

OPEN SPACE ASSESSMENT SPECIFICATION

Summary Requirement

Castle Point Borough Council is seeking to appoint specialist consultants to undertake a borough wide assessment of open space to understand the current situation in relation to accessibility, quantity and quality of such space, and to identify opportunities for these open spaces to contribute towards high quality green infrastructure in the borough. The review will be used to inform green infrastructure planning, and local planning, and will be used to secure developer contributions and other sources of funding for open space works.

In 2012, when the last Open Space Assessment Review was undertaken, there were 142 Open Spaces in Castle Point covering 1,218.62ha. Since that time there have been a series of changes to open space provision which has seen the number of open spaces increase to 144 due to provision in new developments. The extent of open space coverage has also changed. Most notably Hadleigh Country Park and Canvey Wick have grown in terms of publicly accessible space. There have been some modest losses of space elsewhere. Each of these 144 open space sites will need to be assessed.

Additionally, there are a number of small areas of green space located within housing estates that the Council is responsible for maintaining. Due to their small size, these sites are not designated open spaces at this time but may have a role to play in contributing to the accessibility of open space provision and place making. These small green spaces should also therefore be assessed.

Consequently, there will be no minimum size threshold for site inclusion in the assessment because it is recognised that even small spaces can serve a practical and valuable function in a community.

The types of open space that exist in Castle Point currently are:

- Country parks
- Natural and semi natural green spaces
- Green corridors and green/blue coastal corridors
- Amenity green spaces
- Parks and gardens
- Children's play spaces
- Allotments
- Cemeteries and churchyards
- Civic spaces
- Playing fields

This specification does not require a Playing Pitch Assessment. A Playing Pitch Assessment and Strategy was prepared in 2018. An Update was prepared and agreed in 2022. It should however be noted that playing fields can provide wider

environmental benefits in terms of Green Infrastructure, and those which are publicly accessible can be used for other recreational purposes such as dog walking. These sites should therefore be assessed in respect of these wider considerations.

Each site will need to be reviewed in terms of its accessibility, quantity, and quality, having regard to:

- the type of open space it is;
- accessibility;
- the contribution the site makes to the environment and place-making, including the character of the area;
- recommended standards that exist for different types of open space as set out by Fields in Trust or Natural England; and
- Natural England's Green Infrastructure Principles

It is anticipated that the outcome of this assessment will be:

- A baseline assessment of each site and the contribution it makes to recreation, character, health and wellbeing, and to the Green Infrastructure network.
- Recommendations on how each open space could be improved to enhance accessibility, recreation provision, the quality of the local environment and the local Green Infrastructure network. These recommendations should be made within the context of the objectives set out in the South Essex Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy, and it may be the case that off-site works to address matters such as improved connectivity are therefore identified.
- Where it is proposed that an open space could be enhanced in respect of biodiversity, it is expected that the site is surveyed in terms of its current biodiversity condition and is given a Biodiversity Net Gain baseline score using the national Defra Metric.
- Where improvements are recommended, high level indicative costs should be provided so that the Council is able to understand the scale of investment likely to be necessary. This should be done on a site-by-site basis, so that the Council is able to prioritise sites for further investigation and investment.
- Recommendations with regard to how, and the scale of developer contributions that should be secured to support the delivery of open spaces and green infrastructure within the borough both in terms of any additional provision needed and in terms of any enhancements to existing provision required to support a growing community.

The Review is required to be completed by August 2023.

Background

In June 2022, the Council took the decision to withdraw its local plan, and to commence work on a new local plan, hereon known as the Castle Point Plan, focused on meeting the needs of local people and ensuring that development proposals bring about genuine local benefits that are supported by local communities and stakeholders. Place making will be at the heart of the Castle Point Plan, and we

already know that green infrastructure and the natural environment are important to local people.

The Castle Point Plan will be prepared having regard to the requirements of the Environment Act. To this end, we will be seeking biodiversity net gain, and seeking to determine through the Castle Point Plan how high a proportion we seek to achieve. We will also be looking to inform and integrate with the Local Recovery Network Strategy for Greater Essex.

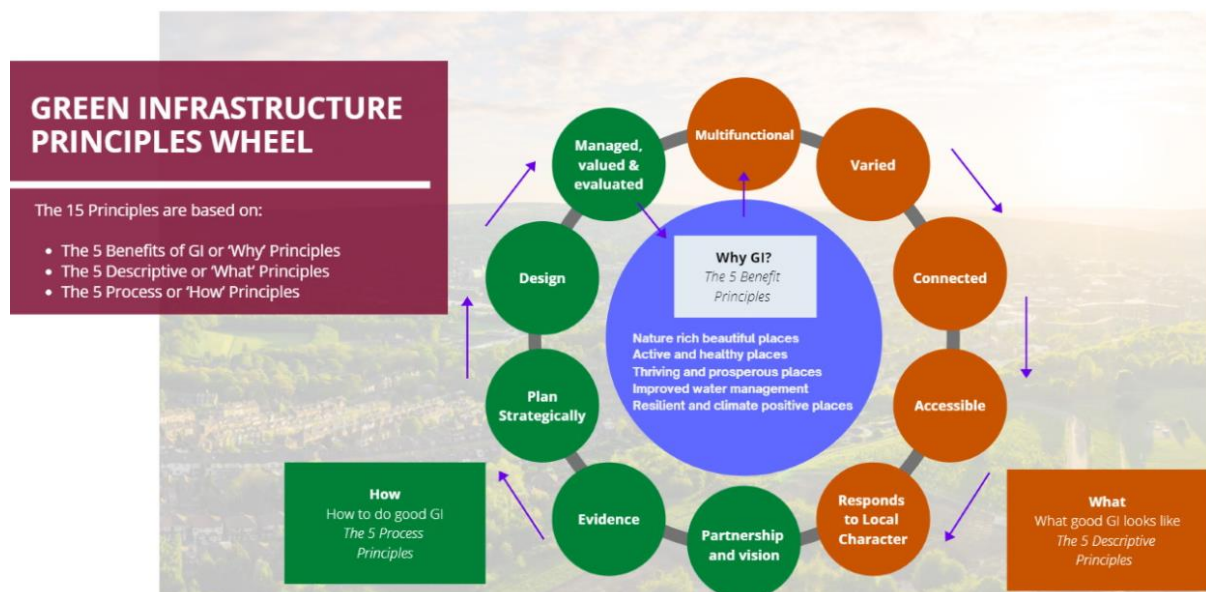
At a wider level, Castle Point is part of the Association of South Essex Local Authorities. Through this partnership a Joint Strategic Framework is being developed that will guide what good growth looks like across the area. This is being informed by the South Essex Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy, and the proposals for SEE Park, which will see the creation of a regional park and integrated network of open spaces and green infrastructure across South Essex. Strategic projects which form part of the SEE Park proposals will be delivered in and around Castle Point. Additionally, the proposals brought forward through the local plan will help to ensure that residents have doorstep access to accessible greenspaces and that there is a network of green links between the different elements of SEE Park for people and for wildlife.

In bringing forward the Castle Point Plan, and delivering green infrastructure and biodiversity net gain, the Council will be seeking to ensure that community and stakeholder engagement is at the heart of the process. There will also be a strong drive towards digitisation of data and information to make it more accessible for a wider range of people to view and interrogate.

The last Open Space Assessment was undertaken in 2012, using the methodology set out in the now archived PPG17. Since that time there has been an increased emphasis on green infrastructure planning, and open spaces having a broader role in terms of not just being places for recreation, but also offering benefits in terms of wildlife, water and flood risk management and climate change amongst other things. It is therefore necessary that a new open space assessment is undertaken which not only looks at open spaces in terms of their recreational attributes, but also considers the contribution these spaces can make in terms improving the environmental quality within its locality. This assessment will not only inform the Castle Point Plan, but also the Council's approach to green infrastructure planning, to the delivery of biodiversity net gain within open spaces, and to the delivery of open space investments.

Fields in Trust set out accessibility, quantity and quality criteria for open spaces in terms of their recreational attributes. It is expected that these criteria are used as part of the Open Space Assessment.

Beyond this, Natural England set out standards for Accessible Natural Green Spaces, and they have also recently published Green Infrastructure Principles.



These principles set out why, what and how good quality Green Infrastructure should be delivered and should be used to provide a framework for assessing the wider environmental benefits of open spaces and providing a framework for how these spaces should be improved.

A key element of the Green Infrastructure Principles is 'managed, valued and evaluated'. This principle is considering the sustainability of green infrastructure provision in terms of maintenance and stewardship. It is therefore critical that the recommendations set out in the Open Space Assessment are realistic. High-level indicative costs are therefore sought for recommendations proposed. These should be determined using an appropriate industry standard costing method and costing tables, as available. These costings should be indexed linked to provide a basis for understanding inflationary impacts.

It is expected that there will be instances where it is recommended that improvements to the level of biodiversity in an open space should be improved. The Council would welcome these recommendations, as there is the scope to offer these opportunities as biodiversity net gain units. Due to the introduction of biodiversity net gain and the associated Defra Metric, it is anticipated that where the opportunity is identified to improve a site for biodiversity purposes, the assessment will include an assessment of the sites biodiversity composition and condition to allow a Biodiversity Net Gain baseline position to be determined. It is anticipated that by taking this approach the Council will be able to engage in the biodiversity net gain market, providing an additional potential source of revenue for open space enhancements.

The Council is taking an urban first approach to development, and this will place additional pressure on existing open spaces and green infrastructure. Currently, the Council does not have Developer Contribution Guidance to secure Open Space or Green Infrastructure provision or contributions as standard. It is therefore critical that

recommendations are provided in respect of how developments should contribute towards the delivery of open space and green infrastructure improvements in the borough. Where development is brought forward on greenfield sites there may be opportunity to secure on-site open spaces and/or green infrastructure. Recommendations should be provided setting out quality, accessibility and quantity standards for when such provision is made as part of a development.

Objectives

1. Technically Robust

The Council is seeking a technically robust Open Space Assessment that objectively considers open space provision in Castle Point considering accessibility, quantity, and quality, having regard to the type of open space it is and the recommended standards that exist for different types of open space as set out by Fields in Trust or Natural England. In terms of wider considerations around the accessibility and quality of a site reflecting wider environmental and place making objectives, regard should be had to Natural England's Green Infrastructure Principles in assessing each site.

It is further expected that the recommendations for each site will be prepared in accordance with the Natural England's Green Infrastructure Principles to ensure that they can be delivered. These recommendations should have regard to the need to deliver the objectives of the South Essex Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy at a local level, so that open spaces in Castle Point integrate into the wider network of open spaces and green infrastructure in South Essex to create a cohesive network for local people and wildlife.

To ensure the technical robustness of the assessment, it is expected that a clear methodology statement is agreed upfront. It is also expected that fieldwork is undertaken as part of the assessment and that fieldwork notes are available as appendices to the final reporting. The field work should be undertaken by suitably qualified individuals. Officers from the Council, including from the planning team and from the operational services team should be able to review and comment on fieldwork and on the reported baseline and any recommendation to ensure that any errors or inconsistencies are identified and addressed.

The Council will expect the appointed consultant to be able to successfully defend their work at an Examination in Public for the Castle Point Plan, or at a Planning Appeal.

2. Biodiversity Net Gain Ready

It is considered that there is scope within parts of the open space provision in Castle Point to provide biodiversity net gain units. As part of the Open Space Assessment, it is required that where this potential is identified for a specific

site/sites, a biodiversity net gain baseline assessment using the Defra Metric is undertaken for that site/sites to allow for it to be taken forward as units.

3. Digitised

Whilst the Council will expect a method statement and outcome reports to be prepared, it is expected that the principal output from this work to be a GIS layer with an associated database, so that the Council can interrogate the data and information for different purposes. It is expected that this information should be provided in a way which can be shared with the public and partners to enable wider understanding of open space provision in Castle Point and enable wider participation in the delivery of open space projects. Additionally, in order to allow for the community to engage with the outputs of the assessment an online storyboard or Power BI of the results should be prepared so that residents can access the findings in a clear and interactive way.

4. Embedded community engagement

The Council expects there to be opportunities for the community, community groups and site owners to input into the open space assessment and what needs to be improved in open spaces local to them. It is expected that a survey will form part of the assessment, and recommendations will be informed by that survey and by discussions with community groups that have an interest in open space provision and maintenance.

5. Multifunctional outputs

The outputs of the Open Space Assessment are intended to inform not just plan-making but also the Council's approach to Open Space provision and Green Infrastructure Planning. To this end, recommendations should not be narrowly focused, but should look across the range of functions, powers and responsibilities that the Council and its partners have. Furthermore, the intended system of biodiversity net gain creates a market for biodiversity rich land which previously did not exist. The outputs should reflect this, by including appropriate recommendations for the Council in terms of open space sites which may provide access the biodiversity net gain 'market'.

Engagement

As set out above engagement with the community, community groups and site owners is a critical objective of this work. Therefore, it is expected that the appointed consultant will:

- a) Undertake a survey with residents to understand how they feel about their local open spaces, what they value and what needs to be improved. The Council will have an online engagement platform on which to host this survey. It will be necessary to supplement this with targeted engagement with certain groups

within the community to achieve demographic representation. This engagement should be comprehensive and should be fully documented.

- b) Prepare a short, visually interesting summary document for residents which summarises the outcomes of the Open Space Assessment. The Council will send this to earlier participants and host it on their website.

The way that site owners and community groups with an interest in open space provision and maintenance in the borough are engaged in the Open Space Assessment will be critical to the success, or otherwise, of securing delivery of open space improvements at the sites in which they have an interest. It is therefore expected that in depth discussions with these site owners and community groups take place to inform the recommendations for sites.

A presentation to Members should also be costed in as an option.

Deliverables

It is expected that the following deliverables will arise from the Open Space Assessment:

- 1) A method statement and outcomes report in MS Word and PDF
- 2) High-level costings report to underpin the recommendations in MS Word and PDF
- 3) A stakeholders engagement report in MS Word and PDF
- 4) GIS data as shapefiles with a linked database that is capable of sharing with appropriate partners
- 5) An online Storyboard or Power BI that presents the information in an engaging, accessible, community friendly way.
- 6) Biodiversity Net Gain Baseline reports in MS Excel and PDF for sites where biodiversity enhancements are proposed.
- 7) Engagement materials and documents as set out above.
- 8) Presentation materials related to any stakeholder engagement event and member briefing.
- 9) The consultant may be required to provide evidence at the examination of the Local Plan, or in relation to planning appeals affecting Open Space sites identified through the assessment.

All technical work required to fulfil this commission should be completed by suitably qualified individuals, with biodiversity reports completed by suitably qualified ecologists.