

SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL**CABINET****DATE: 25 FEBRUARY 2025****REPORT OF CABINET MEMBER: MARISA HEATH, CABINET MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT****LEAD OFFICER: SIMON CROWTHER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR ENVIRONMENT, PROPERTY AND GROWTH****SUBJECT: A LAND MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK AND POLICY FOR SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL OWNED LAND****ORGANISATION STRATEGY PRIORITY AREA: ALL PRIORITY AREAS****Purpose of the Report:**

The purpose of the report is to gain Cabinet approval for the Land Management Framework approach and the Draft Land Management Policy. The Framework and Policy will support Surrey County Council (SCC) to make evidence-based decisions on the use and management of SCC land-based assets: to support environmental outcomes alongside financial, commercial, social and economic outcomes. A summary version of the Policy is in Annex 1.

The Framework and Policy are only one aspect of the decision-making process and sit alongside others across SCC. It supports No One Left Behind and all four corporate priorities providing environmental, health, social and economic benefits through: improving the local environment and increasing resilience to climate change impacts which often impact the most vulnerable residents; supporting nature recovery; and, providing access to high quality green space and supporting training and volunteering opportunities for residents, including those under our care such as looked after children, care leavers, carers, Youth Opportunities and Surrey Choices.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that Cabinet:

1. Notes the Land Management Framework approach and
2. Approves the draft Land Management Policy.

Reason for Recommendations:

There is a pressing need to understand our land-based assets from an opportunity as well as risk and liability perspective which in some cases is considerable. This Framework and Policy will enable informed business cases to be developed so these assets can be effectively managed and decisions made about how they are used to maximise value and control costs and risks, and where appropriate disposed of.

Executive Summary:

Background

1. Currently SCC has no policy to ensure that management of its land-based assets align with the strategic direction of how Surrey County Council (SCC, “the Council”) wants to utilise its property assets. To date focus has mainly been on buildings and not land-based assets.
2. SCC owns or manages approximately 2% of Surrey’s land. This is made up of:
 - Over 10,000 acres of countryside and its associated buildings
 - Over 2,500 acres of grade 3 or 4 farmland and its associated buildings
 - The Basingstoke Canal where it passes through Surrey
 - The grounds of SCC’s operational sites such as libraries and schools
 - Highway verges including 2 million trees
3. The Council’s land-based assets have significant capital value, but they also provide:
 - Livelihoods, including 17 farms and a range of rural business tenancies, visitor economy licences and land for learning and communities
 - A high-quality environment with over 7,000 acres designated for wildlife and 3,000 km of public rights of way.
 - Extensive environmental services such as potential flood storage, carbon sequestration, biodiversity, pollination and air filtration.
 - Nature recovery and biodiversity net gain contributions towards the Council’s planning applications for capital programmes.
4. The Land Management Framework and the Land Management Policy will provide a mechanism, alongside others, to support evidence-based decision-making on how SCC use and manage land assets to support all strategic outcomes, environmental, social and economic as well as commercial and financial.

What has changed?

5. As a landowner the Council has many duties it must comply with including health and safety, nature protection and laws relating to contract and tenure. These duties have extended following recent changes to the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 and the Environment Act 2021, placing a greater requirement on the Council to consider natural processes in its flood risk management and to drive, and report on, improving biodiversity.
6. The introduction of the last Government’s 25 Year Environment Plan and the more recent Environment Act 2021 and the emerging Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill means there is more legislation that SCC and Surrey must respond to including:

- An enhanced biodiversity duty for landowners impacting land management
 - Local Nature Recovery Strategies – SCC is the Responsible Authority
 - Increased focus on natural flood risk management using land assets
 - Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) for SCC developments
 - Duty to Further the Purpose of the National Landscape (AONB)
7. As well as the above duties and responsibilities recent government funding and private investment has been driving the management of land in the direction of ensuring positive environmental outcomes. Specifically, the Environmental Land Management grants (the replacement for the Common Agricultural Policy) are paying for environmental goods and services. Early indications from the new Government are in a similar vein. The Council needs to be in a position to take advantage of these environment-based funding streams to support future management of the Estate.
8. In addition, there are many competing demands for how we use our land-based assets including for communities, economic development, for residents, for income/capital receipts and for the environment. Some of these demands can be balanced; however, we need to ensure we are using an integrated, evidence based, transparent approach that takes into consideration policy outcomes and financial considerations when assessing the land-based asset for various uses.

Key Elements of the Land Management Framework

9. The **proposed Land Management Framework** has three key elements:
- An **evidence base** which allows for conditions surveys, as well as assessment of risks and liabilities and evaluation of social, economic and environmental opportunities. The evidence base will allow all uses and value for money to be compared as part of the decision making process.
 - A draft Land Management Policy which includes a vision and set of **principles and sub policies** driven by the Surrey Way outcomes, SCC corporate needs (including financial and commercial considerations) and environmental legislation
 - **Land management plans** with a focus on an holistic place/estate-based approach.
10. **Diagram 1** gives an overview of the Land Management Framework. The Land Management Framework brings together evidence such as potential benefits from certain land uses; risk and liabilities and relevant policies and legislation.
11. **Diagram 2** shows the three principles and ten policies set out in the Land Management Policy. The Land Management Policy synthesises all relevant

policies and legislation into a set of high-level principles and specific policies that can be used to inform and guide decision-making.

12. An interim governance arrangement has been put in place, in the form of a Land Board chaired jointly by the Director of Land and Property and the Director of Environment. The Land Board will report to Land and Property's Property Panel and Cabinet Members as appropriate. Any decisions on use of investment will be made through established governance routes.

DIAGRAM 1

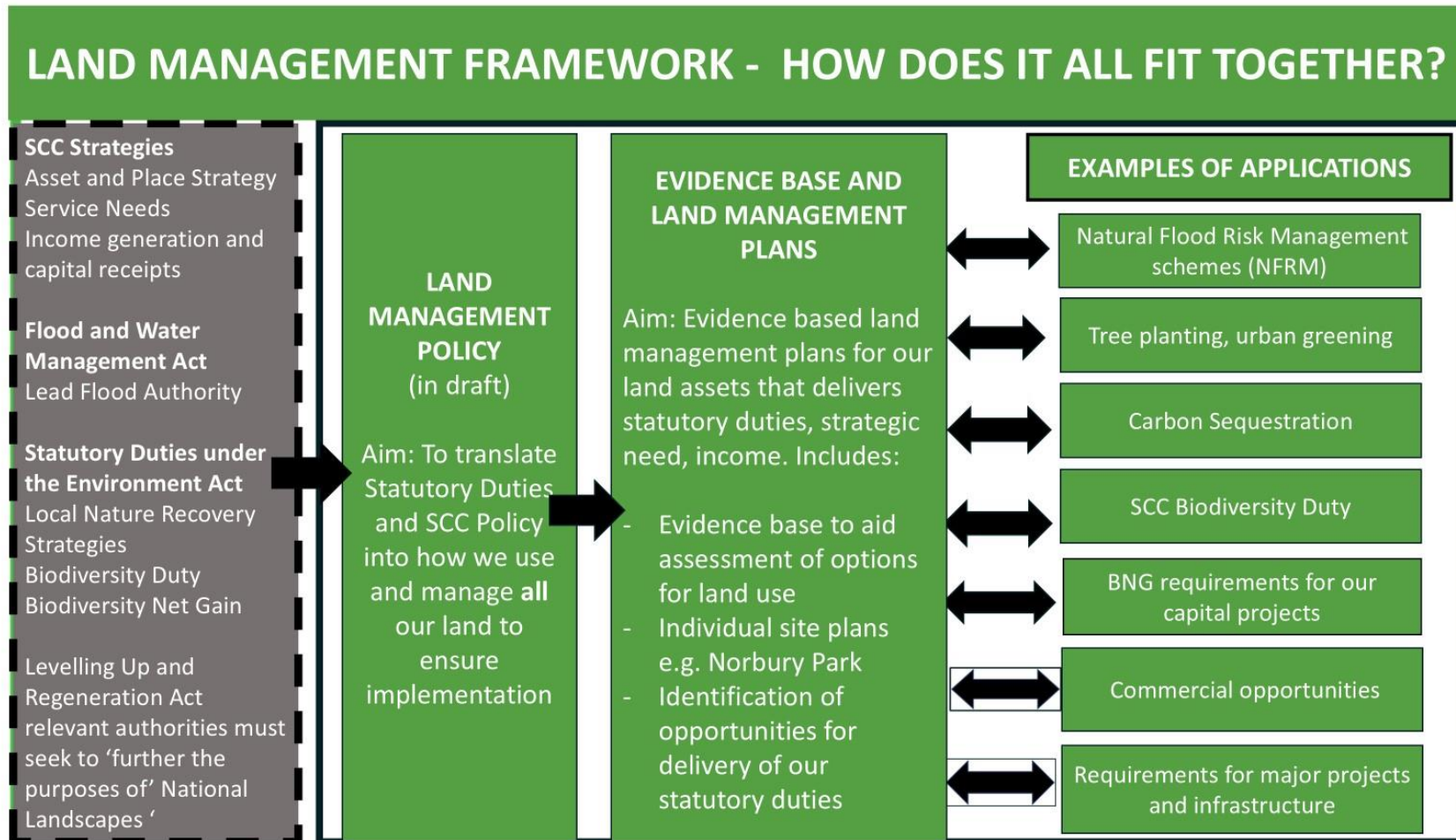


DIAGRAM 2

Land Management Policy Vision and Principles

Draft Vision

*“by 2050, Surrey’s land-based estate will be **thriving**. The Council’s ambition is to act more dynamically to ensure the future sustainability of outland based assets, both financial and environmental, through embedding nature-based solutions, community action and new technology into our land management and decision-making. Our land will be more resilient to economic and environmental shocks and climate change support growing biodiversity and ~~has~~ strong local community engagement and ownership. The Land Management Policy is a decision -making tool which will guide us in determining the best use of land in the right locations”*

The Land Management Policy Principles are to:

1. Harness the natural environment to deliver wider outcomes: The Council recognises the wider value of the land it owns and will maximise the services it can provide for all of Surrey
2. Lead by example: The Council will become an exemplar landowner, positively managing its land to achieve the best outcomes for its tenant farmers and rural businesses as well as the environment.
3. Responsible and Effective Management: The Council is committed to putting in place management practices and monitoring those to ensure the delivery of the Policy

Governance : an officer Land Board chaired jointly by the Director of Land and Property and the Director of Environment. The Board will report to Land and Property’s Property Panel. Members will be engaged through existing mechanisms and decisions on investment will be through established governance routes.

Policy 1: Protecting Nature: We will enhance biodiversity by protecting natural habitats and creating connections between them.

Policy 2: Health and Wellbeing: Open spaces accessible to all, promoting physical and mental health

Policy 3: Education and Employment. We will use our land to provide learning opportunities and to support local employment .

Policy 4: Income Generation: We will explore ways to generate suitable income streams from our land, including farming and other rural businesses.

Policy 5: Sustainable Farming: We support all farmers to adapt and to improve soil health, produce local food, and contribute to the environment

Policy 6: Circular Economy: Our approach to land management will include sustainable practices that reduce waste and promote recycling.

Policy 7: Build Resilience: Be resilient to climate change impacts, invasive species and diseases.

Policy 8: Water Management. We will prioritize land management activities which improve water quality and reduce the risk of floods and droughts.

Policy 9: Net Zero Carbon: We support appropriate activities that contribute to achieving net -zero

Policy 10: Community Engagement: We will create opportunities for the community to engage with and volunteer in the natural environment.

Consultation:

13. As the Land Management Framework and Policy is internally focused, there has been no formal external consultation.
14. Stakeholders, such as the Norbury Park Forum will be engaged as appropriate on an ongoing basis after Cabinet has approved the draft policy with regards to implementation.

Risk Management and Implications:

15. There is a reputational risk of inaction due to SCC being the Responsible Body for the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and the legislative requirements under the Environment Act 2021 and the Land and Regeneration Bill.
16. There is also a financial risk if SCC doesn't take action as SCC and its tenants may be unable to access Government land-based funding.
17. There is a risk of unachievable expectations from key stakeholders, however, this will be mitigated through the production of business cases for any major implementation.

Financial and Value for Money Implications:

18. There are no direct financial implications from approving this policy. Decisions taken in implementing the policy and framework will be made through normal approval processes and within existing budgets.

Section 151 Officer Commentary:

19. The Council continues to operate in a very challenging financial environment. Local authorities across the country are experiencing significant budgetary pressures. Surrey County Council has made significant progress in recent years to improve the Council's financial resilience and whilst this has built a stronger financial base from which to deliver our services, the cost of service delivery, increasing demand, financial uncertainty and government policy changes mean we continue to face challenges to our financial position. This requires an increased focus on financial management to protect service delivery, a continuation of the need to deliver financial efficiencies and reduce spending in order to achieve a balanced budget position each year.
20. In addition to these immediate challenges, the medium-term financial outlook beyond 2024/25 remains uncertain. With no clarity on central government funding in the medium term, our working assumption is that financial resources will continue to be constrained, as they have been for most of the past decade. This places an onus on the Council to continue to consider issues of financial

sustainability as a priority, in order to ensure the stable provision of services in the medium term.

21. There are no direct financial implications arising from approving the Land Management Framework policy. Decisions taken through the framework will be subject to normal governance processes including consideration of financial implications.

Legal Implication – Monitoring Officer:

22. The Land Management Framework and Policy seeks, amongst other things, to ensure that the County in its land management function addresses the challenges of new and emerging environmental legislation. The Framework and Policy has no direct legal implications. If approved by Cabinet any subsequent decisions taken based on this will be subject to normal governance processes and legal oversight and requirements.

Equalities and Diversity:

23. There are no direct equalities and diversity implications arising from approving the Land Management Framework policy. Decisions taken through the framework will be subject to an EIA as appropriate.

Other Implications:

24. The potential implications for the following council priorities and policy areas have been considered. Where the impact is potentially significant a summary of the issues is set out in detail below.

Area assessed:	Direct Implications:
Corporate Parenting/Looked After Children	NA
Safeguarding responsibilities for vulnerable children and adults	NA
Environmental sustainability	Positive impact, specifically in relation to nature recovery and climate change resilience.
Compliance against net-zero emissions target and future climate compatibility/resilience	Positive impact.
Public Health	Positive impact.

What Happens Next:

25. Further engagement will be undertaken with key partners and stakeholders at SCC's key sites for key stakeholders to provide input into implementation.
 26. Specific topic based policies will be developed and agreed as appropriate e.g. solar
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Consulted:

No formal external consultation.

Annexes:

Annex 1 -Summary version of the Policy.

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