

FIRST ROUND CONSULTATION JANUARY 2021

The motivation for proposing a Regional Park is to give an identity to and recognise the fantastic landscapes that make up the Stour Valley and to attract investment for its management. Landscapes includes a rare chalk river at its centre, beautiful chalk downland, large areas of ancient woodland, important wetlands and coastal nature reserves. We are all increasingly aware of the benefits of getting out into nature, and the need to improve biodiversity and combat climate change. Throughout there is rich historic and cultural heritage that attracts large numbers of visitors. The different communities that live in the Stour Valley would benefit from investment in their local heritage.

This consultation is the first step in finding out if key stakeholders are generally supportive of the proposal. If there is a positive response, then funding would then be sought to develop the proposal though wider consultation and discussions to consider and agree content, structures and funding etc.

Note: You should have already received a Consultation Phase 1 document that gives you the background, map and proposals referred to in the questions below. If you did not receive this document, please advise as soon as possible.

In principal:

1. Do you/your organisation see advantages or benefits in creating a Regional Park?

Our councillors had little opportunity to discuss the merits and demerits in detail but there was recognition of the more strategic benefits such as

- a) **The Regional Park's potential to offset some of the economic and social legacy from the decline of the railway industry in Ashford and the perception of Ashford as a predominantly "new" urban space**
- b) **The potential to drive regeneration through public-private partnerships which sits happily with our own objectives**
- c) **environmental enhancement as a basis for social and economic improvement programmes.**

Moreover:

- d) **The Park's extension to a greater area of Ashford could help to provide the growing numbers of local people with more opportunities for recreation, enjoyment and access to natural greenspace**
- e) **Responses to our recent survey indicate that the current residents cherish such opportunities and bemoan the loss of green space.**
- f) **A Regional Park which includes SWAN could offer the opportunity to raise the profile of the area, especially given the current trend of day visits**

2. What are your thoughts on the boundary proposed in this initial consultation?

There no

Most of Ashford, including SWAN, is outside the proposed boundary. It is unclear to Councillors why this is the case given that the Great Stour and its various tributaries impact on Ashford itself. There is a strong view that Ashford should not be seen solely as the "gateway" but as an integral and constituent part of the Park

"The Ashford Green Corridor is made up of parks, recreation grounds and other green spaces alongside the rivers that flow through Ashford. They provide a pleasant relaxing environment for people and valuable habitats and corridors for a surprising range of wildlife species."

Councillors were surprised not to see any link to the Ashford Green Corridor, in the initial planning of these boundaries and also as a partnership with the project. So much development and investment has been made

into developing the AGC and key partnerships have been developed to protect and enhance the “green fingers” of the area.

As the Ashford Green Corridor and green spaces follows the River tributaries and expands into the Conningbrook Lakes and Kennington abutting with Wye in boundary and also further physically with cycle paths and so forth it would make sense to us to consider this into the SVRP

3 Which of the possible projects and opportunities outlined in the initial consultation document do you consider offer the most value for the Region?

We would consider all the individual projects and opportunities to be relevant in varying degrees but we see an holistic benefit where the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

- Improvements to, and equipment for, community facilities. There is always immense value in improving and providing community facilities, the improvement they offer to health and wellbeing is clearly evident.
- Improved and Increased access to cycling services as those offered at the station are very limited, increased exercise and outdoor life would be of key value for the region.
- As would the Visitor Centres in providing excellent service and support to the SVRP

4. Which projects might have the most value for the community you/your organisation serves?

Clearly there has been no discussion about the SWAN area being included so far but we can see opportunities for linking the growing number of safe cycle routes, for example. A project though that could be of exceptional value in our area, that would need further examination, is the development of a visitor focus on the larger than expected number of green areas abutting the Ashford Designer Outlet, East Stour river/Aylesford Stream which are of real value to our residents and which give the area its rural feel (according to residents)

With the Designer Outlet pulling in millions of visitors a year we see real potential, prima facie, for extending the visitor experience and therefore visitor dwell times as well as potential for bringing McArthur Glen or adjacent ASDA in to the partnership. The area is well served by transport routes in including motorways, access to HS1, Eurostar and other rail franchises such as Marshlink to/from Sussex.

The SWAN area is key to the Ashford Green Corridor both for the Dykes as well as the environmental diversity Reflected in the Frog Island nature reserve statues. SWAN offers a Community Orchard, Frog Island, Nature Reserve with surrounding fields and follows the tributaries in the area. Swan is also ideally situated to offer continuing access to further green spaces and lakes in Finberry and Bridge Fields its ideally located by the Railway Station and the Designer Outlet. This with the valuable space and habits within the location of the SWAN Area would be ideally suited to a Visitor Centre.

Considering SWAN’s prime location for visitors to the area, cycling access would be of immense value and ideally situated in this area. Extending out to the Wye area and up to Conningbrook Lakes as well as through Victoria Park and out into the surrounding areas. It would give visitors the ideal opportunity to start their visit with easy access into nature.

5. Are there any risks or concerns that this proposal raises?

Yes – as a new Council we are still finding our financial feet and are unsure if there is an expectation on us to provide investment monies to support the project – Moreover, the return we will get on any investment is unclear. We would need to demonstrate any investment would benefit the taxpayers in the SWAN area otherwise adverse audit reports could lead to financial and reputational risk.

That said we may be able to offer in kind services – we have staff who have established and managed n-f-p businesses such as CIC’s in the past and written the Articles/Memorandum of Association for them.

6. Do you/your organisation generally support the proposal to create a Regional Park?

Yes in principle

7. Would you/your organisation wish to be involved or take a role in the project?

This would need further discussion. Our priority focus is on developing the new Council but it is not something we would rule out given the experience we have in house and especially if there is a financial commitment. Also if it were to involve Improvements to, and equipment for, community facilities.