



MAKE YOUR VOICE HEARD

Section 7

Natural

Environment

and Green Belt

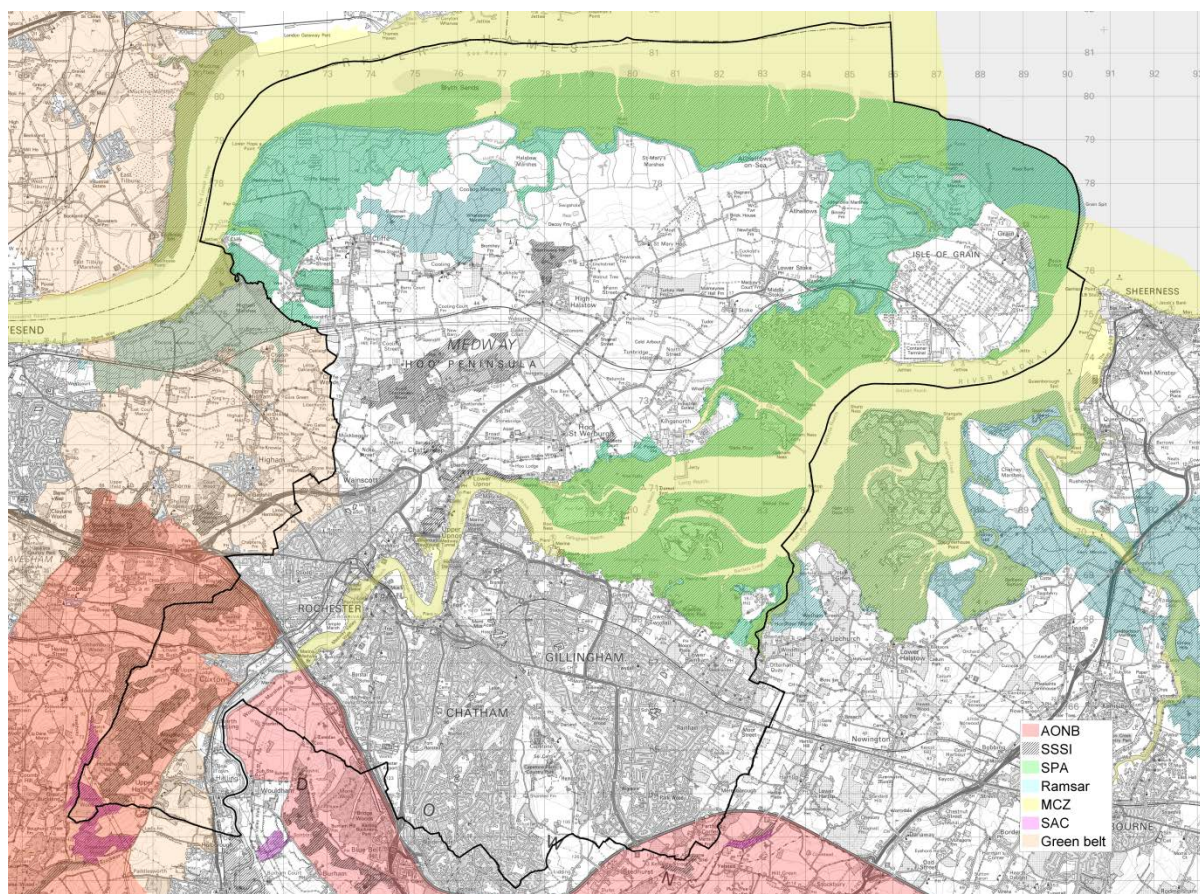


SECTION 7

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND GREEN BELT

- 7.1 Although known by many as an urban conurbation, Medway has a distinctive and diverse rural area, including expansive estuarine and marshland landscapes, the wooded slopes of the Kent Downs, and productive farmland.
- 7.2 The area's environmental quality is recognised as being nationally and internationally important with 28% designated as a Special Protection Area and a third of the land area is designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest. It also includes land in the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The RSPB has its oldest heronry/nature reserve at Northward Hill, and Plantlife has its largest reserve at Ranscombe Farm. The natural features of the river and the Downs are reflected in the city's character and form. These include the Capstone and Horsted Valleys and Darland Banks. The council's approach to the conservation and enhancement of the natural environment will embed green infrastructure planning in both rural and urban areas and promote improved connectivity and functionality. Understanding and embracing Green Infrastructure functionality will assist Medway in delivering improvements in urban air quality, sustainable drainage, biodiversity, rich open spaces and safer access routes, and in securing sustainable developments both within its spatial options and urban areas. The new Local Plan will seek to strengthen the condition of the local environment, and respect the need to live within the earth's environmental limits.
- 7.3 In the responses received to the consultation on the 'Issues and Options' stage earlier this year, there was much support for the protection of green spaces (both urban and rural) and the important features of the area's natural and historic environment. Extension of links for people to enjoy walking, cycling and riding around Medway, together with strengthening green corridors for wildlife were promoted. Medway was seen to have some great assets with the potential to improve the attractiveness of the area for businesses, universities and visitors and provide a good quality of life for residents. Enhanced access to the river was a key opportunity for the future. There were varying views on the approaches to reconciling development needs with protecting the environment, but recognition that well designed, sustainable development, located sensitively, could provide opportunities to invest in enhancements in the environment and improve connectivity for people and wildlife.
- 7.4 A key feature of Medway is the extent of areas that are designated of international or national importance for their biodiversity and landscape value. These indicate areas where development should be restricted in order to protect their special characteristics as outlined above.

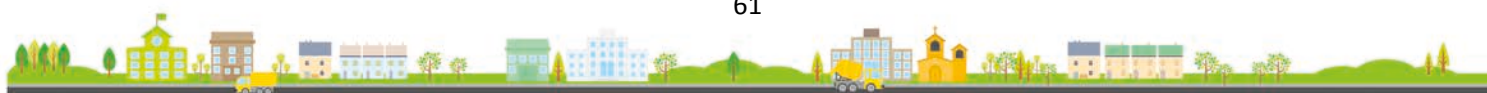




Environmental and Green Belt Designations in Medway

Rivers and Estuaries

- 7.5 The lower reaches of the river Medway flow alongside the villages and towns of the borough, opening up into the estuary separating the Hoo Peninsula from the largely urban area to the south. The Thames forms Medway's northern boundary. The rivers and estuaries and associated habitats are intrinsic to Medway's character, and have influenced the area's history and development. The use of the water for trade continues with wharves, docks and associated infrastructure supporting the supply of minerals and wider goods. The urban waterfront is a focus for Medway's regeneration ambitions, from south of Strood to the north of Gillingham.
- 7.6 The routes around the Medway and Thames form part of Natural England's English coastal path that will be in place by 2020. The Saxon Shore Way long distance path enables walkers to explore the area's Saxon shoreline. There are wider opportunities to open up access through the urban area, through a waterside path or boardwalk, which will be explored through detailed plans for Medway's regeneration and development. This will be an iconic project that could transform the area's urban waterfront and connections. Similarly ambitions to provide a riverside link for walking and cycling between Medway and Maidstone will be supported. The new river crossing south of Halling will open up opportunities for walking and cycling routes embracing both sides of the Medway valley. The Medway Local Access Forum will play a key role in determining such opportunities.



- 7.7 Much of the Thames and Medway estuaries and bordering mudflats and marshes are designated as Special Protection Areas and Ramsar sites for their international importance for wintering birds, and also have status as Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The forward thinking Strategic Access Management and Monitoring Strategy (SAMMS) scheme has been developed by environmental groups and local planning authorities to ensure residential developments can come forward without increasing further the disturbance of over wintering wetland bird populations. The Medway Estuary from Rochester to the Isle of Grain was designated as a Marine Conservation Zone in the first round of designations in 2013. This protects a nationally scarce species of tentacled lagoon-worm and a number of habitats and their associated wildlife. The health of the MCZ will largely be achieved through the licensing regimes that manage activities taking place on the river or seabed, but the council as local planning authority must consider the potential impact of developments proposed along the coast.
- 7.8 The council recognises tensions between opening up access to the coast and the needs of wildlife. Research⁵ has shown that the internationally important birdlife of the Thames, Medway and Swale Estuaries Special Protection Areas and Ramsar sites can be damaged by the impact of people visiting the estuary. Dogs exercising off the lead, cycling and watersports are among the activities shown to cause disturbance to birds, and so a potential contributing factor to the decline of birds in the estuary. Medway Council is working at a landscape level, participating in a North Kent SAMMS Project Board, to coordinate the delivery of a strategic package of measures to address the potential of damage to the special features of the designated habitats. The strategic approach is funded through a contribution from new developments which would increase the population within 6km of the protected areas, which the research found to be the distance within which most visits to the estuarine coast originated.
- 7.9 Medway Council adopted an interim Policy Statement in November 2015 to provide a basis for its implementation of the Strategic Access Management and Mitigation programme⁶. It is the council's intention that the new Local Plan will include a policy on this matter to seek to avoid damage to the protected characteristics of the Thames, Medway and Swale SPA and Ramsar sites.

⁵ <http://www.medway.gov.uk/pdf/Final%20North%20Kent%20Bird%20Report.pdf>

⁶

<http://www.medway.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/localplansandpolicies/developmentplanpolicies/developmentbriefguidance/birddisturbanceinnorthkent.aspx>



Policy Approach: Strategic Access Management and Monitoring

The council will work in collaboration with local planning authorities in north Kent to contribute to the delivery of a strategic access mitigation scheme to address potential damage from population increases on the designated habitats of the Thames, Medway and Swale Estuaries and Marshes. Development within 6km of these areas designated as the Special Protection Areas and Ramsar sites that has the potential to generate additional visits to these coastal areas will be required to make a defined tariff contribution to a strategic package of measures agreed by the North Kent Access Management and Monitoring Strategy (SAMMS) Project Board.

Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

7.10 The Kent Downs to the south of Medway are part of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) designation that runs across the county from Downe to Dover, and celebrate their 50th year of designation in 2017. This is an exceptional landscape and the area is afforded the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty. Medway Council is a member of the Kent Downs Joint Advisory Committee that coordinates actions to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the AONB. The council has adopted the Kent Downs AONB management plan in line with statutory requirements, with the purpose of securing and strengthening the distinctive qualities and features of the AONB, within the context of development and wider changes across Kent and Medway. Medway's only Special Area of Conservation falls within the Kent Downs near Upper Halling, as a small part of the North Downs Woodland SAC.

Medway's green infrastructure network

7.11 The large urban conurbation made up of the distinct Medway towns is surrounded and interspersed by countryside and water. The parks, paths and open spaces across urban Medway are important to residents for relaxation, health, socialising, and contribute to the quality of towns and suburbs. These can be the most direct way for people to engage with their local environment and can contribute to tackling social isolation, inactivity and wider health issues. In contrast to the city landscapes, the rural parts of Medway are noted for expansive marshes, woodland, chalk downland, orchards and shelterbelts, and a range of other farming activities. Capstone and Horsted Valleys bring an accessible rural landscape into the heart of Gillingham and Chatham. The continuous orchards running along the northern bank of the estuary provides an attractive and productive belt connecting Rainham to Gillingham. Together these urban and rural assets make up Medway's green infrastructure network that provides a number of landscape services, and multiple benefits for nature and people. These include:

- Habitats for wildlife;
- Food production;
- Water storage and filtration;
- Air quality
- Setting for heritage



- Woodland for timber, fuel and as a carbon sink;
 - Access to open space to relax, exercise and learn;
 - Defining a local sense of place; and
 - A focus for community activities.
- 7.12 Green spaces and countryside help in regulating the resilience of the environment at a local and global scale. The council will work at a landscape scale to conserve biodiversity and secure the wider benefits of a coordinated approach to planning for the protection and enhancement of Medway's natural and local environment. Green infrastructure planning will inform the development strategy and principles promoted in the new Local Plan.
- 7.13 The principles underpinning green infrastructure planning in Medway are:
- Positively reinforcing a sense of place
 - Separating places but joining communities
 - Delivering clear benefits for the environment through development to ensure all communities benefit from change
 - Providing richer experiences
 - Creating more accessible urban and rural places
 - Getting closer to nature
 - Ability to move through productive landscapes
 - Embedding sustainable thinking from the global to the local scale
- 7.14 Working at a landscape scale, a green infrastructure network of parks and paths, watercourses, and farmed, forested and natural environments will seek to embed connectivity for people and wildlife. These will form a Green Grid for Medway, which will be detailed in a Green Infrastructure Framework to be published in 2017 to support further work on the Local Plan, as the council establishes its preferred options for development. Key components of green infrastructure planning will include strategic green infrastructure zones in areas facing development to provide for sustainable development and provide robust landscape features to enhance planned growth. Planning at this strategic scale provides an opportunity to deliver these multi-functional green infrastructure zones.

Protection and enhancement of the natural environment

- 7.15 The environment is central to the ambitions for Medway's sustainable growth. The council recognises the challenges of accommodating the needs of the area's growing population alongside safeguarding the special characteristics of the local environment. The Local Plan will set out the council's commitment to protecting biodiversity, valued landscapes and geological conservation interests.



Policy Approach: Securing strong Green Infrastructure

The council will protect the network of green infrastructure across rural and urban Medway. The highest protection will be given to securing the ecological and landscape interests of sites designated of international importance as a Special Protection Area, Ramsar site and/or Special Area of Conservation. A high level of protection from damaging impacts of development will be given to Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Ancient Woodland.

The council will consider the need to protect the special features of Regionally Important Geological Sites, Local Wildlife Sites and Local Nature Reserves. Development proposed in the Kent Downs Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty will have regard to the need for the conservation and enhancement of the components of natural beauty.

Wider components of the green infrastructure network will be protected in line with the analysis and strategy set out in the emerging Green Infrastructure Framework. This will include open space assets, landscape buffers and green infrastructure zones.

New development should provide for green infrastructure that supports the successful integration of development into the landscape, and contributes to improved connectivity and public access, biodiversity, landscape conservation, design, management of heritage features, recreation and seeks opportunities to strengthen the resilience of the natural environment.

The council will promote the extension of the green infrastructure network through setting criteria for the establishment and maintenance of Local Green Spaces.

Opportunities will be sought to promote and enhance the public rights of way network, including footpaths, bridleways and cycle routes, in particular to address existing gaps in connectivity and extend appropriate access along the riverside.

Landscape

- 7.16 Medway benefits from a diverse range of landscapes. Areas such as the Kent Downs and North Kent marshes are protected by environmental designations. However the council recognises the importance of wider landscapes in providing local character, retaining links to the historic environment and defining distinct settlements. The council is updating the Medway Landscape Character Assessment produced in 2011, to provide a robust basis for landscape planning in rural and peri-urban locations. This will provide guidance to inform the preferred development strategy for the new Local Plan. It will also inform requirements for areas to be designated for their strategic landscape importance, including preventing coalescence and securing the quality and functions of the local landscape. Further guidance will be established in the Green Infrastructure Framework.



Policy Approach: Landscape

The highest protection will be given to the Kent Downs AONB to conserve and enhance its natural beauty, including the consideration of potential impact on its setting. The local character, qualities and distinctiveness of the Kent Downs AONB will be conserved and enhanced in the design, scale, setting and materials of new development.

The council will expect development to respect the character and qualities of the surrounding landscape. An updated Medway Landscape Character Assessment and Green Infrastructure Framework will provide a basis for determining the acceptability of development proposals and areas and features that need to be protected and enhanced.

Green Belt

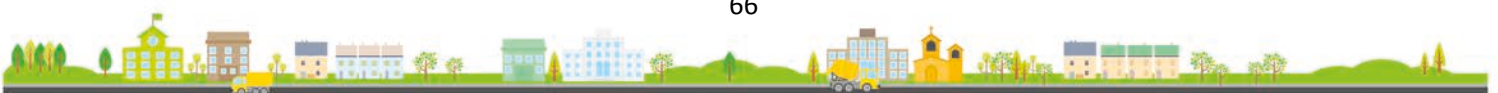
- 7.17 Green Belt is not a formal environmental designation, as its primary purpose is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. The council attaches great importance to the function provided by the Metropolitan Green Belt that covers areas to the west of Medway. The designation has retained a strategic gap between Strood and Gravesend and prevented the coalescence of Strood and Higham. As part of the preparation of the Local Plan the council will review the Green Belt to assess if land is meeting the purposes established in national policy. Given the scale of growth projected in Medway's population, the council is giving broad consideration to all realistic options at this stage of the plan preparation. This includes testing if the exceptional circumstances exist that would justify a revision to the Green Belt boundary in Medway.
- 7.18 Should the council determine that there are no such exceptional circumstances to support the release of Green Belt land, it will adhere to its policy that development will be restricted in this location, in line with national policy to ensure that the land remains permanently open.

Flood Risk

- 7.19 'Flood risk' is defined in the national Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) as "a combination of the probability and the potential consequences of flooding from all sources – including from rivers and the sea, directly from rainfall on the ground surface and rising groundwater, overwhelmed sewers and drainage systems, and from reservoirs, canals and lakes and other artificial sources."⁷
- 7.20 The Environment Agency's 'Flood Map for Planning (Rivers and Sea)'⁸ shows areas at risk of river and sea flooding, principally within Flood Zones 2 (medium probability) and 3 (high probability), while areas within Flood Zone 1 (low probability) may have critical drainage problems. Much of the land along the shoreline of the Isle of Grain, the south side of the River Medway and lower lying land towards Cuxton and Halling

⁷ NPPG, Paragraph: 002 Reference ID: 7-002-20140306

⁸ http://maps.environment-agency.gov.uk/wiyby/wiybyController?x=357683&y=355134&scale=1&layerGroups=default&ep=map&textonl y=off&lang=_e&topic=floodmap



is within Flood Zone 3. Large areas of Strood and Medway City Estate lie within either Flood Zones 2 or 3.

- 7.21 Environment Agency mapping also indicates areas throughout Medway at flood risk from surface water.⁹ However, the maps do not take account of the possible impacts of climate change and therefore reference should also be made to the Council's Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (Addendum).¹⁰

Policy Approach: Flood Risk

A Local Plan policy to manage flood risk from all sources will be developed in partnership with the Environment Agency and other flood risk management bodies. In line with the NPPF and PPG, the policy will apply a sequential, risk-based approach and prioritise the use of sustainable drainage systems.

The policy will draw on the Environment Agency's Thames Estuary 2100 Plan, South East Coastal Group's Shoreline Management Plans and the forthcoming Medway and Swale Estuary Strategy. It will also be supported by the Strategic Flood Risk Assessment, the Local Flood Risk Management Strategy and associated policies in progress.

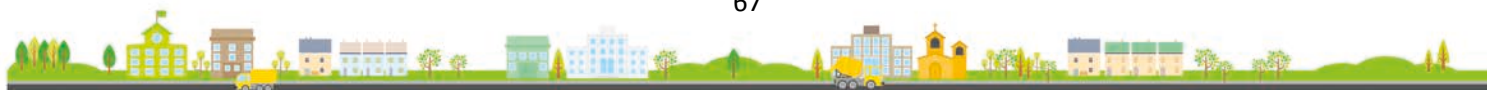
Air Quality

- 7.22 As well as a detrimental impact upon the natural environment, air pollution if unchecked will have an increasing impact on human health and quality of life. The new Local Plan will recognise that air quality is an important consideration when making decisions with regards to future developments, transport and pollution control issues.
- 7.23 Where an air quality objective is deemed to be breached, the local planning authority must declare an Air Quality Management Area and put in place an action plan in order to bring pollutant levels below the objective.
- 7.24 Medway has three AQMAs: (i) Central Medway, (ii) Pier Road Gillingham and (iii) High Street, Rainham. The pollutant of significance is nitrogen dioxide, and is almost entirely due to traffic and traffic congestion. The Council has a statutory duty to have an Air Quality Action Plan, which aims to improve air quality within these designated areas, as well as the borough in general.
- 7.25 The Medway Council Air Quality Action Plan 2015 (AQAP) was formally adopted in December 2015. The guidance has been prepared to set out the measures which will be taken to help reduce vehicle emissions which occur as a result of development proposals. The guidance will apply across the whole Borough in order to improve air quality and avoid other areas having to be designated as Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs).

⁹ <https://flood-warning-information.service.gov.uk/long-term-flood-risk/map?map=Reservoirs>

¹⁰

<http://www.medway.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/checkifyouneedpermission/managingfloodrisk/localfloodriskstrategy.aspx>



- 7.26 Large, potentially polluting developments include those that generate a significant amount of vehicle movements (such as large out of town industrial, leisure, retail or office developments), industrial processing plants, power stations and incinerators. The impact of any proposals on ambient air quality will also be important where the development could in itself result in the designation of Air Quality Management Areas or conflict any Air Quality Action Plans declared by the Council. In appropriate circumstances, air quality impact studies through air dispersions modelling and appropriate modelling will be made legally binding through the use of planning conditions or planning obligations (s.106 agreements).
- 7.27 The use of renewable and alternative energy sources; and integrated transport strategies, will all help to improve air quality and also contributing to reducing CO2 emissions.

Policy Approach: Air Quality

The council seeks to reduce exposure to areas of poor air quality, maintain areas of good air quality, and where possible improve air quality through restricting development or requiring acceptable and effective mitigation measures.

All proposals should take account of the Medway Council Air Quality Planning Guidance that sets out a screening checklist for major size development and proposed development within, or close to an AQMA. Depending on the scale of development, the Local Planning Authority may require the submission of an Air Quality Assessment and/or an Emissions Mitigation Assessment. The guidance also advocates mitigation measures for all development. Where mitigation is not integrated into a scheme, the Local Planning Authority will require this through a planning condition(s). If on site mitigation is not possible, then the Local Planning Authority may seek contribution to wider air quality mitigation measures through a planning obligation.

