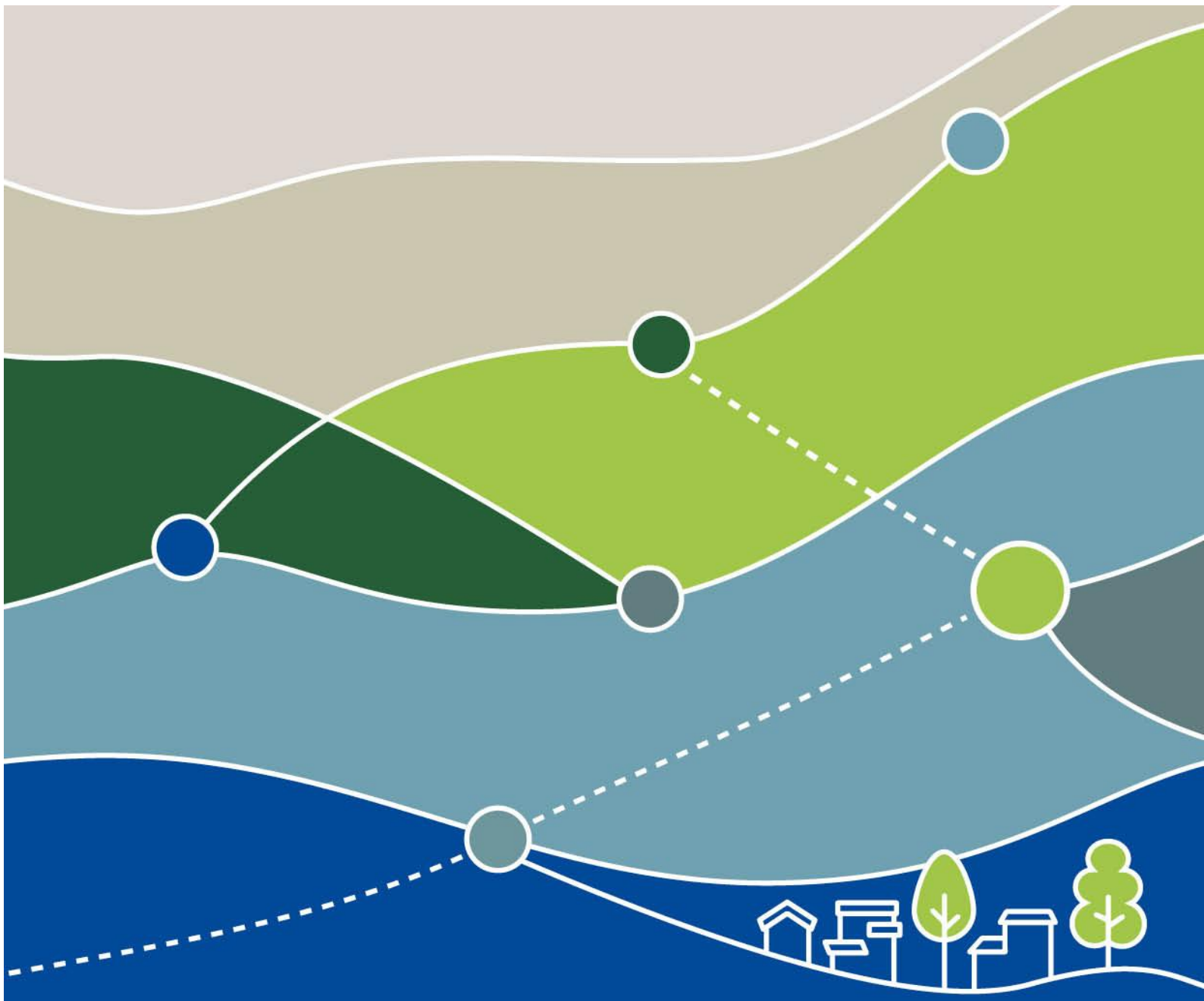


SDS Scoping Engagement
Environment Discussion Paper

The environment question this engagement is asking you to help us with:

How can Gloucestershire accommodate future housing, employment and infrastructure growth while securing measurable improvements in biodiversity, environmental quality, water management, landscape character, heritage conservation and access to nature?

Gloucestershire
COUNTY COUNCIL

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This is a discussion paper to explore the environmental (built and natural) matters of strategic importance that should be considered in drafting a future Spatial Development Strategy. It does not select growth locations or establish detailed policies.

We welcome your views on the strategic issues, evidence and outcomes for environmental matters that should inform the future Spatial Development Strategy (SDS).

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Executive Summary

Gloucestershire has an exceptional natural, built and historic environment. Its nationally and internationally important landscapes, habitats, river systems, heritage assets and green and blue infrastructure are central to the county's identity, economy, health and quality of life. These assets also face significant pressures from biodiversity loss, habitat fragmentation, poor water quality, flood risk, infrastructure capacity and unequal access to high-quality natural spaces.

The environment is also a cross-boundary issue because landscapes, habitats, ecological networks, river catchments, water systems and heritage settings extend across administrative boundaries.

Environmental matters must therefore be a key consideration when planning for future growth, so that impacts can be avoided or mitigated and opportunities for protection, restoration and enhancement can be maximised across the county.

The Environment discussion paper provides a strategic-level overview of the following environmental matters of strategic importance (MSI) that should influence decisions about the location, scale, form and phasing of future growth across Gloucestershire.

Environmental matters of strategic importance

- ENV 1 Delivering a county wide nature recovery, connecting habitats and strengthening biodiversity.
- ENV 2 Managing rivers, water environments and green infrastructure as an integrated network to support nature recovery and climate resilience.
- ENV 3 Understanding environmental capacity and identifying the most sustainable locations for growth, directing growth away from areas of greatest vulnerability.
- ENV 4 Protecting and enhancing Gloucestershire's local character, nationally important landscapes, heritage and environmental assets whilst planning for growth.
- ENV 5 Create healthy places with access to nature and high-quality green and blue infrastructure for all communities.
- ENV 6 Support growth that creates well-designed, sustainable places where people and nature can both thrive.

Introduction

The environment plays a fundamental role in shaping the future of Gloucestershire. It provides the natural resources, landscapes, habitats, water systems, historic places and green spaces that support communities, businesses and quality of life. At the same time, the county faces significant environmental challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, flood risk, water quality pressures and increasing demands on natural resources.

A Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) presents an opportunity to take a long-term, county-wide approach to protecting and enhancing Gloucestershire's environment while supporting sustainable growth. Strategic planning can help ensure that homes, jobs,

infrastructure and services are delivered in ways that work with environmental systems rather than against them, creating more resilient places for future generations. The SDS can provide the strategic framework through which environmental objectives can be addressed consistently across the county and, where necessary, beyond administrative boundaries.

This discussion paper explores the key environmental opportunities and challenges that may need to be considered through the SDS. It examines how growth, infrastructure and land use decisions could help deliver nature recovery, improve climate resilience, protect important landscapes and heritage assets, enhance water environments, and support healthier communities. The paper is intended to stimulate discussion and gather views on the environmental priorities, outcomes and strategic interventions that should help shape Gloucestershire's future.

Ultimately, the SDS should seek not only to minimise environmental harm, but to secure positive environmental outcomes, leaving Gloucestershire's natural and historic environment in a better condition for future generations while supporting sustainable economic prosperity and community wellbeing.

Policy and Legislation

The Environment Topic Paper is informed by a range of existing environmental policy, guidance and evidence prepared by Government, Gloucestershire County Council, district councils and partner organisations. These documents provide the baseline information needed to understand environmental assets, conditions, trends, opportunities and constraints across the county.

This environmental evidence helps to establish the baseline requirements for the future Spatial Development Strategy and identifies the strategic environmental opportunities, constraints and priorities that should influence future growth. The evidence will inform the Integrated Impact Assessment (including Strategic Environmental Assessment requirements), Habitats Regulations Assessment, climate resilience assessment, water environment studies and other supporting assessments. It will provide a consistent framework for evaluating spatial options, testing policy approaches and demonstrating that environmental considerations will be integrated into the preparation of the SDS from the outset.

- Environment Act 2021 Environment Act 2021
- Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981
- Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended) The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017
- Water Resources Act 1991 Water Resources Act 1991
- Flood and Water Management Act 2010 Flood and Water Management Act 2010
- Water Industry Act 1991 Water Industry Act 1991
- Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990

- Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979 Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979
- Environmental Assessment Regulations (SEA requirements) The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004
- Habitats Regulations Assessment Requirements Habitats regulations assessments: protecting a European site - GOV.UK
- Land Use Framework Land Use Framework - GOV.UK
- National Food Strategy National food strategy for England - GOV.UK
- Natural England Green Infrastructure Framework Green Infrastructure Home

Key Gloucestershire Sources

- Local Nature Recovery Strategy, Gloucestershire Local Nature Recovery Strategy | Gloucestershire County Council
- Strategic Flood Risk Assessment Level 1 - SFRA supporting documents | Gloucestershire County Council
- National landscape management plans
    - Cotswolds CNL-MANAGEMENT-PLAN_2025-30-FINAL.pdf
    - Wye Valley The AONB Management Plan | Wye Valley | Wye Valley AONB
    - Malvern Managing the Malvern Hills National Landscape – Malvern Hills National Landscape
- Historic Environment Record Archaeology | Gloucestershire County Council
- Landscape Character Assessment 2017_lca report chap1-4.qxp
- For climate-related legislation, please see the Climate discussion paper.

Matters of Strategic Importance - Context

ENV 1 - Delivering a county wide nature recovery, connecting habitats and strengthening biodiversity.

Nature recovery is most effective at a landscape scale, as habitats, species populations and ecological networks extend beyond administrative boundaries. Gloucestershire faces ongoing pressures from habitat fragmentation, species decline and climate change, creating a need for coordinated action to strengthen ecological connectivity, restore habitats and improve biodiversity across the county.

Gloucestershire's Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) identifies nature recovery as a strategic priority that cannot be delivered through isolated projects or individual development sites alone. The strategy highlights that many of the county's most important habitats, species populations and ecological networks are fragmented and under pressure from land use change, climate change, pollution and historic habitat loss. As wildlife and natural systems operate across administrative boundaries, a coordinated county-wide approach is needed to safeguard biodiversity and reverse long-term declines. The LNRS establishes a shared framework for identifying where nature recovery should happen and where investment can achieve the greatest benefits for wildlife and the wider environment.

A central theme of the LNRS is the creation of a coherent Nature Recovery Network based on the principle of "better, bigger, more and joined up" habitats. The strategy prioritises

protecting existing biodiversity-rich sites while expanding and connecting habitats across the county. Through its Local Habitat Map, the LNRS identifies Areas of Particular Importance for Biodiversity and Areas that Could Become of Particular Importance for Biodiversity, helping to direct habitat restoration and creation where it can strengthen ecological connectivity. This includes opportunities to reconnect woodlands, grasslands, wetlands, river corridors and farmland habitats, allowing species to move more easily through the landscape and adapt to future environmental change.

ENV 2 - Managing rivers, water environments and green infrastructure as an integrated network to support nature recovery and climate resilience.

Water is one of Gloucestershire's most significant strategic environmental considerations. The county is centred on the River Severn catchment and River Thames catchment, bordered by the River Wye to the west. Its river network includes the Avon, Chelt, Frome, Leadon and Coln. These river systems connect towns, rural landscapes, internationally important habitats and key infrastructure, while also providing essential functions for water supply, biodiversity, recreation and agriculture. The Gloucestershire Local Nature Recovery Strategy identifies rivers, wetlands, floodplains and water-dependent habitats as critical components of the county's Nature Recovery Network, recognising their role in supporting wildlife, connecting habitats and delivering wider environmental benefits.

Flood risk is a longstanding and strategically important issue across Gloucestershire. The county experiences flooding from rivers, surface water, groundwater and ordinary watercourses, with the Severn Vale, Gloucester, Tewkesbury and parts of Cheltenham particularly affected. The severe floods of 2007 highlighted the vulnerability of communities, infrastructure and water supplies, while more recent flood events demonstrate the increasing risks associated with climate change. Almost 11,000 properties within the county are estimated to face a 1% annual probability of river flooding, and flood risk is expected to increase as more intense rainfall events, rising river levels and changing weather patterns affect the wider Severn River Basin. Managing flood risk therefore requires a coordinated catchment-wide approach that extends beyond local administrative boundaries. In the Cotswolds, flooding and water management within the wider Thames catchment will need careful consideration and climate change is expected to increase the frequency and severity of some flood events here.

The strategic challenge is to manage water, flooding and environmental infrastructure as an integrated system that supports both nature recovery and climate resilience. Evidence from the Lower Severn catchment highlights the importance of working with natural processes, restoring floodplains, wetlands and river corridors, and using nature-based solutions to reduce flood risk while enhancing biodiversity and ecosystem health. At the same time, pressures on water quality, wastewater infrastructure, water resources and river ecosystems require greater coordination between environmental management, infrastructure investment and patterns of growth. Taking a catchment-based approach can help improve ecological connectivity, strengthen resilience to flooding and drought, and maximise the multiple benefits provided by Gloucestershire's rivers and green infrastructure networks.

ENV 3 - Understanding environmental capacity and identifying the most sustainable locations for growth, directing growth away from areas of greatest vulnerability.

Gloucestershire is characterised by a diverse environmental geography that creates both opportunities and constraints for future development. The county contains nationally protected landscapes, internationally important habitats, extensive floodplains associated with the River Severn and its tributaries, areas of high ecological value, significant heritage assets and productive agricultural land. Environmental capacity varies considerably across the county, with some locations able to accommodate change more sustainably than others. Understanding these differences is essential to ensuring that growth is aligned with the environmental characteristics and carrying capacity of individual places rather than applying a uniform approach across Gloucestershire.

The evidence base emerging from the Gloucestershire Local Nature Recovery Strategy highlights that many of the county's most valuable environmental assets are interconnected and vulnerable to cumulative pressures from development, climate change, pollution and habitat fragmentation. At the same time, flood risk remains a significant consideration across the Severn Vale and river catchments, while pressures on water resources, water quality and environmental infrastructure are becoming increasingly important factors in determining where future development can be sustainably accommodated. Environmental capacity is therefore not simply a matter of individual site constraints but of understanding the combined effects of growth on natural systems, ecosystem function and long-term resilience.

A strategic understanding of environmental capacity provides a framework for directing growth towards locations where environmental impacts can be minimised and opportunities for enhancement can be maximised. This involves considering the relationship between settlements, infrastructure, flood risk, biodiversity networks, landscape sensitivity, water environments and access to services alongside the need to support economic development and housing delivery. By recognising environmental limits and opportunities at a county-wide scale, Gloucestershire can better balance growth with the protection and enhancement of natural assets, increasing resilience to climate change whilst supporting sustainable patterns of development for future generations.

ENV 4 - Protecting and enhancing Gloucestershire’s local character, nationally important landscapes, heritage and environmental assets whilst planning for growth.

Gloucestershire benefits from a distinctive combination of landscapes, historic settlements and environmental assets that contribute significantly to the county's identity, economy and sense of place. The county contains large parts of the Cotswold National Landscape, the nationally important landscapes of the Wye Valley National Landscape and Malvern Hills National Landscape, the internationally important Severn Estuary, extensive river valleys, ancient woodlands and a rich historic environment. These assets are fundamental to Gloucestershire's attractiveness as a place to live, work and visit, while also supporting biodiversity, tourism, recreation and wider environmental quality. The Gloucestershire

Local Nature Recovery Strategy identifies many of these areas as containing some of the county's most important biodiversity resources and environmental functions.

The county's pattern of growth and development has historically been shaped by its environmental and heritage assets, creating a distinctive network of market towns, villages and urban areas set within varied landscapes. Future pressures associated with housing, employment, infrastructure and climate adaptation have the potential to affect landscape character, heritage significance and environmental quality both directly and cumulatively. Many of Gloucestershire's most valued assets cross administrative boundaries or form part of wider landscape and ecological systems, including river corridors, historic landscapes, woodland networks and protected landscapes. This creates a need to consider environmental and cultural assets at a strategic scale rather than solely through individual site-based assessments.

Protecting and enhancing Gloucestershire's character requires an understanding of how landscape, heritage and environmental assets contribute collectively to the county's identity and resilience. The strategic challenge is not simply to avoid harm, but to use environmental stewardship, conservation and high-quality place-making to strengthen the distinctive qualities of Gloucestershire over time. By recognising the interrelationship between natural capital, heritage, landscape character and community identity, future change can support the long-term conservation and enhancement of the assets that make Gloucestershire unique whilst ensuring they continue to provide environmental, cultural and economic benefits for future generations.

ENV 5 - Create healthy places with access to nature and high-quality green and blue infrastructure for all communities.

Gloucestershire's natural environment makes a significant contribution to the health and wellbeing of its residents. The county benefits from a diverse network of parks, woodlands, river corridors, public rights of way, commons and accessible countryside, including nationally important landscapes and extensive green spaces within and around its urban areas. Evidence within the Gloucestershire Local Nature Recovery Strategy recognises that nature provides a wide range of benefits beyond biodiversity, including supporting physical health, mental wellbeing, recreation, social connection, climate resilience and environmental quality. Access to these benefits is increasingly important as the county's population grows and communities face wider health, environmental and social challenges.

However, access to nature and high-quality green infrastructure is not distributed evenly across the county. Communities in urban areas can experience varying levels of access to green space, whilst barriers such as major roads, fragmented habitats, limited active travel connections and environmental inequalities can affect how easily people can benefit from natural environments. The county's river corridors, green infrastructure networks and ecological assets provide opportunities to improve connectivity between communities and nature, helping to create environments that support healthier lifestyles, active travel and greater access to outdoor recreation. The LNRS identifies opportunities to strengthen these networks and deliver multiple benefits for both people and wildlife.

At a strategic level, creating healthy places is closely linked to the spatial distribution of green infrastructure, environmental assets and community access to nature. Gloucestershire's interconnected network of landscapes, waterways and natural habitats provides an opportunity to support healthier and more resilient communities through improved environmental quality and access to green space. Taking a county-wide perspective helps recognise how natural assets can contribute simultaneously to public health, climate adaptation, biodiversity recovery and quality of life, ensuring that the benefits of nature are available to communities across both urban and rural parts of Gloucestershire.

ENV 6 - Support growth that creates well-designed, sustainable places where people and nature can both thrive.

Gloucestershire is expected to accommodate substantial housing, employment and infrastructure growth over coming decades while also responding to climate change, biodiversity decline, environmental pressures and changing community needs. The county contains a diverse network of urban areas, market towns and rural communities connected by strategic transport corridors, environmental assets and economic centres. At the same time, the Gloucestershire Local Nature Recovery Strategy identifies the need to recover nature across the county and strengthen ecological networks, recognising that future patterns of development will play an important role in shaping environmental outcomes. Growth and environmental enhancement should therefore be considered together rather than as competing objectives.

The quality and location of development can have a significant influence on both environmental resilience and quality of life. Well-designed places can support sustainable travel, reduce resource consumption, improve climate resilience, provide access to nature and create healthier communities. Gloucestershire's environmental assets, including its river corridors, green infrastructure networks, landscapes and biodiversity-rich habitats, provide opportunities to integrate nature into the design and function of settlements. The LNRS promotes a joined-up approach to land use and environmental management, recognising that multifunctional landscapes can deliver benefits for biodiversity, climate adaptation, water management, recreation and community wellbeing simultaneously.

A strategic approach to sustainable place-making recognises that long-term prosperity depends upon maintaining and enhancing the environmental systems that support communities and the economy. Gloucestershire's natural capital, historic environment and landscape assets are fundamental components of successful places, contributing to health, economic attractiveness, resilience and environmental quality. Creating places where people and nature can both thrive requires growth to be planned and delivered in a way that strengthens ecological networks, supports climate resilience, improves environmental quality and reinforces the county's distinctive character, ensuring that future development contributes positively to both communities and the natural environment.

Matters of Strategic Importance for Environment – Key Strategic Priorities

ENV 1 Delivering a county wide nature recovery, connecting habitats and strengthening biodiversity.

Key Strategic Priorities

1. Deliver a connected county-wide Nature Recovery Network that restores, expands and links priority habitats, enabling biodiversity recovery and improving ecological resilience to climate change.
2. Achieve measurable improvements in the condition, extent and connectivity of Gloucestershire's natural environment, supporting the recovery of priority species and ecological networks.

ENV 2 Managing rivers, water environments and green infrastructure as an integrated network to support nature recovery and climate resilience.

Key Strategic Priorities

1. Improve the health, resilience and connectivity of Gloucestershire's rivers, wetlands, floodplains and green infrastructure networks to support nature recovery and environmental quality.
2. Increase resilience to flooding, drought and climate change through integrated catchment-based management and multifunctional blue and green infrastructure.

ENV 3 Understanding environmental capacity and identifying the most sustainable locations for growth, directing growth away from areas of greatest vulnerability.

Key Strategic Priorities

1. Align the distribution of growth with environmental capacity, directing development towards the most sustainable locations and away from areas of greatest environmental vulnerability.
2. Reduce cumulative environmental impacts by ensuring development respects environmental limits and supports the long-term resilience of natural systems and resources.

ENV 4 Protecting and enhancing Gloucestershire’s local character, nationally important landscapes, heritage and environmental assets whilst planning for growth.

Key Strategic Priorities

1. Conserve and enhance Gloucestershire's distinctive landscapes, heritage assets, environmental resources and sense of place for current and future generations.
2. Ensure that growth reinforces local character and contributes positively to the long-term stewardship and enhancement of nationally and locally important assets.

ENV 5 Create healthy places with access to nature and high-quality green and blue infrastructure, for all communities.

Key Strategic Priorities

1. Plan connected networks of green and blue infrastructure that link settlements, neighbourhoods, natural areas and the wider countryside.
2. Improve health, wellbeing and quality of life by strengthening connections between people, nature, recreation and active lifestyles.

ENV 6 Support growth that creates well-designed, sustainable places where people and nature can both thrive.

Key Strategic Priorities

1. Create sustainable, climate-resilient and well-designed places that integrate nature, infrastructure, homes, jobs and services.
2. Ensure growth delivers lasting environmental, social and economic benefits, supporting thriving communities alongside a thriving natural environment.



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