

The Greater Ashford Borough –
Environment & Land Mapping Commission

Final Commission Report

December 2022





Commission Members:

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Noel Ovenden	Vice Chair – ABC Independent Group Leader* & Chair of Overview & Scrutiny [*NB: Both Chair & Vice Chair are 'Non-Voting' members]
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Peter Dowling	River Stour (Kent) Internal Drainage Board
Christine Drury	Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE)
Nick Fenton	Kent Housing & Development Group
Jo James	Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce
Shona Johnstone	Homes England
Sandra Norval	Southern Water
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Please note: The body of this report and its recommendations are the collective work of the members of the Greater Ashford Borough Environment & Land Mapping Commission. It should be noted that this report and its recommendations do not, at the time of publication, purport to represent the views of Ashford Borough Council or any of the organisations mentioned or their officers or office holders. December 2022



Foreword

from the Chairman, Councillor Neil Bell

As Members of Ashford Borough Council will know, the Greater Ashford Borough – Environment & Land Mapping Commission – was set up in the autumn of 2021, by Councillor Gerry D Clarkson, the Executive Leader of the Council.

The Purpose of the Commission

The creation of this Commission, covering the whole of Ashford Borough, was catalysed by a variety of issues, all coming together at a similar point in time:

- The concern about increasing pressure for greater housing growth in the Garden of England
- The need for green space to be provided, retained and maintained across the Borough in both urban and rural areas
- The need to ensure that the Borough's green space is quality space with good accessibility and connectivity
- The potential opportunities provided by COP 26 and the need to work towards zero carbon emissions by 2050
- The (then) government's commitment to protect the UK's countryside and the opportunity for the Commission to contribute to, and influence, that in the heart of the Garden of England
- Some specific concerns on different types of pollution and flooding and the risks they pose

With these issues in mind, twelve people with a wide and diverse range of skills and experience, from various agencies and bodies, both from within and from outside the Borough, were invited to join the Commission¹. Two of the twelve, as elected Members of Ashford Borough Council, fulfilled the role of Chair and Vice Chair but, to ensure the impartiality of the Commission, these two roles were designated non-voting only. Supporting the Commission members, in an advisory capacity, were two teams: the first consisting of five officers of the Council who would act as Professional/technical Advisers; the second, made up of a further four officers, would form the Secretariat to give administrative and communications support to the Commission.

With the intention that the work of the Commission would contribute to and inform the future strategy of the Council (via both the Corporate Plan and the Ashford Local Plan), it would be important to ensure the Commission was properly constituted and had a defined agenda: Terms of Reference² were adopted and a Commission Code was put in place, ensuring the appropriate standards of conduct, transparency and (where justified) confidentiality in the Commission's work were maintained. Formal Commission meetings would take place on a monthly basis, with notes of each meeting following the normal procedure of being published as part of the Council's Cabinet agenda process. Other, informal, meetings would take place as needed and would also utilise technology by meeting, where possible, on a 'virtual' basis.

The Path of the Commission

To fulfil its intended purpose, the Commission aimed to create a logical classification of all the land in the Borough, to enable appropriate housing and commercial development to take place, maximising rural access, but without adversely affecting the essential character of the Borough.

Originally intended as a 'zoning' exercise, which would allow quick and easy access to information remotely (by computer), it would also fit with the government's agenda at that time. That agenda has, however, continued to evolve – not only with reforms to the planning system but, with government changes, changes to policy too – so the Commission's work over the past fifteen months has also evolved, resulting in a 'fluid' backdrop to the Commission's work and the subsequent need for the Commission to remain flexible in its approach and its work.

The one constant, however, in the Commission's agenda, has been – and it remains – to create an important part of the evidence base to inform the next iteration of the Local Plan. That is vitally important for the future of the Borough.

The Progress of the Commission

The Commission first met in October 2021, and quickly decided that, with a large agenda in a very short time, it would divide itself into two working groups, which would provide maximum work coverage.

Working Group 1 looked at the subject of Consultation, and devised a questionnaire which was sent out to all Parish and Local Councils and Community Forums in the Borough³. Pre-consultation, all consultees were sent an initial briefing document; post-completion of the consultation, they were subsequently given the opportunity to have further discussions with the Commission, for the purposes of clarification and elucidation. Separate consultation workshops were also held with Ashford Borough businesses⁴ and with housing developers⁵; and a facilitated discussion was held with Ashford College of Further Education, in order to ascertain the views of young people within the Borough.

Working Group 2's remit was to look at mapping, by considering, examining and justifying the need for inclusion (or exclusion) of certain categories of potential mapping layers which would assist in the Local Plan process and potentially contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan⁶. Advice, and an early demonstration, was sought from an external company experienced in mapping; latterly the Council's own GIS team has been providing both information and expertise, and the Commission's recommendations made in this final report are based on the expected ability to be able to carry out those recommendations in-house. Both Working Groups have reported back to the Commission on a monthly basis and have joined together to produce this final Commission report.

The Proposals of the Commission

During the course of the Commission's work, it has become clear that some of the recommendations fall outside the original terms of reference of the Commission; they have, however, been included as they are considered to be directly relevant to development in the Borough and, indeed, to development in Kent and possibly other areas of the UK as well. The Commission's recommendations have, therefore, been divided into different categories, and it is for Ashford Borough Council to decide whether it wishes to take some or all of the proposals forward.

Much of Ashford Borough is within the Weald - an area where people are very aware of its history and its heritage, its gentle development over the centuries, its value to the people who live and work in it, and those communities' emotional attachment to it. This concept of 'place' is both very personal on an individual basis, but also to those very communities who share it as their space for living, work, education, leisure or other reasons. This should be remembered if new communities are to be established; with home-working and less-frequent commuting that becomes more important than ever.

The report is for the Council to read and digest and, the Commission hopes, to take forward some, or all, of the recommendations and proposals. One of the issues that strongly came out of the consultation was that planning is something that is "done to people", both in reality and in perception. The Commission would hope to change this by ensuring that 'environment' is woven into good, and relevant, design throughout the borough. Key 'anchors', such as identification and preservation of assets of community value, need to be recognised and labelled, and the Ashford Space for Nature Plan⁷ will be key to this. In an ideal world, housing numbers would be more controllable ... but that may be a proposal to be worked on for the future.

As Chair of the Commission, I should like to thank all Commission members and the supporting ABC officers for all their hard work over the last year. I believe that this report, and its conclusions and recommendations, contain invaluable guidance on how to progress development across the Borough of Ashford in a manner that achieves a win-win outcome for all concerned, and I commend it to the Council.

Councillor Neil Bell
Portfolio Holder - Planning & Development -
Ashford Borough Council - Commission Chairman



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Section 1

Recommendation to establish the Ashford Space for Nature Plan – Within the Terms of Reference of the Commission

This recommendation is for Ashford to have a Policy, a Map and an Action Plan for locations/sites in the Borough prioritised for Nature:

- For residents and visitors this would mean country parks, pocket parks and local green and open spaces, including village greens & natural recreation areas.
- For wildlife, some locations would be dedicated reserves to encourage/protect species-rich habitats.
- For water, sites/locations would be open water, or restored or new nature-based wetland areas, to maintain/improve river catchments of the Medway, Rother, Beult and Stour.
- Although some sites may be dedicated solely to each of these specific functions, many will be multifunctional, such as boardwalk sections of wetland sites, public access areas of wildlife reserves, and country parks that also have wildlife 'cocoon' areas within them. Some sites/locations will be open landscapes, including heathland; others will be woodland. None should be Grade 1, 2 or 3a agricultural land, unless in an essential location such as a river bank buffer area, as these need to be prioritised for food production.
- There is an insufficiently wide understanding of the huge diversity of landscape in Ashford Borough, which in turn means habitat and species diversity. We have the Downs, the Stour Valley, the Ancient Woodlands of the Weald, Isle of Oxney surrounded by the Rother Levels and Shirley Moor and the Greensand Ridge. It is also easy to forget the River Beult, much of the course of which is designated Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The section of the Stour between Wye and Fordwich is effectively a chalk stream, with water in the chalk aquifer entering the river under hydrostatic pressure just upstream of Wye.

- It is worth noting that there is already work being done, on a landscape scale, through farming clusters around Kent. One of these is the Upper Beult Farming Cluster which stretches from Orlestone Forest down to Brissenden, near Bethersden. This has recently been awarded funding under the new Natural Environment Investment Readiness Fund (NEIRF). The Upper Beult Cluster is funded by Southern Water, which has been commendably proactive. Conservation, farming support and the rest of it needs to be on a landscape scale to really make a difference.
- The precedent for the Ashford Space for Nature plan is the unique and highly successful Ashford Green Corridor Policy, Map and Action Plan: a long-established structural part of Ashford planning since 1994.
- The imperatives are Global Climate Change, reversing the decline in biodiversity, and the mental health and wellbeing benefits for people of reconnecting with nature. They are already in national policy: Net Zero targets, the 10% biodiversity net gain planning requirement, and health prescribing. Much of the detailed rationale exists in the ENV policies of the current Ashford 2030 Local Plan.
- Many sites and areas are already known and mapped as national designations: SSSI, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), Special Protection Area (SPA), and Nature Reserves; some are linear: National Trails, Public Rights of Way (PROWs). Others may be well recognised locally but not mapped or more widely appreciated. Ashford Space for Nature could itself be a new designation that might eventually be adopted nationally as well.
- Country Parks are good for the separation of public nature access, from areas of nature regeneration, where it is desirable to have only very low levels of human disturbance. Human beings, dogs and cats don't sit comfortably with conservation. Biodiversity enhancement needs space, and nature conservation initiatives must be planned at scale.

- The Commission's work suggests there is an appetite amongst Community and Parish Councils and the wider universe of the Borough, to participate in the detailed work needed to identify the sites/locations. The mapping tools are now available: digitally as layers, and point-in-time picture maps. A Strategic Space for Nature Land Availability Assessment (SSNLAA) exercise, analogous to the Strategic Housing & Employment Land Availability Assessment (SHELAA), which is already used, could be a key part of the Local Plan Evidence Base.
- ABC will already own some sites identified for the Ashford Space for Nature Plan; others will be in private ownership. Landowner buy-in and participation will be essential. Mapping, and preparing and delivering the Action Plan, will need paying for and expert support. The Kent Wildlife Trust (KWT) is a long-established ABC partner at many sites, including the Warren and Hothfield Common. New legal requirements on developers for biodiversity net gain, as

- well as nutrient neutrality requirements, may assist the funding arrangements - for example by purchases of land or credits, as well as by allocating areas within larger sites. There is a strong tradition of community engagement in the Borough, to be leveraged for the Ashford Space for Nature Plan. This could include improving access to iconic areas of water and nature, such as The Royal Military Canal. The Council may wish to establish a process, mapping support and funding, via a pilot programme, to test the viability of Ashford Space for Nature to be a Borough-wide community based plan.
- The Ashford Green Corridor was ground breaking when it was established almost 20 years ago. This could be an equally important flagship initiative. The Ashford Green Corridor has a well justified policy, and a map that is a *de facto* local designation. A similar ambition for policy, map and local designation could be set for the Ashford Space for Nature Plan.



Country parks are good for the separation of public nature access from areas of nature regeneration.

Section 2

Mapping Recommendations – Within the Terms of Reference of the Commission

Mapping is already an important tool in ABC's work on Planning and other Council functions. The Commission focused on what should be mapped and the availability of data and systems. Environmental constraints, such as landscape and wildlife designations and flood risk maps are fairly easily accessible. The issue is how to use the data sets to identify and articulate opportunities. Nationally available data is used as layers in Geographic Information Systems (GIS). ABC has an interactive GIS system, and works in close partnership with KCC, which has the Public Rights of Way online maps (PROW), and the Kent Landscape Information System (KLIS):

- ABC is upgrading its mapping software to a new dynamic GIS layer system. This will continue to be an important internal tool. It needs also to be a supported upgrade for external users, including residents and businesses, to enable a better experience of mapping when using it to engage with ABC. The next levels of mapping involve specialist software services, and can be particularly helpful when drawing together data sets from many sources, to produce intuitive, easy-to-access maps in complex situations. The Commission was shown the TMA capability, which ABC has used successfully for the trees project. It is a more expensive service but, for particular projects, is likely to be justified on project efficiency. The Commission's view is that ABC should have both the upgraded GIS software and also plan to use specialist mapping for some projects.
- The Ashford Space for Nature Plan, set out above, will come to life, when seen as a mapping project, working in partnership with communities, landowners, developers, wildlife and access organisations, using a shared mapping approach to map larger and smaller spaces for nature. This would include identifying buffer zones, spaces for community orchards, and current and future tree belts that can screen development, whilst also providing three-dimensional habitats. Mapping can also identify and help to improve the connections between spaces for nature as wildlife corridors and more vehicle-free routes for people. The Ashford Green Corridor is an

established policy and plan around Ashford Town that needs to be maintained, developed and promoted with mapping - whatever action is taken on the idea of a borough-wide Ashford Space for Nature Plan.

- Creating these visualisations will raise the profile of the Borough-wide functioning natural environment, to balance the built environment of existing and planned housing, employment and hard infrastructure sites. There are wonderful natural places across the Borough now, but they are often isolated and rarely celebrated. It will also make it more likely that the larger area needed for a Country Park in the Weald can be achieved.
- A higher profile for local and borough-wide maps of the PROW network, in partnership with KCC, would help focus on areas needing attention or support, including more control, for example, of 4 x 4 recreational abuse of parts of the PROW network. Maps are also the starting point for exploring the potential with landowners, to evolve the use of some parts of the network as safer off-road pedestrian or cycle routes.
- Mapping tools would also assist the work on river catchments, managing attenuation for flood prevention in built areas, as well as wetland attenuation possibilities for nutrient neutrality objectives. The work of the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership on the Catchment Improvement Plan could, for example, have better delivery if the work was aided by mapping. The complexity of drainage systems in many parts of the Borough could also be better understood.
- Mapping and Zones also need to be considered in the context of emerging revisions to Government direction on Planning and Levelling-Up. As this report is finalised, Investment Zones seem likely, for which it will be important that the immediate and wider environmental constraints, characteristics and opportunities are articulated through maps, whatever other policy changes are made to accelerate delivery. As the Borough has a number of larger brownfield and allocated sites, it is to be hoped that the Investment Zone criteria would favour those first.
- For all of the above reasons, and types of uses, mapping should be developed to be a more accessible tool, as it can then be applied

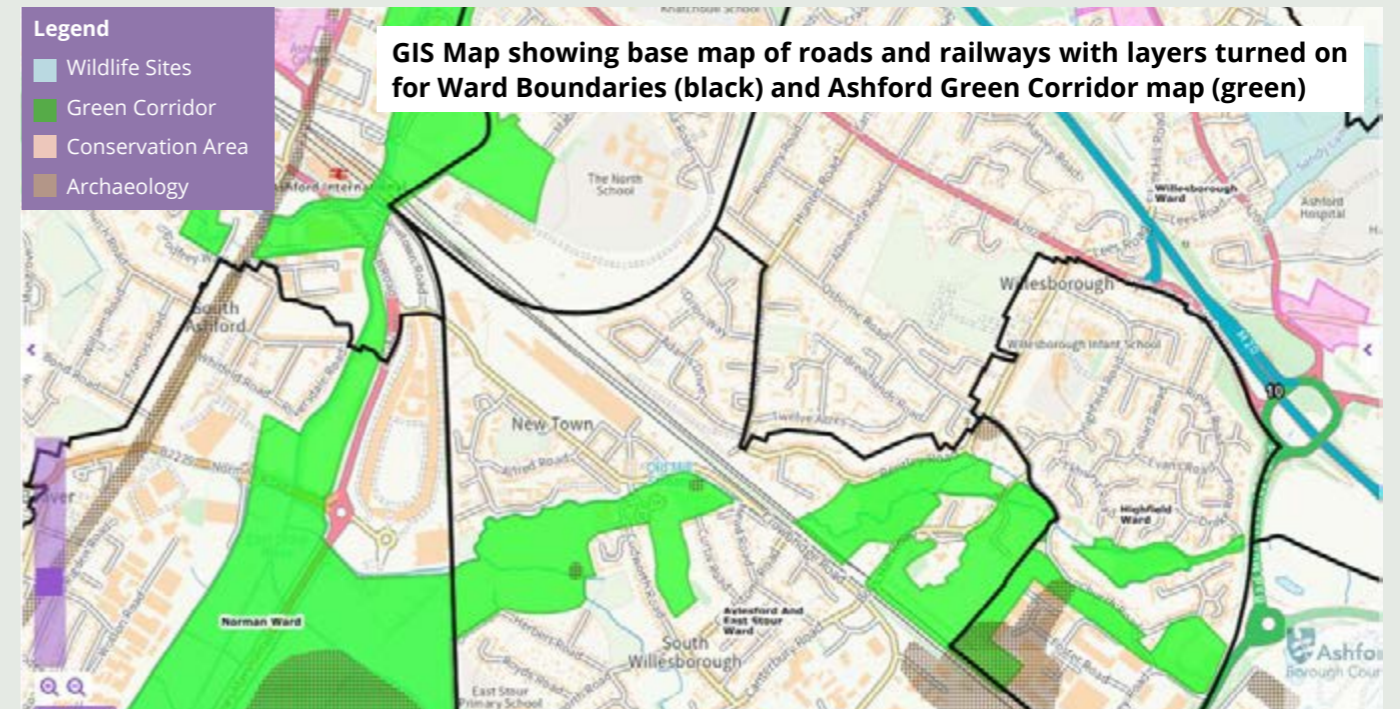
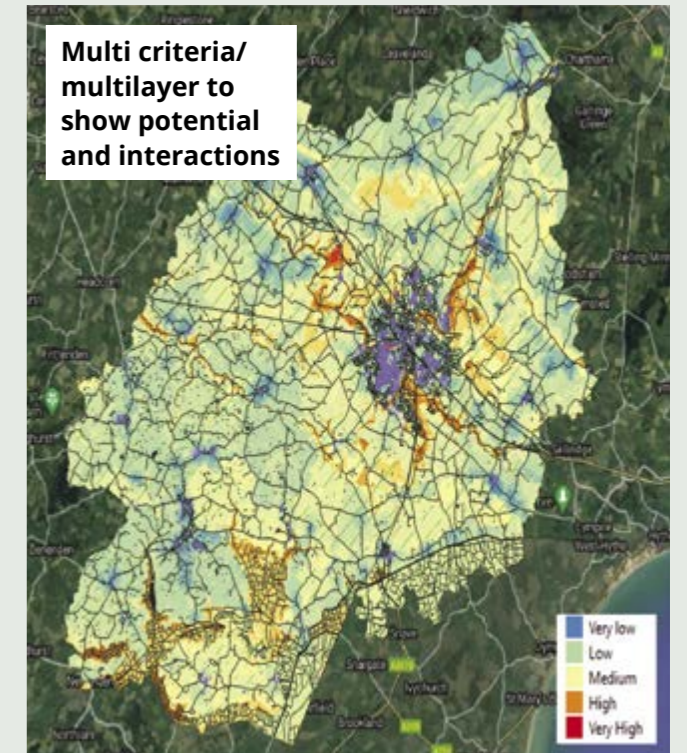


Photo credit TMA.

to explain and illustrate the natural and built environment together, in support of whatever policies and projects emerge. This means working on both aspects of mapping: what is to be mapped? – (which needs to be defined from the many options above and below); and which interactive layered system is most efficient in performance and cost?

- Moment-in-time maps, captured as picture files (pdf), will continue to be important. Two examples of these are: the current state of bus routes; and integration with other dynamic systems, such as cycling route maps or the KCC PROW maps which, for example, show areas where vegetation clearance is being done.
- The PROW network, environmental and landscape designation (SSSI; AONB etc.) and Flood Zones 2 and 3, are essential base layers, over the underlying location map of rivers, roads, railways and built areas. Topography, mitigating climate change and reversing biodiversity loss, mean visualising the Borough differently, and using map changes as a measurement tool.
- An effective GIS, publicly available online, and open-source data is the recommended starting point. The upgrade needs to be easy to access and use. Projects may need to supplement this with specialist mapping expertise, to show solutions or benefits, such as a heat map of access to Space for Nature, or to measure progress in a catchment improvement project, to enable faster delivery.



Criteria

Social and environmental factors have been considered, including;

- Woodland deprivation - Green space deprivation - Flood alleviation - Pollution filtration
- Biodiversity enhancement - Wildlife connectivity corridors - Potential of low grade farmland

Section 3

Water Recommendations –

Within the Terms of Reference of the Commission but also requiring the involvement of the Government, Southern Water, South East Water and Water Regulators - the Environment Agency and Ofwat⁸

Although these are items that relate to Government policy, the water companies and external stakeholders, they are so important for the Borough that they need to be taken as within the Terms of Reference of the Commission. ABC is already working in close partnerships, on the waste water issues and consequential effects of the Stodmarsh Nutrients problem. The Commission's work has been to look particularly at the wider environmental context, and ways of working differently, to achieve a more joined-up approach, if the regulatory barriers to doing so can also be addressed. The Commission considers there is a strong case for doing so as follows:

- Water should be a key consideration in shaping the way that we want to see development emerging in the Borough. This means further developing blue-green infrastructure which supports the water and waste-water networks on which we all depend.
- A number of quite basic things need to be done including:
 - Eliminating surface water from entering, and preventing Fats, Oils and Greases (FOG) from blocking, foul water sewers
 - Ensuring all drainage connections are going to the right place (i.e. no foul flow to surface water sewers), and misconnections are corrected.
 - Adapting soakaways and septic tanks - for example when extensions are approved - in order to maintain and improve ground water quality.
 - Considering highway runoff, to prevent pollutants from reaching watercourses including tyre wear, agricultural debris and litter. This will be assisted by more frequent road sweeping and drain clearing as well as management of green verges as blue filters.

- Working better through development: working with water and drainage undertakers, to ensure that development considers placement in relation to underground assets, proximity to treatment works (considering odour, noise, traffic such as tankers etc.), SuDS design and maintenance plans.
- There need to be more water storage facilities. For example, the Stour sometimes drops away in late summer, almost as though a plug has been taken out of a bath.

- Upskilling to understand how multi-stakeholder approaches can enable a shift from hard, engineered (grey) infrastructure, to an integrated approach, making use of nature-based solutions as well. This includes changing the way that we see green spaces, to repurpose them to slow the flow of rainwater, and design planting to help with this. This links in directly with the Ashford Space for Nature Plan.
- The present disequilibrium on water has been well aired in the Commission's work. The Stodmarsh Nutrients problem has focused minds. The health of our rivers, including the Stour as an important chalk stream, is a clear and obvious objective. There are different positions on how to achieve that objective, as the following two bullet points explain.
- The solution to Phosphate & Nitrate eutrophication should be mainly by water treatment - not wetlands. There are around 200 chalk streams in the world, most of which are in England and the Stour catchment is the most notable in Kent. It is heavily abstracted for water supply and other uses, and suffers huge damage from permitted discharge from wastewater treatment works, which also tends to raise water temperature well beyond the level required to sustain the fragile chalk stream community. Current proposals for wetlands to remove nutrients might work, or they might be the final 'nail in the coffin' for the river.

Water is a key consideration in shaping emerging developments.



The water companies say they will upgrade by 2030, but this needs to happen much faster. The engineered wetlands proposed require commitments from landowners in the order of 80 years. It is a new concept and its effectiveness and consequences must be researched meticulously before wetlands are chosen as a solution to this problem. Enhanced water treatment, on the other hand, is proven technology that just needs investment approval.

- The Kent Water Quality Group is working on a solution that will be a combination of water treatment upgrades to Technically Achievable Limits, with a wetland sites component to absorb the residual Nutrient balance. The Commission's view on this topic is that whatever the uncertainties and outcome on the wetlands component, there needs to be a broader forward funding approach to delivering the works upgrades e.g. through LEP/Section 106/ CIL etc., and not limited to Ofwat criteria only.
- The possibilities offered by Natural Flood Management (NFM), also need to be considered. For example, the Shipston Area Flood Action Group – Slow The Flow (*safag.org*) - has done a considerable amount of good work and we could learn a thing or two from them. There has for some time been a lot of talk of NFM in Ashford, which will benefit flood & drought conditions, but with frustratingly little implementation, although there has been some. A Catchment Improvement Partnership (CIP) exists, which involves many organisations & groups, and is chaired by the Kentish Stour Countryside Partnership (KSCP). This does a lot of good river restoration work and has an excellent group of volunteers. What is needed to enhance this is a mapping system which will hopefully aid delivery.

There will not be much resistance to 'slowing the flow' in the upper reaches of the catchment, but we must also promote the need for appropriate river maintenance further down the system, as a completely choked system is no good for anything and biodiversity is harmed. Appropriate channel maintenance improves our ability to evacuate extreme flood flows, but also the confidence and ability to retain water when needed.

NFM should be focused in rural areas, for the benefit of the whole catchment. SuDS should be retro-fitted in urban areas, where practicable, to help relieve the pressure on the sewer and river networks, as well as ensuring that the redevelopment of brownfield sites reduces runoff substantially, which is not always the case.

There are numerous related policies and plans related to NFM, which have taken a lot of time and hard work to put together, and we should aim to pull the most relevant together to help the many interested parties to engage. An openly available interactive map is needed, to help identify areas of most and least risk and opportunity, as this would help to steer development to the most suitable locations.

- There needs to be a 'reconnection' to the water cycle, recognising that the entire community is part of it. The water companies operate vast infrastructure to provide a service, but protecting water sources and surface and foul water drainage systems is within everyone's gift.
- There needs to be a strategic approach that can revise the *modus operandi* for the privatised utilities, through collaboration and forward funding, to enable 'Infrastructure First', linking with environmental perspectives. The requirement for a good water supply is fundamental to life, and there needs to be a strong focus on this in the light of climate change.
- There needs to be an exploration of the means of getting a more holistic approach to water, as the current system is quite fragmented and makes the sort of joined-up thinking that is necessary for housing development to work more difficult than it needs to be.



Wetlands are part of the answer to water treatment.



Permeable paving helps to avoid surface water flooding.



Section 4

Recommendations of Principle –

Beyond the Terms of Reference of the Commission, but relevant and largely do-able by Ashford Borough Council

These are directions that can be set by ABC through planning policy, advisory notices, or by embedding into contracting through procurement processes, all of which could feed into the Local Plan and the Corporate Plan:

- ABC needs to develop a plan for commercial sites, both large & small, not forgetting small rural sites in this, with the benefits that these bring to the rural economy.
- Controlling the growth of Ashford Town should be achieved by the imaginative use of buffer zones, not by a rigid 'Green Belt'. This would involve the use of green spaces in various forms: parks, buffer zones, areas of biodiversity and country parks. This will be a natural consequence of the Ashford Space for Nature Plan. Increased density, as opposed to physical expansion, should also be considered, particularly if accompanied by adequate green spaces.
- Appropriate, and often (though not always) small-scale, housing development in most villages is required, including Rural Local Needs Housing - in part to provide a supply of smaller, more modestly priced but still high-quality properties, in terms of space standards etc., to replace those considerably enlarged by extensions. Small-scale commercial development should also be encouraged, to improve rural sustainability.
- Small-scale development in villages can be a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it will add to housing numbers in villages, and put greater pressure on the infrastructure (more cars on the roads, pressure on social infrastructure, schools, GP surgeries etc.) without the necessary Developer Funding coming forward. On the other hand, it could encourage more smaller builders and potentially self-build. Small scale

development also tends to adopt a 'ribbon development' form, and may therefore spread communities out over longer distances, along existing roads. How to manage these pros and cons needs to be carefully considered.

- Overall, there should be a greater proportion, greater than the existing maximum policy of 40% of non-market housing for rent, or staircase to ownership (including ABC stock development), and a greater quantity of more modestly priced market housing is needed. This should still be built to a high-quality standard, and would enable young people to have homes and allow local people in the villages to remain in their communities.
- Housing developments need to be better designed, from their conception, with genuine consideration of their inherent purpose and setting. Even with the early intervention and advice of the Independent Design Panel, current building often appears to have had superficial design treatments at the end of the whole development process. Home-working needs to be considered, probably in many cases by dual-use spaces, but also looking at this need in particular localities.
- Scale is needed for biodiversity to work and while this can't be achieved everywhere, good linkages between smaller parcels of land will be essential.
- There should be more trees planted, as well as more trees protected and retained, as a contribution to carbon reduction and Net Zero. The right tree needs to be in the right place. Ashford Borough Council has already made an excellent start on this by planting 135,500 trees.
- Grade 1 & 2 agricultural land should be used for food production only, other than in exceptional circumstances. Grade 3 should be explicitly split into Grades 3a & 3b, with Grade 3a being used for food production only, and Grade 3b available, in some cases, for other uses, including biodiversity. The contribution that land being actively farmed makes to the character of the Borough should be a constant consideration.

- When assessing agricultural land use, it is clearly desirable to protect Grades 1, 2 and 3a land for food production, but there is a crossover, and there must be regard to emerging agricultural policy, in terms of farm income support through the Environmental Land Management System, Sustainable Farming Incentive, and the opportunities which will be available for Biodiversity Net Gain and other Nature Based Solutions.

- Twenty five years ago, Grades 1, 2 and 3a were very rarely permitted for development. The NPPF introduced the principle of Best & Most Versatile (BMV) land and protection of that has been much less rigorous. The benchmark, in recent years, has been a very grey area between land in Grades 3a and 3b: 3a being protected and 3b being considered suitable for development. Clearer definition is required, although assessment outcomes from this can never be expected to be black and white. It is also true that lower grade land often has the greatest conservation potential.

- The difficulty is where the line should be drawn between the two sub-grades. There is no doubt that the less productive end of Grade 3 is very often not worth farming, as the value of output does not cover the costs of production. Grade 3b land often also lends itself to conservation. There should be more concern about the loss of Grade 1 and Grade 2 land to development. That is the land which produces yield and, without yield, farming cannot be profitable. The loss of Grades 1, 2 and 3a land around Canterbury, Faversham and Sittingbourne is a case in point.

- Solar panels or roof tiles should be mandatory on all new buildings, subject to electrical practicality, as part of the Borough's Net Zero commitment, alongside encouragement and support of post-fit schemes throughout the Borough.

- Ground based solar should not involve significant or cumulative loss of countryside, valued landscape or agricultural land in any way, as this would materially change the character of the Borough
- To reduce flood risk, building development in areas of highest flood risk should be designed with this risk in mind. These areas are often better used for environmental enhancement.



Solar panels should be mandatory on all new buildings.



Farms can diversify by adding commercial units on site.



Small scale quality house building in rural areas is a focus.



The unique character of Tenterden must be maintained.

- ABC's very good SuDS Policy should be promoted. The use of 'open' SuDS in all new developments should be encouraged, in preference to out-of-sight, out-of-mind 'closed' underground tanks. Open SuDS, such as balancing ponds, swales and watercourses, also enhance public spaces and improve biodiversity. The retro-fitting of SuDS in previously developed areas, which currently drain unattenuated to the sewer network, should be explored. This should also include run-off from highways. The ongoing maintenance of SuDS needs to be improved.
- Ashford Town Centre needs special attention in terms of 'tidiness' and looking 'loved'. This mainly applies to the older buildings in the High Street and involves such things as repairing building fronts and facias, replacing broken tiles, masonry and paving, removing grass etc. from guttering and roof drainage channels etc.

- It is most important that the unique character of Tenterden is maintained, and protecting this must be a key consideration in any proposed developments there.
- The underlying principles of Neighbourhood Plans (NPs) should be explored, to allow communities to identify local planning priorities that can win support from the residents in referendums. Those priorities would still have to meet wider policies and Adopted Plans, but such an approach would re-establish the original local involvement intentions of NPs, whilst avoiding the substantial time and cost of extensive evidence gathering, that has become the main feature of the current system, and duplicates work already carried out at higher levels.

Section 5

Strategic Recommendations - Beyond the Terms of Reference of the Commission and requiring joint commitment of the Government and various third parties

These are items that relate to Government Policy, Local Policy and external stakeholders who may work in partnership with ABC. They will tend to require wider agreement to put them into practice, but the impetus from Ashford Borough Council to explore better ways of conducting its land planning and associated constraints, within one of the faster growing Boroughs nationally, makes it well placed to conduct pilot projects in these areas in collaboration with other stakeholders particularly KCC:

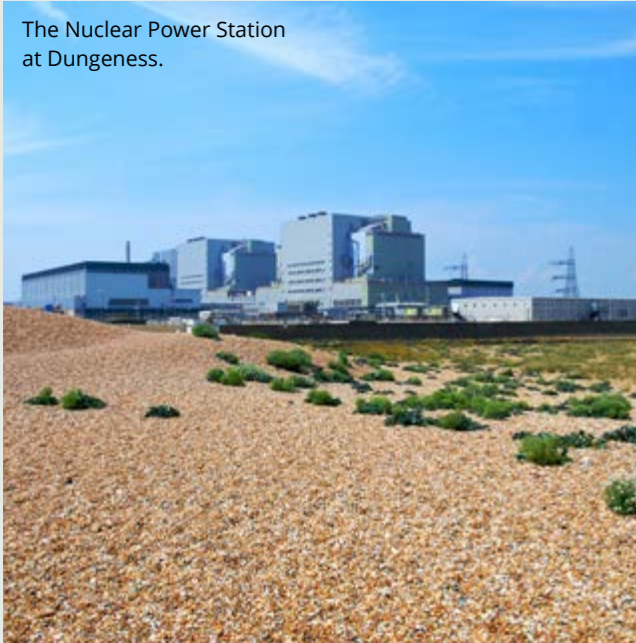
- There is a pressing need for some sort of Kent Regional Housing & Infrastructure Plan, with a replacement for the Strategic Market Housing Assessment (SHMA) Model, and more control of Kent Housing Numbers in Kent. It makes no sense that Otterpool, Lenham Heath, Chilmington Green, and other developments at this regionally significant scale, are considered in isolation from one another, especially from the point of view of infrastructure. This will be difficult under the current Local Government structure and it may be that better sub-regional

coordination could more easily be achieved, if there were greater use and visibility of other functional groups such as East Kent, Mid Kent, and West Kent, for example.

- An upgrade of the PROWs for the 21st century is needed to provide a usable network for walking, cycling and horse riding, but not usage by any motor vehicles, except emergency services. PROWs need to be fit-for-purpose. The improvement and reclassification of Public Rights of Way is fraught with difficulty, as ancient law applies, but a concerted and pragmatic effort ought to be able to remove the abuse of our PROWs by off-roaders and the like, to provide safe and attractive routes that can be enjoyed by the general public for active travel. There is great potential in the Ashford area, but a lot of recreational abuse. Permissive Rights of Way will be an important subject under the Environmental Land Management System (ELMS), which is due to replace direct subsidies based on acreage payments, and reward farmers and landowners with public money, for doing things for the public good. Support from landowners and farmers will require financial incentives and the great worry of all the new schemes is that these incentives will be unattractive.



Investment in access to the countryside for all is important.



The Nuclear Power Station at Dungeness.



Linking areas with good quality footpaths and cycle routes is desirable.



Use the bus.

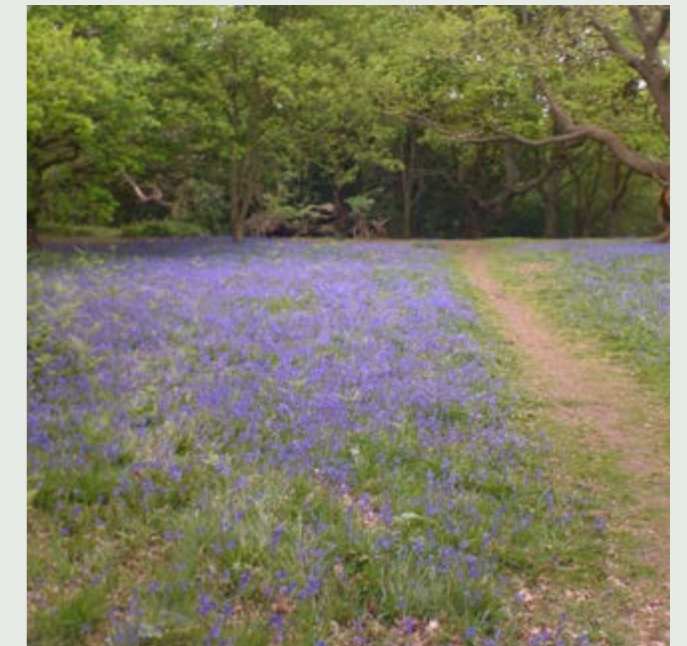


Ashford town centre needs special attention to 'look loved'.

- There needs to be a strong push for a new Nuclear Power Station at Dungeness, using the new Rolls Royce Small Modular Reactors (SMRs), which would make a major contribution to Climate Change and Net Zero, by producing a vast amount of green electricity. This could be done very quickly by putting three SMRs into Dungeness A, which is almost completely decommissioned, and this could be viewed as a pilot scheme to prove that the SMR concept works, and to iron out any teething problems. All the grid infrastructure is already there. Three more SMRs could follow at Dungeness B, once decommissioning is complete there, and all six SMRs would provide almost the same level of electricity as Dungeness B did, but at half the construction cost.
- There needs to be an infrastructure catch-up, then Infrastructure First. The level of housing development in Ashford, and in Kent generally, over recent years, has been far ahead of the infrastructure needed to support it. This will require a New Developer Contribution System, a higher level of such contributions, more money from the state and a forward funding system. This needs to be applied to all infrastructure, but to highways, water supply & treatment and power in particular.

- Water has been covered in an earlier section of this report, but electricity supply is equally important, and all the same arguments apply. At the moment, it is not possible to put in the power cables, transformers and all the necessary electricity distribution apparatus ahead of development, which does not make sense.
- If Developer Contributions increase significantly, land values will have to reduce. Landowners are used to values going up rather than down. There may well be a general re-set but, even if only for an interim period, falling land values will lead to a reduction in the supply of land. If a recession comes on, the construction industry will be needed even more as an economic driver but, of course, if lenders get nervous, there will be no buyers for houses. Land supply needs to be in the right place as, whilst there is no point in being against building *per se*, the Commission is against building inappropriately or at an inappropriate scale. To reduce the pain in the land market, landowners who are prepared to contribute to more onerous planning obligations may need tax incentives to do so. That is not something a Local Planning Authority can provide, but if the Borough can demonstrate thinking outside the box, ABC may at least be given the opportunity to carry out some sort of pilot.
- Fast broadband needs to be sorted out, with a good mobile signal everywhere, to be upgraded as requirements evolve (e.g. 4G to 5G). Ashford Borough Council has spent a long time trying to do this, and the Commission supports its aim of continuously improving broadband, to keep pace with modern requirements, both commercial and residential.

- The current model of Bus Service provision is broken. Better bus services are needed, and a new model needs devising, starting - in terms of approach - with a blank sheet of paper and with a new mindset, especially in rural areas, and not simply part of a largely user-pays economic model (i.e. starting to treat buses more like trains). The pilot Demand Responsive Transport being trialled by Stagecoach and others should be tested for the villages clustered around Tenterden. Work on evolving the 'Little and Often' model should continue in Ashford, including encouragement to "Use the Bus"
- Levelling-Up, and the opportunities it presents for Kent, and Ashford within it, needs to be considered in all of this. Ashford has been awarded £14.7m to facilitate the Newtown Works Studios. The only other district in Kent to benefit from this phase of Levelling-Up, is Thanet, who have two bids, one of which will have some impact on Ashford through the East Kent College Group.



More tree planting in selected areas is required.





Section 6

Next Steps

- In its submission to Ashford Borough Council's Full Council Meeting, the Commission asks the Council to note and consider the report, and to use or embrace recommendations to put greater focus, and place greater emphasis, on the natural environment of Ashford Borough. The Council may also wish to utilise the Commission's recommendations to vary a number of Planning & Development policies.
- The development of an Implementation Plan. This needs to detail how recommendations of the Commission could be implemented, over what timescale and how. Whether or not an external stakeholder group, such as the Commission, should continue in some form also needs to be considered. There are pros and cons to this.
- The Ashford Space for Nature Plan, Mapping Recommendations and Recommendations of Principle could be put into ABC policies and processes.
- A plan could be considered to influence and lobby external parties needed to effect Strategic Recommendations and Water Recommendations, such as KCC, the Government, the Water Companies, the Water Regulator etc. In the first instance, this could involve ABC and KCC working together at senior political level, along with the MP(s), with appropriate Officer support.

Appendix 1

Terms of Reference for the Commission

At the Commission's inception, the Terms of Reference were based on an awareness that it was not the role of the Commission to duplicate any statutory or delegated duties or responsibilities of the Council or its Committees.

The following are the Terms of Reference as agreed by the Commission in October 2021. As outlined in the Chairman's Foreword, however, ('The Path of the Commission: p4), not only government itself, but also government thinking and government policies have changed within that time frame, thereby resulting in a change of focus for the Commission and an awareness that it needed to be more flexible in its aims.

- (i) Members of the Commission will share knowledge and expertise in order to assess and strategically map the Borough of Ashford. This mapping is to both protect the most important aspects of our land mass right in the heart of the Garden of England and to explore sustainable economic and housing growth by:
 - Clearly identifying broad 'zones' within the borough on an interactive map base
 - Mapping the key environmental constraints, key characteristics and identifying the role and opportunities each zone plays within the borough
 - Giving due attention in preparing the Commission's final recommendations, for them to be presented in a balanced and well justified way so that they may be used to advise and shape the future strategy of the Council, including its continuously evolving Corporate Plan and its important Ashford Local Plan.
- (ii) The Commission will receive presentation and briefings from the professional advisers, to assist in their understanding and interface with the exiting and ongoing work of the Council on the relevant associated matters.
- (iii) The Commission will communicate and engage with local Town Council, Parishes, Community Councils and Neighbourhood Forums to inform the land mapping process.

- (iv) The Commission will record and carefully consider the evidence given both in written form and at the hearings that may be called.
- (v) In communicating with local Parish, Town, Community Councils and Neighbourhood Forums, the Commission will stress the importance of fully justifying all proposals which may be submitted by them.
- (vi) To identify broad zones that would provide a reasonable separation that avoids rural villages becoming co-joined and thus creating suburbs of central Ashford or indeed rural sprawl, which would destroy the identity and character of the rural villages.
- (vii) To identify areas that are of significant natural beauty, heritage and/or historical importance that need to be considered for stronger protection
- (viii) To identify any site or area that could provide a significant additional wetland park to add to those being sought across the Borough, especially where they flow into any part of the Borough feeding into the Great River Stour and also the River Beult Medway basin.
- (ix) When formulating their recommendations, the Commission will seek the views of their appointed professional advisers and relevant experts as deemed necessary
- (x) Commission Members will be expected to work together in a collegiate way to find pragmatic solutions to fulfil the Commission's Mission Statement
- (xi) Commission Members, Advisers and its Secretariat must be mindful of any Conflict of Interests that may arise from their work for the Commission

Appendix 2

Greater Ashford Borough - Environment & Land Mapping Commission – Working Group 1 Report to Commissioners on Consultation

Background

The aim of the Commission is to create a logical classification of all the land in the Borough, which will enable appropriate housing and commercial development to take place, and maximise rural access, but in a manner which is both sustainable and will not destroy the essential character of the Borough.

In effect, a specific Land Classification can be considered as a 'zone', with certain characteristics, and the aim is to end up with the whole of Ashford Borough broken down into such zones.

The government's planning reforms continue to evolve, alongside directly related policy issues like Levelling-Up and County Deals, and all of this represents a back drop to the work of the Commission, which is fluid, to say the least.

However, the ultimate intention - to create an important part of the Evidence Base to inform the next iteration of the Local Plan - remains, and is vitally important for the future of the Borough.

The Consultation & the Response Level

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 with members of the Commission, speaking after consulting 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.

A briefing document and the questionnaire were sent out to all consultees by email, to enable them to consider the objectives and the questions. The actual Questionnaire was completed electronically. Following the electronic receipt of the Questionnaires, all consultees were invited to attend a series of meetings with Commission Members, to expand on their views. Two took up this offer.

The exercise took place between 14th February and 4th May 2022.

42 questionnaires were sent out and 33 returned, a response rate of 79%.

The content of the questionnaire is detailed below, together with the overall responses.

Content of the Questionnaire and Responses

Q1. Do you think that when considering development, we should try and do this in a way that protects the overall character of the Borough, allowing it to remain 'rural', on a broad definition of the term?

Virtually 100% of respondents strongly agreed with this statement.

Q2. This question involves consideration of such things as the quality and uniqueness of 'views', village entrances, woodland, green corridors, cycleways or pedestrian routes, and specific types of plants and their terrain, special trees and buildings, amongst other things. Considering these factors, please describe how they apply to your area.

Not surprisingly, there was a wide range of specific responses to this question, which are picked up in the mapping suggestions in Appendix 4 of this document.

Q3. Do you think that there should be a limit to the expansion of Ashford, to enable villages to retain their individual character as settlements?

Over 90% of respondents agreed with this statement.

Q4. You will be aware of the need for more wetlands, providing short and long-term biodiversity, and to slow the rate of run-off of Phosphates & Nitrates along the Stour River valleys. What characteristics would you like to see in a wetland and are there any areas in your parish or neighbourhood that would be suitable?

• The concept of wetlands was accepted as a possible solution to some of the issues caused by polluted outfalls. Those in the Stour catchment were generally supportive but there were very mixed views as to siting. There was mention by several of using wetlands as areas for access and recreation.

• Those parishes on the Downs were less keen on the idea and generally did not comment. Those on the Rother and Beult/Medway catchments could see some merit and also had some existing concerns due to flash flooding from new developments, notably Tenterden.

• This is a topic that would be very difficult to map without further research into the areas needed and would be much better tackled by reducing the sources of the pollution.

Q5. Are there footpaths or Public Rights of Way in your neighbourhood, which might be suitable for upgrading or resurfacing, for more regular use? This could be as cycleways or pedestrian walkways, which could bring both health & climate change benefits.

• 97% of parishes felt that they have some PROWs suitable for improvement. All footpaths, bridleways and byways should be mapped.

Q6. Would you like to see provision of new dedicated surfaced routes linking communities and specifically for cycling, walking, horses, pedestrians and disabled users, not for motor vehicles?

• 87% of parishes strongly agreed with the concept of the provision of interlinking surfaced paths suitable for walkers, cyclists and equestrians (including full disabled access)

• Several of the parishes on the edge of Romney Marsh felt that there should be a continuous path along the full length of the Royal Military Canal.

Q7. Do you think that we should try and provide green spaces as 'lungs', including within the urban area, for exercise, walking, cycling & leisure?

• Virtually 100% agreed that there should be good provision of green space within the urban boundary, preferably linked by paths for walkers and runners.

Q8. Do you think there is a need for a dedicated country park somewhere in the Borough, with signed recreational routes, car parking and café & meeting place facilities, along the lines of Lullingstone, Shorne or Brockhill Country Parks?

• Over 70% agreed and 13% were neutral towards this idea.
• Country parks should be accessible by bicycle or walking

Q9. Are there any areas where more trees could be planted in your neighbourhood?

Not surprisingly, there was a wide range of positive specific responses to this question, which are picked up in the mapping suggestions in Section 4 of this document

Q10. Do you consider that Grade 1 and 2 agricultural land, which is the most fertile land, should be maintained for food production, and not allowed to be developed?

• 93% of parishes strongly agreed that Grade 1 and 2 agricultural land should not be allowed to be developed, but should be retained for the production of a wide range of agricultural and horticultural crops.
• Land classification is already provided as an overlay on the TMA mapping.

Q11. Are there areas in your neighbourhood that should be protected from development for other reasons, such as history or heritage aspects and what are these?

Not surprisingly, there was a wide range of positive specific responses to this question, which are picked up in the mapping suggestions in Appendix 4.

Q12. Do you consider that further areas of ground solar development should be allowed in the Borough, provided that it is screened and not allowed to impact on views?

- There was a majority of neutral or negative opinion on the provision of further ground mounted solar. There was a strong view that any further sites should be on very poor soils and well screened.
- A large number of parishes expressed strong support for the statutory inclusion of solar power on all new build houses and commercial buildings, as well as the further retrofitting of panels on existing buildings.
- There is nothing that could be mapped, since each potential site would have to be assessed on its own suitability.

Q13. Do you think that some parts of your neighbourhood, parish community or village might be suitable for development?

- Over 60% were against development, with 20% neutral. A consistent theme, especially in the villages, was a desire to have very little development, and any that took place should be small scale, either individual houses or low single-figure schemes.
- Another consistent theme, everywhere, was a desire that development should be much more focused on housing that was more affordable, in the wide sense of the term, so non-market housing for rent or staircase to ownership; smaller, cheaper market housing, to enable young people to get onto the property ladder and older people to downsize etc. Rural Local Needs Housing was also mentioned in this context.
- Some respondents in the urban areas spoke of the need for a 'moratorium' on further development, pending infrastructure catching up, especially in the context of roads and healthcare. The term 'saturated' was used by one. Some felt that the survey was excessively focused on the rural areas and that the urban edge of Ashford was being ignored or even sacrificed.
- There was a consistent concern that infrastructure often lagged development or simply did not appear at all, the term embracing roads, school places, GP access, hospital capacity, local shops, village halls, community facilities like play areas, parks & similar, footpath & cycle way upgrades and linkages etc.

Q14. Could the public transport infrastructure in your area, or to and from your location, especially bus routes, be improved, and, if so, how?

- Everyone wants a better bus service everywhere, this being defined in terms of the right routes, at the right times, at the right frequency and at the right price. So much is obvious, but the question is how to do it?
- Smaller buses were mentioned a lot, as opposed to the very large ones often used by the operators, which are half empty most of the time and too big for many settings.
- Two interesting points were made. The first was that when few people used a service, the assumption was usually that there was no demand, but an alternative view was that the service was not right, and that looking at the supply side was where to start. The second point was that we should start with a blank piece of paper and experiment with different models of bus service provision, with nothing out-of-bounds for consideration.
- Some of the comments were 'anti-car', as opposed to 'pro-bus' and we need to be careful with this, although it probably represents the views of a very small number of individuals.
- The need to get the Finberry bus route opened was cited and would be an important link in the urban bus routes in Ashford.

Q15. If there were the opportunity to have development in your area, for either housing or employment, what would you expect to see as accompanying benefits? This could, for example, include a better bus service or a new community centre or village hall.

- There was a consistent concern that infrastructure often lagged behind development or simply did not appear at all - the term embracing roads, school places, GP access, hospital capacity, local shops, village halls, community facilities like play areas, parks & similar, footpath & cycle way upgrades and linkages etc.
- Developer Contributions were welcomed to help provide these things, as well as better bus services and a host of other benefits that are specific to individual places: upgraded public toilets were mentioned, for example.
- Although most people appreciated the *quid pro quo* involved in the system, there is a sense that the level of contributions should be greater, to help bridge the infrastructure gap, on the wide definition of the term.

Q16. Are there any other comments that you would like to make about land classification, development, the environment or any other related issues?

- The need to sort out the town centre, in terms of general tidiness, building fascias and getting rid of the 'rats & gulls' was mentioned. The Town Centre Response Group asked for assistance with local listing to protect and manage Ashford's heritage.
- There were quite a few references to food security and not using agricultural land for development for this reason. A related point was that agricultural land, although not designated (like the AONB or an SSSI), makes an important contribution to the character of the Borough and the settlements within it. This is visual, as a breathing space and also as a habitat for birds and other wildlife, even though it is still being farmed.
- Wittersham made the point that most of the houses in the village were built in the AONB long before it was designated, and that this designation now makes it impossible to have modest development and was being over zealously applied by the planners. However, they are not wanting excessive sporadic development in the open countryside.
- It was suggested that development should be more focused on the environment and specifically that solar roof tiles should be mandatory.
- Green zones to protect villages and between developments are important. These could potentially be mapped: see 'Initial Thoughts on Mapping Layers', on page 28, as well as Appendix 4, Data Prioritisation Matrix.

The Business View

A facilitated discussion was held with the Ashford Economic Development Group (AEDG) on 17th February 2022, organised by the Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce. This was based on the Questionnaire which, whilst not being designed to be completed in this way, elicited responses that generally mirror those of the Parish Councils.

There were also some new perspectives, amongst which was support for bringing Dungeness back into operation as a Nuclear Power Station, using the Small Modular Nuclear Reactors developed by Rolls Royce (SMRs), as a better route to green energy than solar farms.

The report is set out in more detail in Appendix 3.

The Developers' View

Discussions have been held with the major developers, using the Questionnaire as a rough basis for the conversation.

Key views which emerged include:

- Ashford Borough Council has an Approved Local Plan, but all the Allocated Sites in it are currently on hold, due to the Stodmarsh issue. This is naturally a major concern, not least because it opens the door to speculative planning applications in inappropriate locations. A solution to the problem will involve both wetlands and work by Southern Water, but, most importantly, both action and money from the government. This is a really urgent matter.
- There is generally agreed to be a need for more Affordable Housing, in its various forms. This raises viability considerations, not least because of potentially new and expensive requirements, such as electric vehicle charging points in houses. It may well be that a completely new approach is needed to the provision of non-market housing.
- Infrastructure costs money; and if we want it either before, or earlier, in the construction of developments, there is also the issue of forward funding. This is tied up with the whole Developer Contribution System and the government is due to bring forward proposals on this matter, as part of their Planning Reforms.
- There was generally agreed to be a need to 'raise the game', in terms of the design quality of developments, on a broad definition of the term.

The developers support the thrust of the Land Commission's work, but there are some very important issues to resolve, as outlined above.

The Young People's View

A consultation workshop was held with students from the Ashford FE College on 4th May 2022. Seven students from Music Technology and three Beauty students took part, along with two members of staff. This was a lot less than the twenty students that we had requested and was also not balanced by gender and course-type, as we had also requested. As such, the results should be treated with caution and are indicative only. The points raised included:

- The high cost of housing in Ashford and the need for more Affordable Homes. Mention was made of the need for cheap student accommodation, but this conflicts with the way FE Colleges are supposed to work and is really a subset of the first point.
- There should be more solar panels on houses and other buildings.
- Infrastructure, on the wide definition, should accompany housing development. Specific mention was made of healthcare and schools.
- Better, cheaper public transport is needed, especially buses
- Cycleways need to be more linked up and better maintained.
- Paths and footways need to be more linked up and better maintained
- There needs to be better lighting generally, to make people feel safe.
- There was support for green space generally and for more green space to separate developments from each other.
- The importance of trees was mentioned.
- The importance of views was mentioned
- The need to rejuvenate Ashford Town Centre was mentioned, with more attractive shops and other facilities
- Students use their cars because public transport is poor and then have a problem finding and paying for car parking.

Initial thoughts on Mapping Layers, informed by Questionnaire Responses

These are referenced to the WG2 Matrix, which also identifies factors and data to be mapped. (See Appendix 4). The Matrix box that groups population numbers through to economic factors, including super output areas, is essential background data on the shape of the Borough and will help to inform data sets such as "access to green space", by overlaying the population map and green space to indicate proximity.

The boxes of particular interest from WG1 work are:

Public Transport (essential and easy-to-obtain)

- Map layer settlements in the Borough with railway stations.
- Map layers showing areas with bus services at:
 - more than one an hour
 - one an hour
 - less than one an hour
- the limit of area for buses being defined as no more than 400metres from bus stop.

Roads by Highway Category and Condition

(essential and easy-to-obtain)

- A-Roads such as A20, A28, A251, A2070 etc.
- B-Roads that are main routes, two-lane roads and maintained as such by KCC highways
- Unclassified rural lanes, typically single-track roads with little or no verge & passing places

PROWs, Footpaths, Bridleways, BOATs

(move up from desirable to essential)

- Add cycleways, where these are different from Bridleways or Byways Open to All Traffic (BOATs).
- Objective is to map the "A-Road equivalents" such as national footpaths and cycle or bridleways and the "B-Road equivalents" - KCC definitive map footpaths and bridleways.
- The reason is to promote access and wellbeing and do so safely - away from road and traffic
- And managing BOATs to restrict motorised use, where this harms other users' access.

Biodiversity Opportunities:

(essential and easy to obtain)

- Map all existing designated areas – SSSIs, SACs, RAMSARs and Biodiversity Action areas
- Some of these are long established substantial areas: e.g. Hothfield Common, although some may be smaller or more recently designated.
- These designated biodiversity areas need to be overlaid (some will coincide) with:

Green Spaces

(move up from desirable to essential)

Access to Green Space

(move up from desirable to essential)

- Green Space includes mapped green corridors in ALP policies, Open Space Strategy areas, Neighbourhood Plan green spaces, identified buffer zones in ALP site criteria policies, other green spaces and buffer zones that are "in discussion."
- Buffer zones are green spaces that have ownership/guardianship which may, or should, include access. The width of a buffer zone can vary: in excess of 500 metres, when it separates a village from new development, so both could have access to the Green Space, dependent on arrangements (e.g: Kingsnorth and Park Farm) or a much narrower buffer or footway, to protect amenity or access between phases of development and areas safeguarded e.g.: for allotments. These green spaces should be 'mappable', from approved development plans.

Water Courses and Flood Zones

(not included in the WG2 Matrix)

- These are two separate mapping layers; both are easy to obtain. They are important locally to communities - to know, manage and respect (e.g: ghylls in Tenterden), to the wider planning of the Borough and as potential for wetland areas, if this aligns with landowners' plans.

Views (not included in the WG2 Matrix)

- 'Extensive quality views' are key criteria for the character of many parishes. These include are local views - approaches to and views from settlements, and landscape scale views such as views from North Downs Trail or Pilgrims Way in the Borough. Some of these are on OS tourist maps; others are in Neighbourhood Plans or Village Design Statements, and the ELMC questionnaires. Some are already identified as part of development plans e.g.: views from St Michael's church in Tenterden.

Heritage Assets (not included in the WG2 Matrix)

- Listed buildings and their settings are key elements in the character of an area: in the Borough this includes listed farmsteads in the open countryside.
- However, for this mapping project, the emphasis is more on being aware that buildings that are listed (easy to map) need to have their setting, not just their curtilage, recognised (less easy to map) or should be subject to a local listing: some parishes/communities are asking for guidance to achieve this.
- Mapping of these could be noted as desirable, but only achievable by a later local mapping exercise e.g: as part of a Heritage Strategy review. Conservation Area Maps can provide a "setting" layer approximation and are easy to obtain.

Confines of Ashford

(not included in the WG2 Matrix)

- This is the map that doesn't exist for Ashford but does for many villages in the Borough.
- A consultation process to map the confines of Ashford would inform the widely held view that there should be limits to the expansion of Ashford. This is described in several ways: green corridors, strategic gaps, protecting gaps between settlements and preventing new urban areas enveloping villages.
- Before such a process takes place, an approximation could be a mapped layer as suggested by Wye - an isoline of 1600m around the built development of each rural settlement. The isoline should realistically include committed development.

Areas to be protected from development or subject to special conditions

(not included in the WG2 Matrix)

- Conservation Areas are an easy-to-obtain mapping layer readily accessible.
- Heritage having existing listing or potential for local heritage listing – especially in Ashford Town
- Neighbourhood Plans where available: made or in draft form (e.g: Charing and Aldington & Bonnington) identify areas to be protected.
- Some parishes have a local open spaces strategy (e.g: Biddenden)
- There are also draft proposals to increase designated areas: the Greensand Ridge as AONB.

Conclusions & Next Steps

There are some interesting conclusions that spring out of this exercise and there is the genuine possibility of creating a database of mapping layers, which can be interrogated and used to create an Evidence Base to inform the next iteration of the Local Plan.

This is particularly important, given the fluidity that is evident in the government's thinking about planning generally, and the directly associated areas of Levelling-Up and County Deals.

If TMA can indicate which of the mapping suggestions:

- are easy for them
 - could be easy if more specific detail was provided
 - are not practical at this stage
- then this would be helpful for the next stage of the project, which should involve merging WG1 & WG2 in some way, but without creating a group that is too large.

To finish, two quotations from the responses to the Questionnaire:

- 'Better Ashford rather than bigger'
- 'Yes, will you actually listen to what we all might be saying, or is this another tick box exercise?'

Although most of the responses to the consultation were reasonably positive, there is a sense that many people feel that planning is something that is 'being done to them', that the Neighbourhood Plan exercise was in some senses a sham and that meaningful local involvement is neither available nor wanted. That said, there is a hope that the Land Commission may be a genuine attempt to canvass opinions that will have a bearing on the future shape of Ashford. We must make sure that it does.

Appendix 3

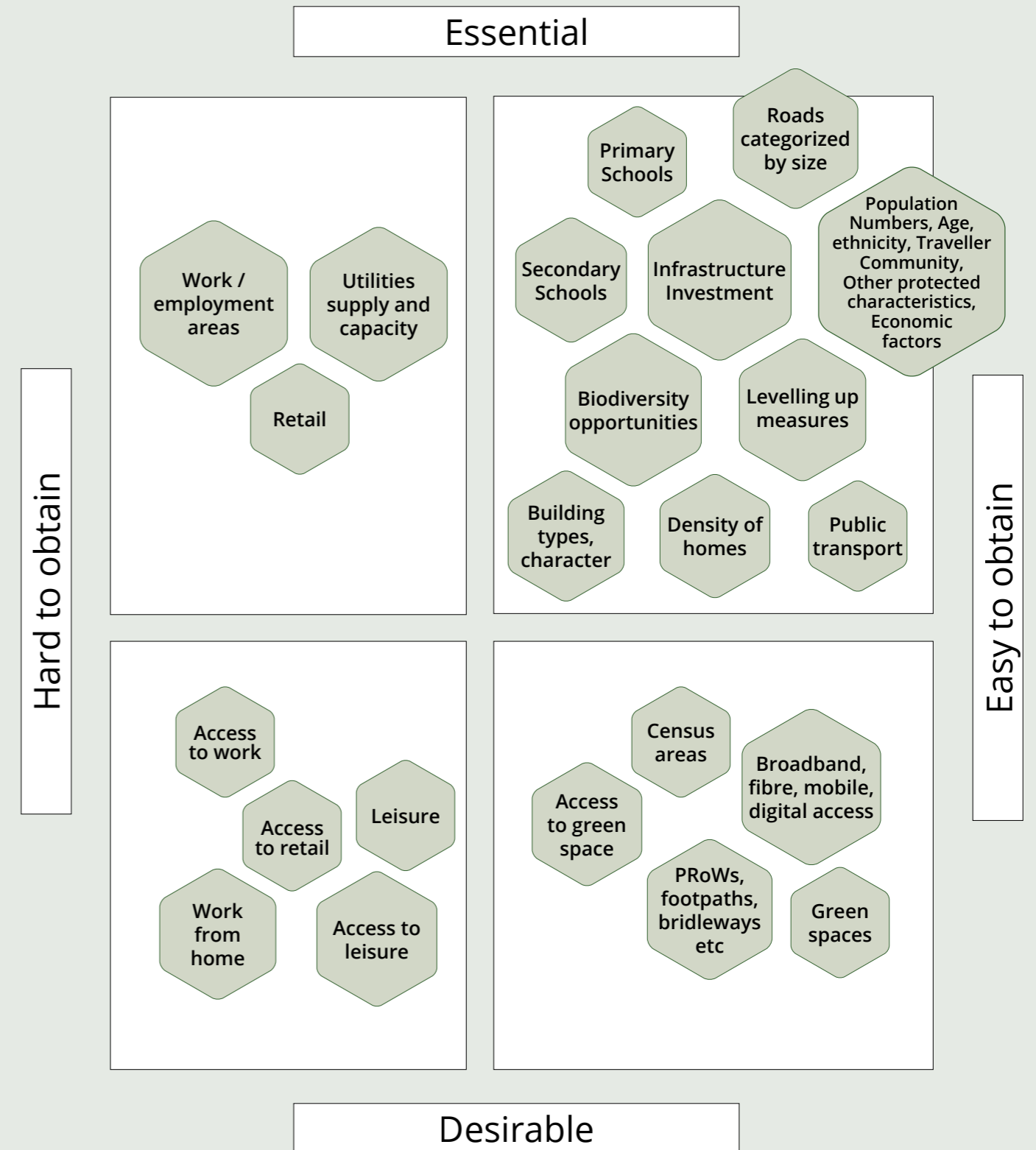
Update on the Kent Chamber's Economic Development Group's response to the Consultation

Jo James had met with the Chamber's economic development group for a facilitated discussion on the consultation questionnaire. Likewise, she had emphasised the importance of the Group's response remaining objective. The main points that were raised by the group were that:

- Development should take regard of the rural nature of the Borough and the individuality of each village
- Ashford should not be stopped from expanding, therefore, but its rural nature must be preserved
- More development should take place on existing brownfield sites
- Some concern on increasing the carbon footprint even further
- Existing nature trails and green spaces should be maximised
- Public rights of way should be upgraded; quality of these routes is important
- There should be new dedicated services linking communities to encourage people out, without necessarily being reliant on the car
- Caution should be taken on assuming solar farms are 'the solution'
- There are sufficient country parks in the Borough, but existing facilities in them should be upgraded
- Land should be maintained for agricultural/food production, although some rural community uses are changing type (e.g. dairy farming to vineyard cultivation) and the effects of this might need to be considered
- More mixed use developments should be considered and those uses should be integrated (Henwood, Evedgate and Mersham)
- Some commercial developments should be replaced with more modern, fit-for-purpose expansion
- Ashford needs a bus station in the town centre (Lower Elwick Road)

Appendix 4

Data Prioritisation Matrix: Factors and Data to be Mapped: WG2



Appendix 5

Developing a Resilient Water Future in Ashford

Water is the most fundamental resource to healthy lifestyles and is often overshadowed by other considerations when planning for long term development. It enables us to live and work and is key to enabling healthy ecosystems too, therefore it is vital to ensure that water resources are protected and managed in concert with other aspects of development thinking.

The Environment and Land Mapping Commission has considered water throughout its work and this appendix sets out the key elements that underpin the way we believe development should emerge in the Borough of Ashford. It is designed to consider how we can reconnect with the natural water cycle, helping to improve management of wastewater and preserve the essential water resources for long term resilience through collaborative working with our water and wastewater undertakers. Delivery depends on all stakeholders adopting a holistic view and closing the psychological gap between green, blue and grey infrastructure.

Around the world there are strong examples of blue-green infrastructure designed to support the water and sewer networks we depend upon and, with a mix of urban, semi-urban and rural areas within the Borough, it will be necessary to develop planning policy which supports a blend of landscape scale initiatives, water-positive design for development, and retrofit opportunities too.

There are some key priorities which currently give rise to many of the unpleasant impacts we see when sewers are less effective than expected or water supplies are impacted by operational issues or drought.

Storm water entering the sewer network is a national challenge and Combined Sewer Outfalls (CSO) represent the majority of the much publicised releases which were designed to alleviate short term pressures and prevent impacts on homes and neighbourhoods. The public voice is clear that this is no longer an acceptable model and a multi-

stakeholder approach is needed to change the way networks designed early last century are modified and storm water is prevented from reaching the networks at all. This requires collaborative efforts, working alongside Southern Water, developers and the Environment Agency to develop infrastructure which works with nature to capture rainwater, slow the flow and divert it away from sewers. No new development should be allowed to design drainage of surface water to connect to sewers and this should be embedded in planning policy to prevent developers from reverting to the right to connect without first applying the drainage hierarchy set out in Document H of The Building Regulations 2010. This means water should be drained by:

- Filtration into the ground (where there is no identifiable risk to ground water)
- Designing for surface water to be directed to a water course or surface water body
- Directing rainwater to a surface water sewer, highway drain or other drainage system
- As a last resort when all other options have proven unviable, by connection to a combined sewer.

Misconnections in existing properties lead to contamination of surface water sewers leading to pollution incidents and pressure on the network; clarity in planning conditions for new developments help to avoid this risk and informing Southern Water of any identified misconnections will enable their dedicated team to address issues. Collaborative working will ensure that the risk of contaminating water resources which South East Water rely upon is eliminated.

Flood risks can also arise from accumulated Fats, Oils and Greases (often referred to as 'FOG') building into so-called 'fatbergs'. The solid mass builds up preventing sewage from flowing through the sewers as they are designed to do. Prevention works in known risk areas are scheduled to prevent such build up but ultimately prevention at source is far more effective. Ensuring that commercial developments which will include restaurants or canteens are required to install equipment to capture FOG to prevent it from entering the sewer will enable the system to flow freely. This is particularly beneficial in areas which are served by combined sewers keeping

capacity free when rain water enters the network in storm conditions. Working together to share information and help to raise public awareness will enable a shift in behaviours to ensure only pee, poo and toilet paper are passed into the sewer network.

Water scarcity is an increasingly significant challenge across the South East of England and promoting water efficient design for new development, including low consumption fittings inside homes and workspaces and options to reduce the use of potable water for activities that don't need super clean water such as watering plants, is to be actively encouraged. Initiatives, such as rainwater harvesting and grey water recycling and encouraging the use of water butts in gardens, all help to make the most of every single drop of water. Technologies are available for new build and retrofit solutions; positive leadership will drive change forward with benefits to communities and the environment.

Preserving ground water quality to reduce the amount of treatment required to achieve drinking water quality is a vital element of ensuring resilience for the future. Contaminants can enter the water cycle in many ways including infiltration from the surface. Good design of drainage systems to ensure they have sufficient filtration before reaching ground water reserves helps to eliminate contaminants in surface run off. Installing rain gardens, improving verges and considering water in the design of green spaces can contribute to improvements.

A further risk to ground water persists from existing developments which have historically relied on soakaways and septic tanks. Placement of soakaways and decline of the condition of septic tanks can both lead to contaminants which could be avoided. Where extensions and renovations are proposed conditions to adapt soakaways and upgrade septic tanks can assist with improving these issues. There may be potential to link new development with these issues: for example, if new sewers are laid on a new development next to an existing development which has soakaways, a new opportunity to connect to the network is created, unlocking new options to adopt a multi-stakeholder approach to a persistent problem.

Designing Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) into larger developments is now becoming normalised. Opportunities to take a holistic landscape scale approach, linking development of green space, verges and swards using a blue-green infrastructure approach to close the gap between new developments, would lead to a resilient landscape, more capable of managing large volumes of storm water and capturing valuable water resources which can contribute to tackling the water scarcity issue.

Dependence on grey infrastructure to achieve all this is not realistic; the water industry is widely recognising the potential of bringing the benefits of blue-green infrastructure and nature-based solutions forward to support and protect the built infrastructure we have relied upon for nearly two centuries. The Victorians recognised that a new approach was required to improve their society when they designed our current infrastructure. As we enter the new Carolean era we are called upon to shape a more interconnected approach for water which works for society and the environment in an affordable way. The work of the Environment and Land Mapping Commission affords us the opportunity to do so.

Adapting the way we consider green spaces is fundamental to this thinking. We have spoken of making space for nature: this includes the natural water cycle and these spaces can be repurposed from clipped grass and paving to more wild areas which filter water, slow the flow and, in turn, benefit biodiversity. Designing access which prioritises nature to enable the ecosystems to work effectively can also provide routes which connect people, improve disabled access and provide space for movement too, providing the opportunity to include interpretation assets to help visitors to understand the water cycle.

Linking verges and swards with similar thinking enables them to be used to capture pollutants such as tyre wear and litter before they can reach ground water where it becomes a problem for the treatment of drinking water.

The Council has a unique opportunity with its role in planning to shape a future that will benefit all residents and visitors. Focusing on the basics and building the relationship with water and sewerage undertakers to ensure that development considers these approaches we can preserve underground assets and treatment works, enhance how future infrastructure looks and feels and build resilience into our towns and countryside.

Enabling this will require a commitment to a vision of the future, in which infrastructure is both built and nature-based, working in harmony, reconnecting with the water cycle, including the community enabled by partnership working with key stakeholders and a review of skills to ensure our people are ready to lead us towards that vision.

Building a water resilient future is within our gift: let's pass it on to the future residents of Ashford Borough.

Appendix 6

Members of the Commission and their Outside Interests and Affiliations

Neil Bell	Elected Member – Ashford Borough Council (Conservative) Ashford Borough Council Portfolio Holder for Planning & Development
Noel Ovenden	Elected Member – Ashford Borough Council (Leader: Ashford Independents), Ashford Borough Council Chair of Overview & Scrutiny Committee Chair – Wye Parish Council, Member of River Stour (Kent) Internal Drainage Board
Michael Bax	Chair - Weald of Kent Protection Society, Deputy Lieutenant for Kent
Peter Dowling	Clerk & Engineer - River Stour (Kent) Internal Drainage Board
Christine Drury	Chair of Ashford District Committee - Campaign for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE), Trustee of Kent Branch (& Vice President until 4.11.22) – CPRE, Chair – Westwell Parish Council, Chair of Trustees - Ashford Borough Museum
Nick Fenton	Chair - Kent Housing & Development Group, Chair - Housing & Development Group, South East Local Enterprise Partnership, Member - Kent & Medway Economic Partnership, Board member - Locate in Kent, Board member - Kent Housing Group, Board member - Kent & Medway Business Advisory Board, Board member - North Kent SAMMS Project, Board member - Kent Nature Partnership
Jo James	Chief Executive - Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce, Vice Chair – Kent & Medway Economic Partnership, Vice Chair - Kent & Medway Business Advisory Board, Director – South East Local Enterprise Partnership
Shona Johnstone	Head of High Growth & New Settlements, Markets, Partners & Places - Homes England
Sandra Norval	Future Growth Lead – Southern Water (includes working with the Kent Water Quality Steering Group), Member - Ashford Strategic Delivery Board, Vice Chair & Honorary Treasurer – Society for the Environment
Chris Reynolds	Chair of Joint Advisory Committee – Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
David Robey	Elected Member – Ashford Rural South Division Kent County Council Deputy Cabinet Member for Economic Development - KCC
Jeremy Smith	Chairman - Ashford Committee, Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC), Member - Executive Committee (Governing Body) - KALC, Chairman – Wittersham Parish Council

Appendix 7

Council Officers who assisted the Commission

Professional Advisers [Providing clarification and explanation on factual issues only]

Jeremy Baker	ABC Principal Solicitor & Deputy Monitoring Officer to provide professional advice to the Commission and individual Commissioners on matters of Governance and Conduct only
Tracey Butler	ABC Director of Place, Space & Leisure
Simon Cole	ABC Head of Planning & Development to provide professional planning advice on proposals to change the planning system from central government and the nature of the evidence base necessary for a council to support a subsequent sound local plan
Tom Marchant	KCC Head of Strategic Planning & Policy to provide professional planning advice on proposals to change the planning system from central government and the nature of the evidence base necessary for a council to support a subsequent sound local plan
Andrew Osborne	ABC Economic Development Manager (includes representing ABC as a member of the Ashford College Local College Board)

The Commission Secretariat

Kirsty Hogarth	ABC Head of Secretariat	Jeff Sims	ABC Senior Communications Officer
Danny Sheppard	ABC Member Services Manager	Linda Stringer	ABC Senior Executive Assistant * (until July 2022)

Appendix 8

Other Contributors to the work of the Commission

The members of the Greater Ashford – Environment & Land Commission would like to extend their special thanks to the following people and organisations for their willingness to participate in the work of the Commission.

- Sean Fenton – for facilitating the Ashford College Workshop
- Stagecoach South East – for participating in a Q&A session with Commission members
- Ashford College – to the students and staff for hosting and participating in a facilitated workshop
- The Town, Parish & Community Councils, Forums and Groups within the borough of Ashford who participated in the consultation questionnaire and follow-up
- Ashford Economic Development Group – for participation in a facilitated workshop - through Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce
- Various officers of Ashford Borough Council for their time and assistance in organising and facilitating the Commission’s meetings and work.
- Developers’ Group – for participation in a facilitated workshop - through Kent Housing & Development Group

