

THE GREAT FEN MASTERPLAN – PLANNING GUIDANCE

(Report by Head of Planning Services)

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Cabinet regarding the extensive consultation that has been undertaken in respect of the Great Fen Masterplan and, taking any appropriate additional comments from the Overview and Scrutiny (Environmental Wellbeing) Panel and the Development Management Panel into account, to adopt the Masterplan as Huntingdonshire District Council Planning Guidance to inform both Council policy and to be a material consideration in respect of potential relevant planning proposals.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Great Fen area covers some 3,000 hectares of largely arable land in Huntingdonshire, with Peterborough to the north and Huntingdon to the south. It encompasses two National Nature Reserves at Holme Fen and Woodwalton Fen.
- 2.2 The Great Fen Masterplan was prepared by a partnership comprising Huntingdonshire District Council, the Environment Agency, Natural England, the Middle Level Commissioners, and the Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire and Peterborough Wildlife Trusts. It was published in March 2010, and the quality of the project was subsequently recognised through the award of the prestigious Royal Town Planning Institute's Silver Jubilee Cup.
- 2.3 The Great Fen Masterplan is a spatial plan to guide the long term delivery of the Great Fen Vision and aims and objectives. The anticipated delivery timeframe extends over the next 50 years, but projects such as a first stage Visitor Centre are currently being designed for early implementation. It is anticipated that funding for implementation will be drawn from a variety of sources.
- 2.4 The agreed Great Fen Vision is:
- A restored fenland landscape providing a rich variety of habitats for people and wildlife, now and in the future*
- 2.5 The Masterplan's aims and objectives are:
- **Natural and historic environment:** To create a new resilient fenland landscape which delivers major wildlife and heritage benefits and achieves high standards of sustainability in all respects.

- **Social:** To create an accessible, inspiring and tranquil environment for recreation, education, health and wellbeing.
- **Economic:** To contribute to diversification and development of the local economy, consistent with environmental and social objectives
- **Climate change adaptation and mitigation:** To plan, design and manage the Great Fen to benefit climate change adaptation and mitigation.

2.6 The Masterplan describes what might be achieved on the ground. These themes, and the way that they interact, will strongly influence the visitor experience at the Great Fen:

- **Habitats:** The management of a wide range of habitats including open water, ponds and ditches; reed bed; fen; bog; seasonally wet grassland and marsh; woodland and scrub; fenland edge, dry grassland and woodland mosaic.
- **Landscape character and structure:** The landscape character and structure will take particular account of the wide, open spaces of the Fens, which are enclosed and framed by woodland, reed beds and other habitats and features.
- **Land and water management:** The proposed land management approach will be less intensive and more traditional in character, dominated by grazing with other activities such as hay cutting and reed harvesting also taking place. Water management will continue and will be designed to respond to the changing nature of the area over time.
- **Visitor gateways:** The Great Fen is in a rural location and does not directly adjoin the larger settlements. However, it will become a visitor attraction and people will arrive by a variety of travel modes. It is likely that eventually the Visitor Centre will become the primary hub for visitors within the Great Fen. Visitor Gateways of varying kinds, some with parking facilities, will be created around the edge of the Great Fen area. The Ramsey Heights Visitor Gateway will include education services for local schools and communities. There is also scope to create tourism opportunities in surrounding villages.
- **Access:** Access to the Great Fen area will be balanced between the needs and interests of visitors and the requirement to protect and preserve valuable habitats. Accessibility is to be managed in six zones, each of which has its own particular character.

3. PLANNING POLICY CONTEXT

3.1 The strategic planning policy context for the Great Fen Masterplan is set out in the Huntingdonshire Core Strategy, adopted in September 2009. Policy CS 9 of the Core Strategy sets out the Council's priorities for strategic green infrastructure and enhancement and the creation of corridors and links to develop a coherent network of district-wide green infrastructure. The Great Fen Masterplan is also specifically embedded within the emerging Cambridgeshire Green Infrastructure Strategy.

4. PLANNING STATUS

4.1 It is proposed that the status of The Great Fen Masterplan should be as Huntingdonshire District Council Planning Guidance. This Planning Guidance

will inform both Council policy and be a material consideration in respect of relevant potential planning proposals. The format of the Masterplan does not need to be reconfigured to give it the proposed status as Planning Guidance. This can be achieved by including a Preface to the document which explains the status that it will have. The text of the Preface can be found at Appendix A.

- 4.2 The Masterplan was subject to two phases of widespread public consultation. Phase 2 of the consultation process included visitor exhibitions and some 260 comments were received. The consultation process undertaken and its outcomes are described in detail in 'The Great Fen Masterplan: Statement of Consultation' which can be found at Appendix B.

5. CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The approval of The Great Fen Masterplan as Huntingdonshire District Council Planning Guidance will enable the Masterplan to be a material consideration when the Council determines forthcoming planning applications within the Great Fen area. It will also enable the Masterplan to inform policy development.

6. RECOMMENDATION

- 6.1 It is recommended that Cabinet approves the Preface text attached at Appendix A and adopts the Great Fen Masterplan as Huntingdonshire District Council Planning Guidance to both inform Council policy and guide Development Management decisions.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The Great Fen Masterplan: March 2010 (see The Great Fen website: www.greatfen.org.uk)

Huntingdonshire Core Strategy: September 2009

Cambridgeshire Green Infrastructure Strategy: 2011

Great Fen: Statement of Consultation

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APPENDIX A

STATEMENT OF RECOGNITION OF THE GREAT FEN MASTERPLAN AS HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL PLANNING GUIDANCE

The Great Fen Masterplan has been prepared by the Great Fen Project Partners which comprise the Environment Agency, Huntingdonshire District Council, the Middle Level Commissioners, Natural England and the Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire and Peterborough.

The Masterplan is designated as 'Huntingdonshire District Council Planning Guidance' in recognition of its flexible philosophy as an illustrative document making suggestions of what might be possible where. It is not intended to be a specific blueprint for the future of the area. The Masterplan reflects the very long term vision of the Great Fen partnership and will be accompanied by action plans to focus delivery of specific elements.

Delivery of elements of the project will be dependent upon availability of resources and the outcomes of further public engagement. The Masterplan will be used to appropriately inform decisions on planning proposals within the Great Fen area and the surrounding area. The Masterplan is a material consideration when determining planning applications.

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The Great Fen is a long term undertaking and the Masterplan has been drawn up to reflect this. The Masterplan will be reviewed periodically when that may be considered necessary by the Great Fen Partnership.

To retain the integrity of the original Masterplan this statement of recognition as Planning Guidance has been incorporated as an Addendum sheet preceding the actual Masterplan.