

**Agenda Item No:** 10  
**Report To:** Full Council  
**Date of Meeting:** 27<sup>th</sup> April 2023  
**Report Title:** Greater Ashford Borough Environment and Land Mapping Commission – Final report  
**Report Author:** Tracey Kerly  
**Job Title:** Chief Executive  
**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr. Gerry Clarkson  
**Portfolio Holder for:** Executive Leader of the Council



**Summary:** This report summarises the final report of the Greater Ashford Borough Environment and Land Mapping Commission and sets out a response to the recommendations and next steps.

**Recommendations:** **The Full Council is recommended to:-**

- I. Receive the Commission’s Report and express the Council’s thanks and appreciation to the Commission for its work;**
- II. Endorse the headline principles behind Recommendations 1-3 of the Commission’s Report, as expressed in paras. 13, 20 and 30 of this report;**
- III. Note Recommendations 4 and 5 of the Commission’s Report; and**
- IV. Advise the Cabinet to take into account and explore, as part of its work on the Review of the Ashford Local Plan 2030, the Next Steps recommended by the Commission.**

**Policy Overview:** The Ashford Local Plan 2030 is the Council’s current Local Plan, and together with the Chilmington Green AAP and Neighbourhood Plans, is the main part of the statutory development plan for the Borough. This statutory position is unchanged by the Commission’s Report, which looks forward into the future. Part of the Greater Ashford Borough Environment and Land Mapping Commission’s remit was to explore the ongoing changes to the Government’s wider planning reforms; and to make a series of recommendations to the Council regarding issues which may become future policy areas.

**Financial Implications:** None at this time. Any resource implications of the mapping or other work recommended by the Commission will be considered at the time they are progressed further, as appropriate.

<b>Legal Implications:</b> <i>Text agreed by Principal Solicitor – Strategic Development on 18 April 2023</i>	The Commission’s Final Report and recommendations in themselves are neither material considerations in planning decision-making nor planning policies; they do not alter the statutory status of the Ashford Local Plan 2030 and other adopted policy documents such as Neighbourhood Plans. However, they may be picked up and progressed as part of the Local Plan Review process in the future, as appropriate.
<b>Equalities Impact Assessment:</b>	Not required.
<b>Data Protection Impact Assessment:</b>	Not Applicable.
<b>Risk Assessment (Risk Appetite Statement):</b>	None, in view of the Legal Implications explained above.
<b>Sustainability Implications:</b>	<p>The involvement in the Commission of respected practitioners, some of whom sit outside the planning system, have provided a useful and alternative perspective on a series of sustainability issues. This has greatly expanded the Council’s knowledge which shall serve us well in the future.</p> <p>Indeed, the Leader of the Council recently had discussions with the Leader of the County Council about the Commission, including the outputs generated and the process followed. There was strong agreement, between the two organisations, of the value of this wider exercise and a desire to perhaps look beyond just Ashford and across the county for other, similar, opportunities in the future.</p>
<b>Other Material Implications:</b>	None.
<b>Exempt from Publication:</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>Background Papers:</b>	The Land Commission Report – appended.
<b>Contact:</b>	Tracey Kerly <a href="mailto:tracey.kerly@ashford.gov.uk">tracey.kerly@ashford.gov.uk</a>

## Report Title: Greater Ashford Borough Environment and Land Mapping Commission – Final report

### Introduction and Background

1. In the autumn of 2021, the Executive Leader of Ashford Borough Council, established a Greater Ashford Borough Environment and Land Mapping Commission. The stated purposes of the Commission are outlined in the Forward of the Final Commission Report (December 2022), which is appended to this Report.
2. The Commission has proved to be a highly innovative and constructive way of looking at various issues facing the borough (past and future), without being solely 'bound' by the planning system, which is sometimes seen as a limiting factor. Twelve experts across a range of disciplines were selected to take part, who gave their unique insights and expertise as part of the Commission's work.
3. Although not solely bound by the planning system, the work of the Commission was clearly cognisant of it, and aware that much of the change that happens over time has been, and will be, shaped by planning. Indeed, the early work of the Commission was focused on the issue of 'zoning', reflecting the then clear Government intention to fundamentally shift elements of the planning system. This intention is now less certain, but provided an important backdrop for much of the Commission's work.
4. To summarise, the Commission identified the following key recommendations:
  - Recommendation 1 - to establish the Ashford Space for Nature Plan – This recommendation is for Ashford to have a Policy, a Map and an Action Plan for locations/sites in the Borough prioritised for Nature;
  - Recommendation 2 - mapping should be developed to be a more accessible tool, as it can then be applied to explain and illustrate the natural and built environment together, in support of whatever policies and projects emerge.
  - Recommendation 3 - water should be a key consideration in shaping the way that we want to see development emerging in the Borough.
  - Recommendation 4 – recommendations of principle - these are largely suggestions which can be set by the Council through future planning policies (if appropriate), or through advisory guidance.
  - Recommendation 5 – strategic recommendations - these relate more to Government Policy and other external stakeholders who may work in partnership with ABC to achieve common objectives.

5. The remainder of this report responds to the Land Commission Report by identifying the broad elements which the Council can:
  - ‘endorse’, in that the issues are relevant in the borough, are something the Council can actively respond to, and are likely to form work areas of a future Local Plan or where new planning guidance might be produced in the interim, or
  - ‘note’, in that the issue is recognised as being relevant or important, but will require partnership working to address on account of the Council not being able to be the lead body, or that the issue is not of a scale that can be addressed locally and requires more national bodies to intervene and action.

## **Responding to the Commission’s Final Report**

### Section 1 - Recommendation 1 – To Establish the Ashford Space for Nature Plan

6. It is heartening that the Commissioners acknowledge and support the significant work the Council have achieved in recent years when it comes to prioritising nature, utilising the borough’s natural assets and building upon the opportunities within the borough, which has the largest land mass of any district in the county.
7. This includes utilising the boroughs two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs), numerous Nature Reserves and Sites of Specific Scientific Interest, large areas of ancient woodland and the Public Rights of Ways which dissect and connect many important areas. Specific recognition is also given to the Ashford Green Corridor – an integral part of the Borough’s planning strategy since 1994.
8. The Commission are now recommending that the Council seek to create an ‘Ashford Space for Nature Plan’ which can build upon these successes yet further.
9. Such a plan would be supported by evidence and provide an opportunity to further the Council’s understanding of the huge diversity of landscape within the borough. It would also help to establish new ways of thinking about landscape in a more holistic way, such as reversing a decline in biodiversity, focussing more on specific climate change goals, recognising strategic water based issues across the borough, and ensuring that new ‘open’ spaces (green or blue) are multifunctional wherever possible.
10. This broad intention for a Nature Plan should be supported by the Council. It is clearly consistent with our Corporate Plan (2022-24) aspirations for Ashford to be a ‘green pioneer’ as one of its three priority themes, which seeks to target carbon neutrality, increase biodiversity; and reduce waste.
11. As part of this wider aspiration, the Council recently published new Climate Change Guidance which sets out the Council’s expectations of developers for new residential dwellings. Also, the Council is already preparing for the additional requirements of nutrient neutrality, and biodiversity net gain that is

being introduced by the Environment Act, and is exploring how to achieve targets for restoring nature, cleaning up our water and tackling air pollution.

12. It is clear that any new Local Plan will need to include policies that relate to the wider 'green' agenda, albeit balancing these issues with a requirement for sustainable levels of new housing and employment growth, along with infrastructure etc. An Ashford Space for Nature Plan, can assist in this regard. The scope of any Plan will need to be formed by evidence, and shaped by the new Council and Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group as part of the Local Plan review work.
13. **The Council are asked to 'endorse' the Commissioner's Recommendation 1 that an Ashford Space for Nature Plan is established, the scope of which is to be determined as part of the next iteration of the Local Plan.**

#### Section 2 – Recommendation 2 - Mapping

14. The Commissioners rightly acknowledge that the Council already use mapping software, and it is seen as an 'important tool', with many environmental constraints already 'easily accessible'. This is welcomed. However, the Commissioner's clear intention is that mapping becomes a far more comprehensive, integrated and dynamic tool – one which can be used to actually 'identify and articulate opportunities' for Ashford Borough.
15. In particular, the Commission's report suggests that in the future mapping should:
  - Be 'developed as a more accessible tool' by extending the Council's recent internal GIS upgrade to external users of the service, including residents and businesses, to enable a better customer experience of mapping when using it to engage with Ashford Borough Council.
  - Interact better with other systems by going beyond existing constraints mapping and working in partnership with other map and data custodians, 'drawing together data sets from multiple sources, to produce live up-to-date, intuitive, easy-to-access maps'; that improve project efficiency.
  - Build a complete picture by drawing together and integrating mapping layers in a single viewing location that help strategies and/or initiatives 'come to life when seen as a mapping project'. The creation of these visualisations will raise the profile of the borough's existing and planned built and natural environments, allowing 'focus on areas needing attention or support'.
16. Clearly, these are sound aspirations, resources permitting. Some of the desired inter-activeness is already being progressed through new software being implemented by the Planning Service. A review of how successful this has been shall be needed once that system is in place and has had time to 'bed in'. This is something that the next Council and Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group may wish to consider at the appropriate point.

17. Improving digitisation is supported by the Council and is being implemented elsewhere, as part of wider customer service improvements across the board.
18. The next iteration of the Local Plan will no doubt be required to be more 'digital' and 'accessible'. Indeed, the Government are still suggesting in their 'Planning for the Future' White Paper (August 2020) that the system should be as streamlined and modernised as possible - including through the digital transformation of local plans. Accordingly, this recommendation is one that the Council should support.
19. However, it needs to be recognised that the ability to achieve the 'full functionality' as suggested by the Commissioners, will require the requisite resources to be in place to obtain and use any new mapping software. Also, not all mapping is owned or the responsibility of the Council which could limit the functionality.
20. **The Council are asked to 'endorse' the Commissioner's Recommendation 2 that 'mapping' tools are maximised in the future, providing they are fit for purpose, and that there are suitable resources available.**

#### Section 3 – Recommendation 3 - Water

21. The Commission acknowledge that these recommendations are 'within' the terms of reference of the Commission, but many actions will require leadership by others, including the Government, various water companies and the water regulators.
22. The Commission understandably highlight a number of relevant strategic water issues that are prevalent in the borough. These include the desire to make the water network healthier, the need to protect the River Stour as a sensitive and fragile environment as one of only a few chalk streams in the world, and to continue to manage and mitigate flood risk.
23. The issue of Phosphate and Nitrate eutrophication within the River Stour Catchment was also specifically highlighted, with a clear desire from the Commission to maximise Water Treatment efficiencies as the primary means to overcome this issue.
24. The overarching recommendation from the Commission is a request for all the water issues to be treated in a far more holistic way, with all key stakeholders engaged in dialogue so that they can understand how the issue impacts others, in order to move forward and find common objectives.
25. The Council should note, and support this broad aspiration.
26. Whilst how to deal with, and respond to important water issues have long been an integral part of the Council's strategy, it is clear that further co-ordination is needed moving forward, particularly as the borough lies in an area of 'water stress'.

27. This need is even more acute when looking at the 'nutrient neutrality' issue. It is well documented that the Council are actively pursuing new strategic wetlands in the borough. These wetlands will in fact precede, but complement, the planned upgrades to the relevant Waste Water Treatment Works in the catchment. Such land based, natural, solutions are favoured, in principle, by the two key environmental Government organisations in the Environment Agency (EA) and Natural England (NE).
28. Nationally, the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill (LURB) directly addresses issues of nutrient pollution and sewage disposal within sensitive catchment areas. Additionally, Goal 3 (Clean and Plentiful Water) of the Government's Environmental Improvement Plan (2023), acknowledges the importance of water to health and wellbeing, biodiversity, and the economy; and sets out key policies to be able to meet the water targets designed to alleviate the stress that the water system is currently under.
29. The Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group will have an important role to play as part of the new Council in the future review of the Ashford Local Plan, which will need to make sure that these water pressures are addressed and may well need specific and bespoke new policies.
30. **The Council are recommend to 'endorse' the Commissioner's recommendation 3 that water issues are dealt with in a more strategic, holistic, and co-ordinated way, wherever possible. In doing so, it is acknowledged that many of the actions shall be led by other agencies and/or sit outside the scope of solely the planning system.**

Section 4 and 5 – 'Recommendations of Principle' and 'Strategic Recommendations'

31. Although acknowledged by the Commission as being 'beyond' the original Terms of Reference, a number of general principles for guiding new development are suggested under Recommendation 4.
32. The report notes that these are directions that can be set by ABC through future planning policy, advisory notices, or by embedding into contracting through procurement processes, all of which could feed into a Local Plan and/or a Corporate Plan.
33. Recommendation 5 focuses on suggestions beyond the original Terms of Reference, and suggests Ashford Borough Council is invited to seek wider agreement with partners, and promote pilot schemes, to explore the potential benefits further on a range of issues.
34. Given the context and scope of these recommendations, it is suggested that they are 'noted' by the Council at this time. Clearly, should the new Council want to revisit any of these suggestions it can do so. It may well be the case that some of these issues do form new policy areas for a new Local Plan. However, that would be for the Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group to determine in due course as part of that process.
35. **The Council are recommended to 'note' the Commissioner's broad recommendations under Section 4 and Section 5 of their Report.**

36. The Commission Report concludes with a number of Next Steps which are useful 'signposts' for how some of the recommendations might be dealt with by the Council in the future and also reiterate some of the recommendations that form part of the earlier sections (covered above).
37. This section does introduce the desire for the Council to produce an 'Implementation Plan' which will detail how the recommendations of the Commission Report could be implemented, and also mentions whether an external stakeholder group, such as the Commission may play a role in the future.
38. This desire should be **noted** by the Council. In part, this report forms the early stages of what could be termed an 'Implementation Plan'. However, it shall be up to the newly-elected Council and Local Plan and Planning Policy Task Group to explore and determine the exact arrangements of how a number of the recommendations are actioned, including what role any external group might have.

## **Equalities Impact Assessment**

39. Not required at this time in view of the nature of the Recommendations. This will be addressed as and when the recommendations of the Land Commission are taken into consideration, such as if they form part of a new Local Plan.

## **Consultation Planned or Undertaken**

40. The Land Commission Report sets out in some detail the consultation that was undertaken at Appendix 2 of the main report.
41. In brief, a consultation was run with all Parish/Town and Local Councils and Community Forums in the Borough, in the form of a questionnaire; as well as Members of the Commission, speaking with the organisations they represent, including businesses via the Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce and developers via the Kent Housing & Development Group. The FE College was also consulted, to gauge the views of some young people, by a guided discussion, using a discussion guide based on the questionnaire.
42. It should be noted that the Commissioners themselves determined the level and extent of any consultation. The Council did not undertake any consultation itself.

## **Reasons for Recommendations**

43. The purpose of this report is to publicise the Final Report of the Commission and give clarity to the Commissioners and the public around the outputs of the Land Commission and how the Council might seek to move forward with the issues raised.



## **Conclusion**

44. The Greater Ashford Borough Environment and Land Mapping Commission has produced a highly useful report, illustrating the value of engaging diverse experts and getting a different perspective. This has been particularly useful recently, as the planning system has been going through a fundamental review.

## **Comment from the Leader**

*‘The Greater Ashford Borough Environment and Land Mapping Commission exercise has been a huge success and shows the many benefits of engagement with expert practitioners from varied backgrounds. The Commission’s outputs have been carefully and fully considered. This report reflects these considerations and I commend the recommendations to the Council.*

*Recent discussions between myself and the Leader of the County Council have focused on the Commission, including the process undertaken, and there was strong support to seek to action many of the outputs in a collaborative way and also explore whether such a process could work outside of the borough’.*

## **Contact and Email**

45. Tracey Kerly - [tracey.kerly@ashford.gov.uk](mailto:tracey.kerly@ashford.gov.uk)