The Council is undertaking good work in managing its landscapes, open spaces and waterways demonstrated through its awards and Green Flag accreditation for its parks and public open spaces. But with changes to the Council's ambitions around biodiversity, following learning from the award nominated Woodland and Biodiversity Project, now in its fourth year of a five year project, there has been much learnt, and with the recent decision to bring in-house the grounds maintenance service in October 2026, and coupled with the recently launched Essex Climate Focus Area via the Essex Climate Action Commission, the timing is right to review and set in place a new Strategy.

Proposed approach

- 5.3 It is proposed that a strategy is developed that will better align to the wants, needs and ambitions of all, drawing on engagement from the public and across the organisation. It also provides the opportunity to draw into the strategy a focus on our waterways (rivers and coastline) as well as how these assets can support the climate emergency response. This will be an important piece of work that will set the strategic direction for numerous activities and developments, will be broad ranging (covering all aspects of open space and all areas of the borough, including rivers, lakes, and coastline), as well as integrating with policies and strategies such as sports and planning.
- 5.4 Whilst yet to be developed a new strategy will need to:
- Identify and provide an assessment of the assets and infrastructure network.
 - Set out the key drivers and 'needs' for landscape, nature and waterways in the borough.
 - Identify areas of deficiency in terms of quality, value, and accessibility.
 - Identify priority areas and areas of opportunity. To include improvements to existing assets and new assets; and
 - Set out mechanisms for delivery. To include priority projects, actions and partnership working.
- 5.5 The strategy will need to carefully consider the following:
- People and place (Social benefits)
 - Management of the environment (Environmental benefits)
 - A resilient economy (Economic benefits)
- 5.6 It is proposed that the Policy Panel will lead the development of the new strategy working with the Portfolio Holder and officers. In order to do this effectively and to the right level of detail a number of workshops are proposed in addition to the Panels current work programme. The workshops will vary between 1 and 3 hours long. Sessions will focus on particular topics and agreed outcomes. Site visits, case studies, and other data and insight will help inform the members of the group.

- 5.7 An update on the progress of the strategy development will be provided at each Environment and Sustainability Panel, until such time as the strategy has been fully drafted. Due to depth and complexity of this project work, it is expected that the programme will be approximately 18 months long.

First stage

- 5.8 As a first stage in developing the new Strategy, the Council has been working in partnership with Essex Business School (EBS) on a pilot project focusing on the River Colne, funded by the University of Essex's Priority Challenges Fund. The pilot project aimed both to make use of participatory governance mechanisms and to investigate possibilities for developing a participatory governance framework for the future development and eventual implementation of the strategy.
- 5.9 Workshops were held with approximately thirty stakeholders from a wide variety of organisations between 27th June and 5th July 2022. The aims in holding the workshops were:
- 1) **To identify priority areas for the River Colne relating to the new strategy.** As this is being developed under the strategic themes of 'Tackling the climate emergency and leading sustainability' and 'Creating safe, healthy, and active communities,' this included deliberations on a variety of social, environmental, and economic challenges and needs along the upper, mid, and lower sections of the river.
 - 2) **To identify mechanisms by which the strategy could be developed with the active participation of a wide variety of stakeholders i.e., local groups, community organisations, businesses, environment and ecological expertise, and agencies alongside the Council.** Participants considered how we could move beyond more familiar forms of consultation to thinking about co-creating a strategy.
- 5.10 Feedback from the workshop participants has been good and a draft report is now being finalised before sharing. The Panel will receive a full briefing on this work and use this to help inform the next steps of the development of the strategy.

6. Environmental and Sustainability Implications

- 6.1 Landscape, nature and waterways have a direct impact on the environment, and it is clearly set out that there should be positive outcomes for the environment and sustainability. This is driven through the Council's own ambitions. This will be further explored as the programme of development takes place, but could include supporting resilient ecosystems and biodiversity, mitigating and adapting the natural and built environment to climate change, conserving and enhancing a legible network of physical green spaces, improving and better-connecting ecological networks, delivering net gains in biodiversity and ecosystem services, developing greater resilience to climate change, delivering sustainable water management: help reduce flood risk, manage drought, improve water quality, and improve connectivity to reduce the loss and quality of aquatic habitats and wildlife, enhancing the stewardship of existing assets to increase its benefits and outcomes for people, places, and nature, and enabling the delivery of more green infrastructure in accordance with best practice.

7. Financial implications

- 7.1 Transformation funding has been allocated to support this piece of work, the allocation of which will be closely monitored and reviewed to ensure no over-spend.
- 7.2 Consideration will be given to the impact of a new strategy on operational budgets.
- 7.3 Consideration will also be given to the wider impact and benefit of natural assets on the local economy. This could include the development of partnership and or applications for external grant funding, creating attractive areas for investment, supporting the environmental resilience of economic sites, promoting economic growth, employment and skills improvement, supporting local businesses, tourism and visitor destinations, and responding to growth of the borough. This will be further explored as the programme of development takes place.

8. Publicity Considerations

- 8.1 It is proposed that the strategy will be developed through the workshops proposed above. If deemed appropriate and following a review of the pilot project, Participatory Governance and Participatory Budgeting may be used to develop the strategy. A programme and other information will be published.

9. Strategic Plan References

- 9.1 This project work is directly aligned to the Council's strategic priorities of *Tackling the climate challenge and leading sustainability* (in particular, responding to the climate emergency, see Section 6.), and *Creating safe, health and active communities* (in particular, building on community strengths and assets). It is hoped that the strategy will look to consider or address aspects such as creating an environment and the conditions to support community led action, improving mental and physical health, and the cohesion of local communities, promoting healthy behaviour e.g., encouraging physical activity and active travel, improving social contacts and giving people a sense of familiarity and belonging, supporting the development of skills and capabilities, providing opportunities for people to connect with the landscape and nature, addressing inequalities in provision of open space, assets are an essential infrastructure in place-making and in associated planning and land use decisions, maintaining and enhancing cultural heritage, landscapes, and natural resources, and creating and maintaining sustainable places.

10. Equality, Diversity and Human Rights implications

- 10.1 This report sets out proposals for an approach to developing a new strategy. It does not propose or set out to make any service changes at this stage and to that extent it does not impact on the promotion of equality and overcome discrimination in relation to gender, gender reassignment, disability, sexual orientation, religion or belief, age, and race/ethnicity. However, any proposed changes through the development of the strategy will give proper consideration to equality, diversity, and human right implications.

11. Health, Wellbeing and Community Safety Implications

- 11.1 It is clearly set out in the proposed objectives that there should be outcomes for communities (see Section 9). This will be further explored as the programme of development takes place. Any proposed changes through the development of the

strategy will give proper consideration to health, wellbeing, and community safety implications.

12. Health and Safety Implications

- 12.1 It is clearly set out in the proposed objectives that there should be outcomes with health and safety. This will be further explored as the programme of development takes place. Any proposed changes through the development of the strategy will give proper consideration to health and safety implications.

13. Risk Management Implications

- 13.1 There are no implications at this stage, but as the development of the strategy takes place, proper consideration and reporting of risk management will be made.