

Media release

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Land Mapping Commission created to help protect the Garden of England from “rural sprawl”

Concern about growing pressure to build more housing in the Garden of England in Kent has led to Ashford Borough Council setting up an important Land Mapping Commission to help it protect the countryside and to avoid rural and urban sprawl.

The Greater Ashford Borough – Environment & Land Mapping Commission has its inaugural meeting today (Tue 12 Oct). It has a big job on its hands – the borough of Ashford has the largest land mass of the 12 districts in Kent (224 sq miles), and is so large that you could fit 19 of the 32 Greater London boroughs, including the City of London, within its borders.

The Commission is the idea of Cllr Gerry Clarkson, Executive Leader of Ashford Borough Council, who said: “The Government has continued to increase the demands for higher and higher housing delivery growth, to the extent of even reducing the very necessary checks and balances that existed within the planning system.

“We have for many decades based our housing and economic growth on an Ashford Plan-led approach which, combined with other districts in Kent, has contributed significantly to the scale of housing delivery in the UK.

“Unfortunately Government has concentrated on the lower tier authorities to provide the vast bulk of the housing delivery without themselves embracing a more strategic approach.

“I think that the creation of two or three Garden Cities with several thousand homes in each, accompanied by the necessary infrastructure and employment opportunities, perhaps in the Midlands and the North of England, would contribute greatly to the nation’s housing need and ease the quite serious growing pressure on many districts in the South.”

What will the Commission do?

The Commission, which held its first meeting today in the modern market town and growing economic hub, will undertake an independent land mapping exercise that will inform the Council in shaping future strategies, including the continuously evolving Corporate Plan and the Ashford Local Plan.

The Commission will pool the knowledge and expertise of its members in assessing the evidence given in order to strategically map out the Greater Ashford Borough. It will recognise that there is a need to identify suitable locations for well-designed housing, to meet the growing population and to create economic growth to support local communities.

They will endeavour to determine future uses of broad areas of land, in such a way that ensures that rural villages are protected from becoming merged into suburbs of Ashford or “rural sprawl”. This work will go on right in the heart of the Garden of England, where the borough is located.

In the town of Ashford, brownfield sites are being used for housing and economic growth, but there has been an effort to retain and create as much green space as possible for its growing urban population to enjoy, especially where there are apartments with little or no garden space. We must continue to do everything we can to ensure that we create and deliver as much urban green space as possible.

The Commission will identify the areas that are deserving of further protection, which will in turn increase the biodiversity and thereby enhance their natural beauty.

Cllr Clarkson added: "This will assist the Council to live up to our declared ambition of being a green pioneer and an example to Government and others by showing just what can be achieved, by adopting a collegiate, and forward thinking approach."

The Commission will endeavour to assist the Council in identifying areas where wetland parks can possibly be created, providing areas that will mitigate the ongoing adverse effects of nitrates and phosphates entering water courses and will greatly help in flood mitigation. These wetland parks will provide natural areas that encourage biodiversity and in turn provide delightful recreational walks to be enjoyed by all.

Cllr Clarkson said: "The mapping aims to protect the best of our natural environment and the character of our rural villages for the enjoyment and wellbeing of our current and future residents. The work of the Commission will make a significant contribution to the process of formulating our Local Plan and assist the Council in reaching our ambitious net zero carbon target before 2050."

How the Commission will work

The Commission will engage with relevant outside parties, and will take evidence and conduct hearings in line with best practice. This will inform the Commission's recommendations which will culminate in its final draft report for submission to the Executive Leader by 12 December 2022.

The Executive Leader and the Cabinet will consider the report and the recommendations before it is laid before the Full Council, with their comments. The Council will formally receive the report together with any comments from Cabinet and it will be debated.

"This is an excellent opportunity for the Commission to make a once in a generation contribution to shape the future of our beautiful borough. Its work will not only inform future strategic planning but will also become an exemplar to Government on how an inclusive and collaborative approach can lead to better plan making and more sustainable communities," added Cllr Clarkson.

Commission members

While the Executive Leader has decided the composition of the Commission, it will not be influenced or conduct its business in any way that is political. This subject is far too important and that is why the membership is composed primarily of key individuals, many being affiliated to relevant stakeholders, who all have specialist knowledge relevant to the work of this Commission.

The chair is Cllr Paul Clokie, a Conservative party member from Ashford Borough Council, while the Vice Chair is Cllr Noel Oviden, leader of the Ashford Independent Party, the largest opposition party on the council, thus ensuring bi-party participation.

Elected local politicians are deliberately not in the majority, ensuring the complete impartiality and independent nature of this important Commission.

Members include senior figures from the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England, the Weald of Kent Protection Society, Southern Water, Kent Downs AONB, River Stour (Kent) Internal Drainage Board, Homes England, Kent Association of Local Councils, Kent County Council, Kent Developers Group, National Farmers Union, Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce, and Ashford's Cllr Neil Bell, portfolio holder for Planning & Development.

Supporting the Commission is a Secretariat of senior Ashford Borough Council officers, while it will also have the benefit of appointed specialist professional advisors to assist wherever necessary.

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