

Green Cluster Studies

Milton Creek Technical Report



March 2008

Executive Summary

The Green Cluster studies set out an ambitious vision for planning the Green Grid public realm and provide an Action Plan to support its delivery across north Kent. Seven Green Cluster Studies have been undertaken to date, and a further Cluster Study is planned for the Isle of Sheppey. Each one focuses on areas of intensive regeneration and change where there are superb opportunities to create strategically sited new greenspaces which will raise expectations, add value to existing investment and create high quality green infrastructure for future development.

The Cluster Studies have adopted a partnership approach to co-ordinate discussions amongst key stakeholders in each cluster. Many are engaged in developing ideas and drawing up plans for individual sites and the Cluster Studies' workshops have provided a valuable opportunity to focus attention on the relationships between projects and the wider landscape setting.

Milton Creek is Sittingbourne's historic dock. Once a hive of industrial activity, its wharves, mills, docks and tramways have fallen into disrepair and the area is isolated from the town by semi-derelict industrial land. A planned new waterfront district will be the catalyst for transforming Milton Creek and re-connecting Sittingbourne to The Swale.

The Green Cluster Studies' vision for Milton Creek draws together and expresses a common vision for the Milton Creek Cluster. It is an ambitious vision, with a network of public rights of way extending right from Sittingbourne town centre out to the Swale. The network includes connections, destinations and greenspaces which link the principal routes along the Creek to adjacent neighbourhoods. Key stakeholders responsible for leading and influencing the ongoing projects and activities in the Milton Creek area include Swale Borough Council, Kent County Council, the Environment Agency, Kent Wildlife Trust, Natural England, Sustrans, Groundwork Kent & Medway, local landowners, the Bridge Education & Environment Centre and Sittingbourne Yacht Club.

The Milton Creek Green Cluster Study makes the case for strategic, targeted investment in the Green Grid places and connections which link Milton Creek to its hinterland. Sittingbourne is receiving substantial regeneration funding under the Government's Sustainable Communities Plan and English Partnerships has identified central Sittingbourne as a priority area for investment and activity. So Milton Creek is the focus for significant ongoing investment and the new waterfront district has the potential to transform the whole axis of activity within the town. Milton Creek offers the kind of landscape setting which will lift land values, but, without complementary investment in local environmental enhancement and connectivity, the full scale of the regeneration opportunities may not be realised.

The Green Cluster Vision for the Milton Creek Cluster is accompanied by an Action Plan for its delivery. The Action Plan demonstrates how the delivery of various components of the vision can be facilitated - by Greening the Gateway Kent & Medway and by a range of other partners. It also sets out broad capital costs for the investment required to achieve the vision and an overall timetable for its implementation which demonstrates the inter-relationships between proposed and ongoing projects throughout the cluster.

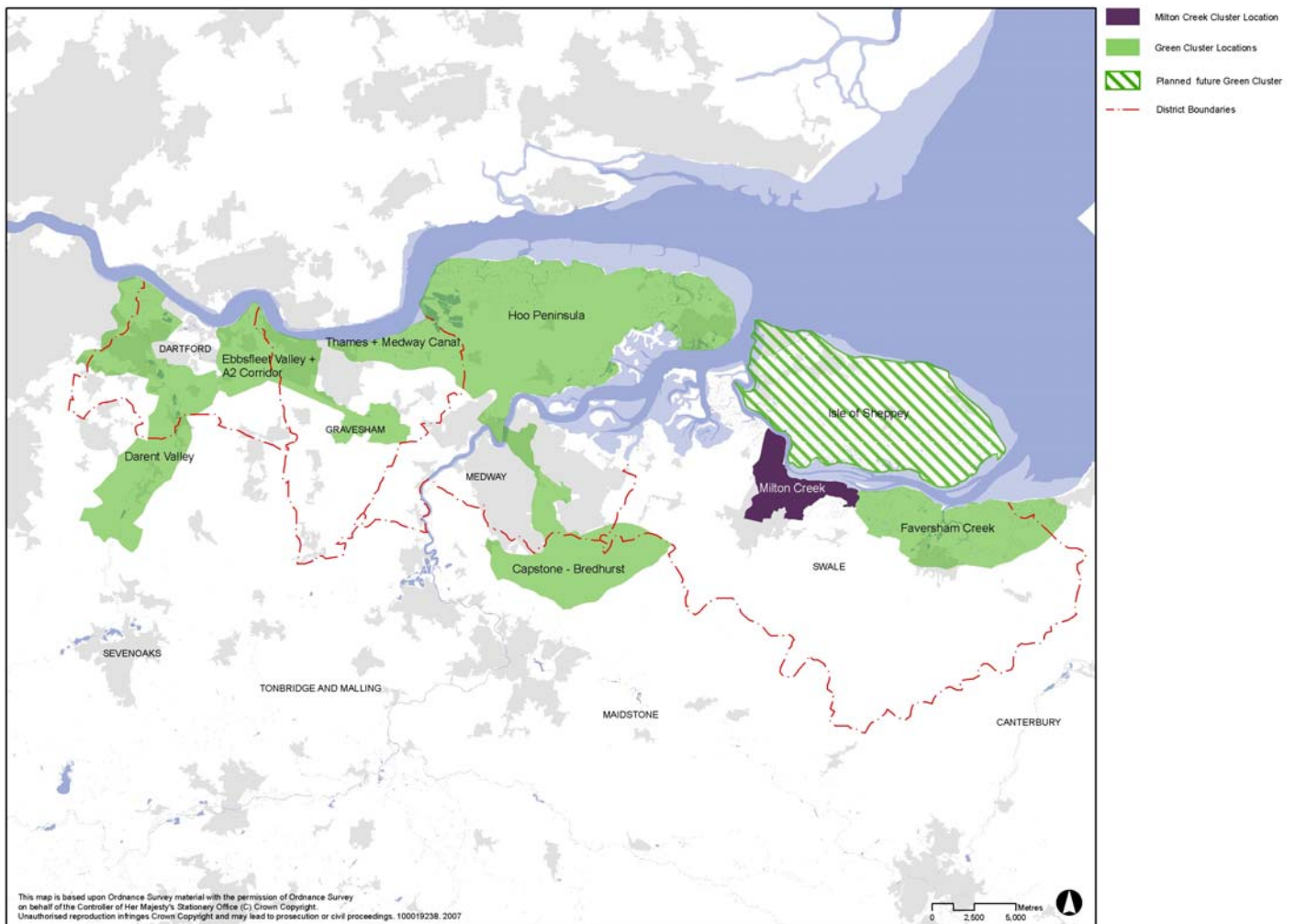


1 What are the Green Cluster Studies?

The Green Cluster studies set out an ambitious vision for the Green Grid public realm and provide an Action Plan to support its delivery across north Kent. Seven Green Cluster Studies have been undertaken to date, and a further Cluster Study is planned for the Isle of Sheppey. Each one focuses on areas of intensive regeneration and change where there are superb opportunities to create strategically sited new greenspaces which will raise expectations, add value to existing investment and create high quality green infrastructure for future development.

'Clusters' or groupings of planned and aspirational green space projects were identified during the Green Grid stakeholder workshops held in Kent Thameside, Medway and Swale in 2007 and the areas selected for the Green Cluster Studies take account of this earlier work. The Green Cluster Studies have:

- identified a coherent sense of place for each cluster area
- captured what is already happening
- identified stakeholder aspirations and updated existing studies
- identified inter-dependencies, gaps and opportunities
- articulated a common vision for each cluster area
- developed an outline action plan which set out actions, governance and phasing for delivering the vision
- made the business case for investment



Green Clusters



The Cluster Studies have adopted a partnership approach to co-ordinate discussions amongst key stakeholders in each cluster. Many are engaged in developing ideas and drawing up plans for individual sites and the Cluster Studies' workshops have provided a valuable opportunity to focus attention on the relationships between projects and the wider landscape setting. Two workshops were held for each cluster: the focus of the first workshop was to collate information, define objectives and understand stakeholder aspirations; the second workshop was a creative session in which the stakeholders worked together to develop a common vision for the cluster.

The overarching Green Clusters vision for Milton Creek captures stakeholder aspirations and visions and inspires an ambitious and creative approach. It is not a proposal or a bid, but is intended to be a helpful tool to prompt creative discussion and joined up thinking in future discussions between stakeholders as the various projects in the cluster are taken forward. Ultimately the Green Cluster Studies will increase confidence, make the case for investment and provide a lever to bid for further funding.



2 Milton Creek Green Cluster

Sense of place



disconnected - amorphous car parks - blocked - circuitous - intimidating - derelict



shifting patterns - water and mud - wilderness - shelter - flocks - industry - squeezed



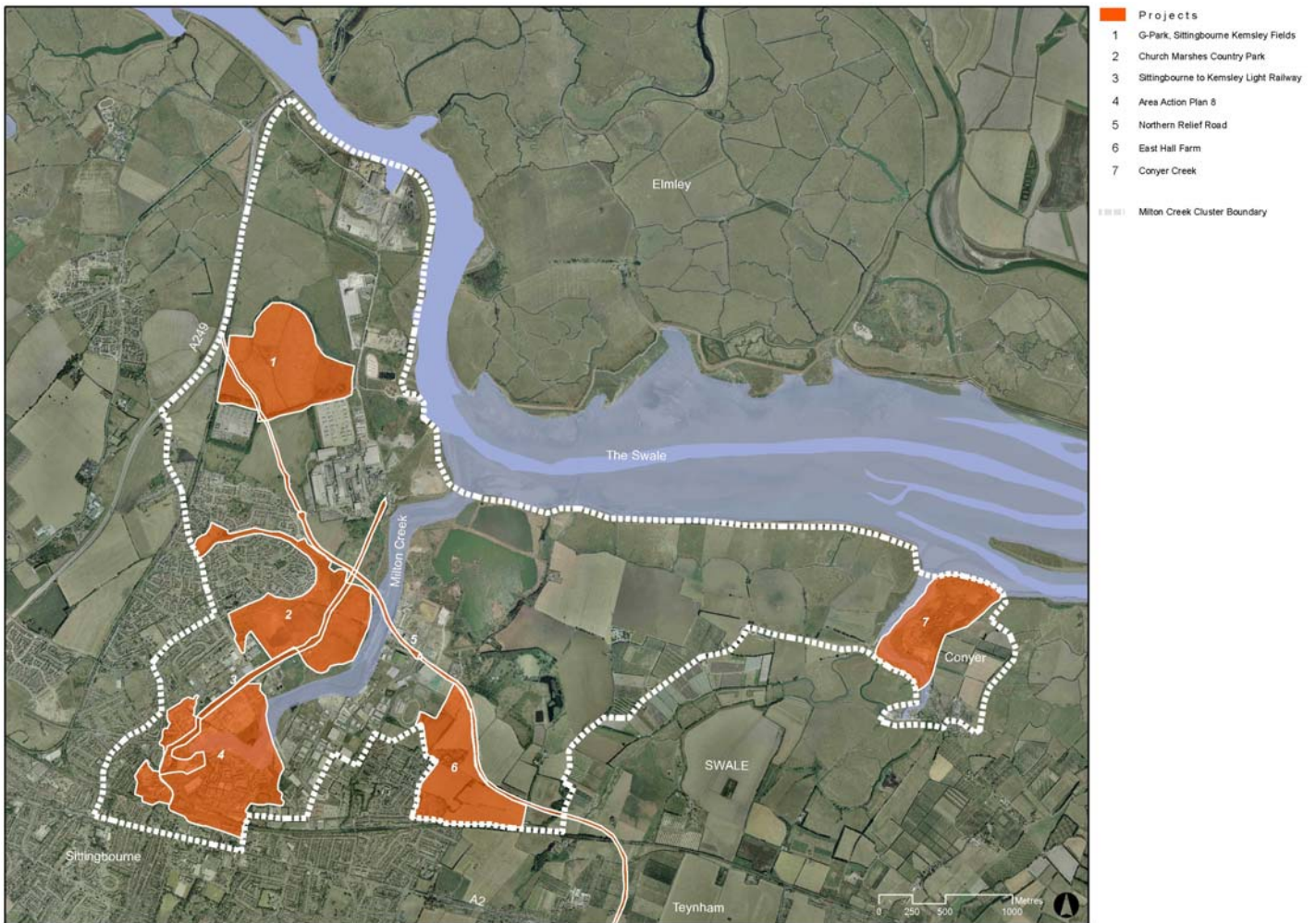
Milton Creek is a fascinating microcosm which winds from a secluded, narrow waterfront at the heart of Sittingbourne out to the expansive flats and marshes of The Swale. The scenery is in a constant state of flux as the tide exposes shifting patterns of water and mud. The Saxon Shore Way takes a circuitous route, squeezed between the industrial units and the creek but connecting Milton Creek to the wider Green Grid routes along the Swale - towards Conyer to the east and Iwade to the west. The Swale Heritage Trail and National Cycle Route One also connect to this hub in the public rights of way network and Sittingbourne train station is only a few minutes walk away. But, despite these connections and a wonderful creek-side landscape, Milton Creek currently presents a missed opportunity for Sittingbourne and the Thames Gateway.

Milton Creek was an important historic transport link and oyster fishery from medieval times and in the 19th century was a hive of industrial activity, with numerous wharves, mills, docks, brickworks and an extensive network of tramways. Paper manufacture in the area dates from 1769 when paper was manufactured at the main Sittingbourne Mill and associated wharf and the tide mill, which projected out over Milton Creek at the head of the creek. Brick-making and cement works later dominated the creek-side, destroying much of the earlier land use pattern, but there were also at least eight ship/barge yards in operation and wharves, docks and berths ran almost continuously along the entire east bank of the creek. During the 20th century the quarries were used for landfill and the majority of the factories and kilns demolished.

The historic connections between Sittingbourne and its historic dock have long been severed and the creek is now entirely surrounded by intimidating land uses, including poor quality industrial units, extensive derelict land, amorphous tracts of car parking and busy roads. Visitors and even most residents are unlikely to be aware of the creek's existence and only the determined dog walker or naturalist will negotiate the tortuous footpath routes around industrial buildings to get to the banks of the creek.



Forces for change - existing proposals, projects & activities



Existing proposals, projects & activities

Sittingbourne is receiving substantial regeneration funding under the Government's Sustainable Communities Plan and English Partnerships has identified central Sittingbourne as a priority area for investment and activity. An area at the head of Milton Creek is allocated as an Area Action Plan in the Swale Borough Local Plan¹ and is to be the subject of a detailed masterplan (which will be adopted by the council in December 2008). A design framework plan for the town centre and the area immediately surrounding Sittingbourne railway station highlighted the potential for a new town square as a forecourt to the station, as well as a bridge over the railway line to link a future mixed use waterfront district at Milton Creek with the town centre. These ideas are now being taken forward in the Local Development Framework and the forthcoming town centre strategy will link proposals for Milton Creek to plans for the design and regeneration of Sittingbourne's town centre.

The Church Marshes Country Park has been developed on a former brownfield site on the west banks of Milton Creek. It is already an important urban open space in an area with limited opportunities for recreation and is developing strong links with local youth groups.

Development plans are emerging for the former town centre paper mill site, a new warehouse development at Kemsley Fields, a landscape restoration project on the former brickworks site at Conyer Creek and the Sittingbourne Northern Relief Road, which will bridge across the creek and transform perceptions of the area. Milton Creek is set to become a new gateway.

The location of these major proposals, together with a range of other ongoing activities and forces for change are shown on the aerial view.

¹ Swale Borough Local Plan, Adopted February 2008



Stakeholders

Key stakeholders within the Milton Creek Cluster are:

Swale Borough Council - planning and delivery of forthcoming masterplans for Milton Creek and the wider Sittingbourne town centre and delivery of the Swale Green Grid and Swale Open Space Strategies. Within Swale Borough Council, the Swale Rural Forum has a key role in delivering the Green Grid public realm. The Cluster Study provides a preliminary vision which will inform the forthcoming masterplanning process which Swale Borough Council is undertaking for the Milton Creek Area.

Kent County Council Highways - design & delivery of the Sittingbourne Northern Relief Road - a key issue is whether the road bridge across the creek will be a fixed, low level bridge or a lifting bridge which would allow boats to navigate the full length of the creek and contribute to the waterfront atmosphere of the new development at the head of the creek

Environment Agency - shoreline & flood management, recreation & waterfront access, protection of controlled water quality, fisheries and contamination. The majority of the land adjacent to the creek is within the 100 year flood plain so opportunities for built development are restricted. At Milton Creek there is a balance to be struck between protection of the marsh environment (by structures which are designed to prevent erosion) and promoting access for eels, which need to reach the freshwater environment of the upper creek in order to breed. The Environment Agency has also provided information on the status of the landfill sites along the creek, with timescales and criteria for remediation.

Kent Wildlife Trust - Milton Creek is a Local Wildlife Site and Kent Wildlife Trust would like to influence the management of the site to maintain, restore or enhance the nature conservation interest of the area. Of particular interest is the Murston Lakes area, which might become a future nature reserve with unlimited public access. Kent Wildlife Trust would also like to work with landowners adjacent to the creek and in the Eurolink industrial estate to improve the environment generally for people and for wildlife (with wildlife corridors and 'stepping stones' through the estate). Murston Church (currently derelict) might be used as a centre for community liaison officer, surrounded by a wildlife garden which could be used by people from the estate. There are also opportunities to make living landscape links (based on the ecological network model) to the Swale marshes and Conyer.

Natural England - an overarching interest in promoting public access to the natural environment and in the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity throughout the cluster

Land Restoration Trust - an interest in securing the sustainable development of the Conyer brickworks site

Sustrans - National Cycle Route One skirts around the creek, but much of the route is difficult to find and to traverse.

Groundwork Kent & Medway - Groundwork has led the masterplanning and community liaison work relating to the Church Marshes Country Park, which is being developed in conjunction with the phased remediation of the extensive landfill sites on the west bank of the creek. Some 3,000 households are within 15 minutes walk of the park and Groundwork aims to develop meaningful connections with local people. Ultimately Church Marshes Country Park will be a safe and exciting green space which provides a much needed resource for a predominantly urban population, with opportunities for leisure and environmental education that celebrates the area's rich heritage.

Private sector landowners - M-Real, Trenport, Gazeley Ltd, Marshalls. All the local landowners are positively engaged in the masterplanning process led by Swale Borough Council. M-Real owns a long corridor of land stretching between Sittingbourne and Kemsley, which is presently occupied by the Light Railway and is keen to incorporate the re-use of this land in broader plans for the land on the western banks of the creek. Trenport owns the Murston Pits site, which is managed by the Kent Wildfowlers Conservation Association.



Dolphin Barge Museum - the Dolphin Barge Museum is currently closed - its original site on Dolphin Wharf is within the Area Action Plan 8 regeneration area and the museum aims to find a new base and long-term future within the Milton Creek area.

Bridge Education & Environment Centre - Swale Borough Council is making a site within the Church Marshes Country Park available to this registered charity of local volunteers on a long-term lease for a centre which will be used for environmental education and interpretation, arts, complementary health and a facility for small conferences.

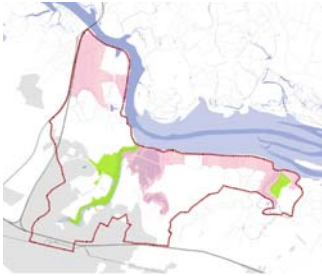
Sittingbourne Yacht Club and other creek users, including a sea cadet training group. The principal aim of the boating community is to maintain and enhance the use of the creek for navigation. With the development of the waterfront district, Milton Creek could become a popular destination for visiting yachts and leisure boats. However, this aspiration can only be achieved if the road bridge for Northern Relief Road is a lifting bridge, which will allow boats to navigate the length of Milton Creek



3 Policy Context

The context maps have been prepared using GIS data. They illustrate our current knowledge of the cluster area and highlight key potential influences which should be taken into account in planning future activities.

The mini-maps below provide an indication of the range of context maps available; the full set of maps (at a larger scale) is available separately.



Statutory Designations



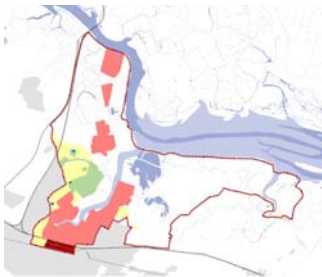
Accessible Greenspaces



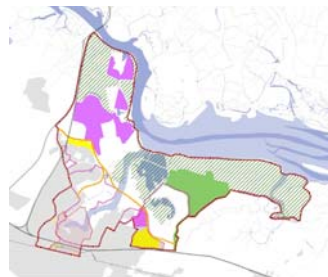
Cultural Heritage



Ecological Network



Land Use



Planning & Policies



Topography



Destinations & Connections

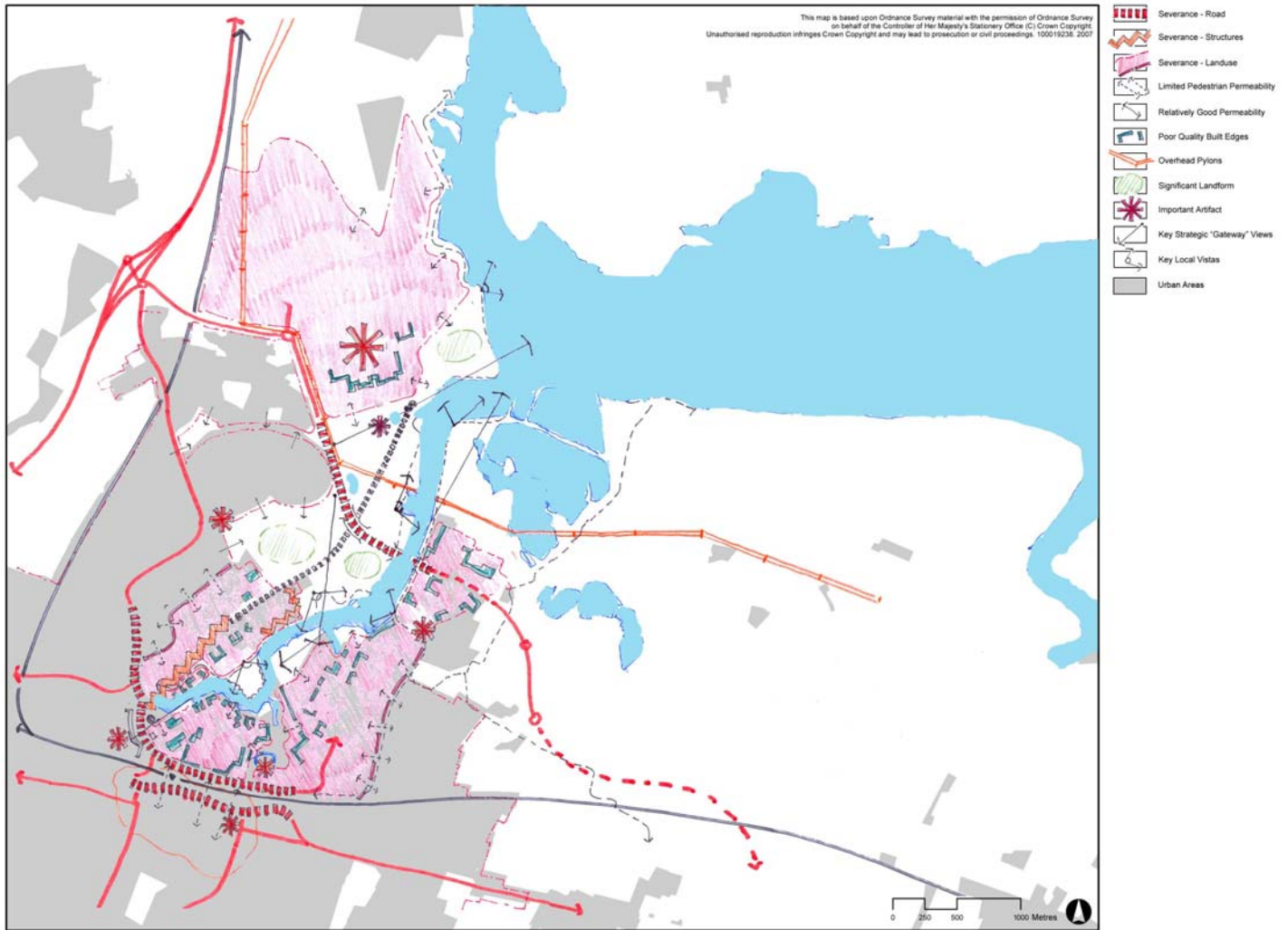
Key issues to note from the context drawings are:

- **Access** - the proposed Sittingbourne Northern Relief Road will cut across Milton Creek, transforming access to this area (in physical and perceptual terms)
 - Milton Creek is served by several major promoted routes, eg National Cycle Route 1, the Saxon Shore Way and the Swale Heritage Trail - the issue is the poor quality of these routes and the impression they convey of a degraded and relatively intimidating landscape - ie Milton Creek looks better 'on paper' than in reality
 - Milton Creek is within easy walking distance of Sittingbourne's railway station and town centre
- **Policy context** - Sittingbourne town centre and the area at the head of Milton Creek are the focus for a major programme of regeneration (Area Action Plans 7 and 8)
- **Statutory designations** - Milton Creek is a Local Wildlife Site and connects to a range of nationally and internationally important designated ecological sites on The Swale
- **Hydrology** - Much of the land surrounding Milton Creek is within the 100 year floodplain - an issue for future built development and the design of footpaths, cycleways and public greenspaces



4 Analysis

As a first step toward defining an overarching vision for Milton Creek, the Analysis drawing begins to focus on the way the area is perceived, by pedestrians, cyclists, residents, visitors and those who work in the neighbourhood. It analyses the public realm, highlighting connections, gaps, barriers and the inter-relationships between existing projects and activities around the creek.



Milton Creek: Analysis



Milton Creek Cluster - SWOT ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS

- Fascinating, attractive creek environment
- Valuable nature conservation habitats
- Proximity to town centre
- Existing strategic Investment at Church Marshes - the first step in establishing a 'green wedge' linking Sittingbourne to the Swale

WEAKNESSES

- Severance of Eurolink Way & railway
- Intimidating & degraded land uses surround and isolate the Creek
- Sewage works
- Long distances along creekside - particularly on foot
- May not be possible for boats to access the head of the creek

OPPORTUNITIES

- Gateway views from new road bridge
- New waterfront district at head of the creek (planned regeneration as part of AAP 8)
- Promoted rights of way (national, footpath & cycleway routes)
- Heritage features - Murston Church & historic moat

THREATS

- Severance (to pedestrians, cyclists & wildlife) as a result of the embankments associated with the Northern Relief Road)
- Other development does not deliver the wider benefits necessary to bring Milton Creek into Sittingbourne's public realm as a major greenspace link

The analysis drawing highlights the issue of 'severance'. The railway line and Eurolink Way combine to function as a major divisive barrier for pedestrians and few are likely to make the journey between the town centre and the creek on foot. Even when people are walking or cycling near to the creek they are unlikely to be aware of its existence because the creek is fully surrounded by degraded and underused land; it is completely isolated from the rest of Sittingbourne. In their current context, the overhead pipes and sections of the Sittingbourne to Kemsley Light Railway seem rather intimidating structures. These and the sewage works are highlighted with a zigzag line on the plan. There is no positive built frontage to the creek - the industrial areas are designed to be accessed by car and, even though the Saxon Shore Way, National Cycle Route 1 and the Swale Heritage Trail pass through the area, those on foot or on a bike are likely to feel disorientated and often intimidated by their surroundings.

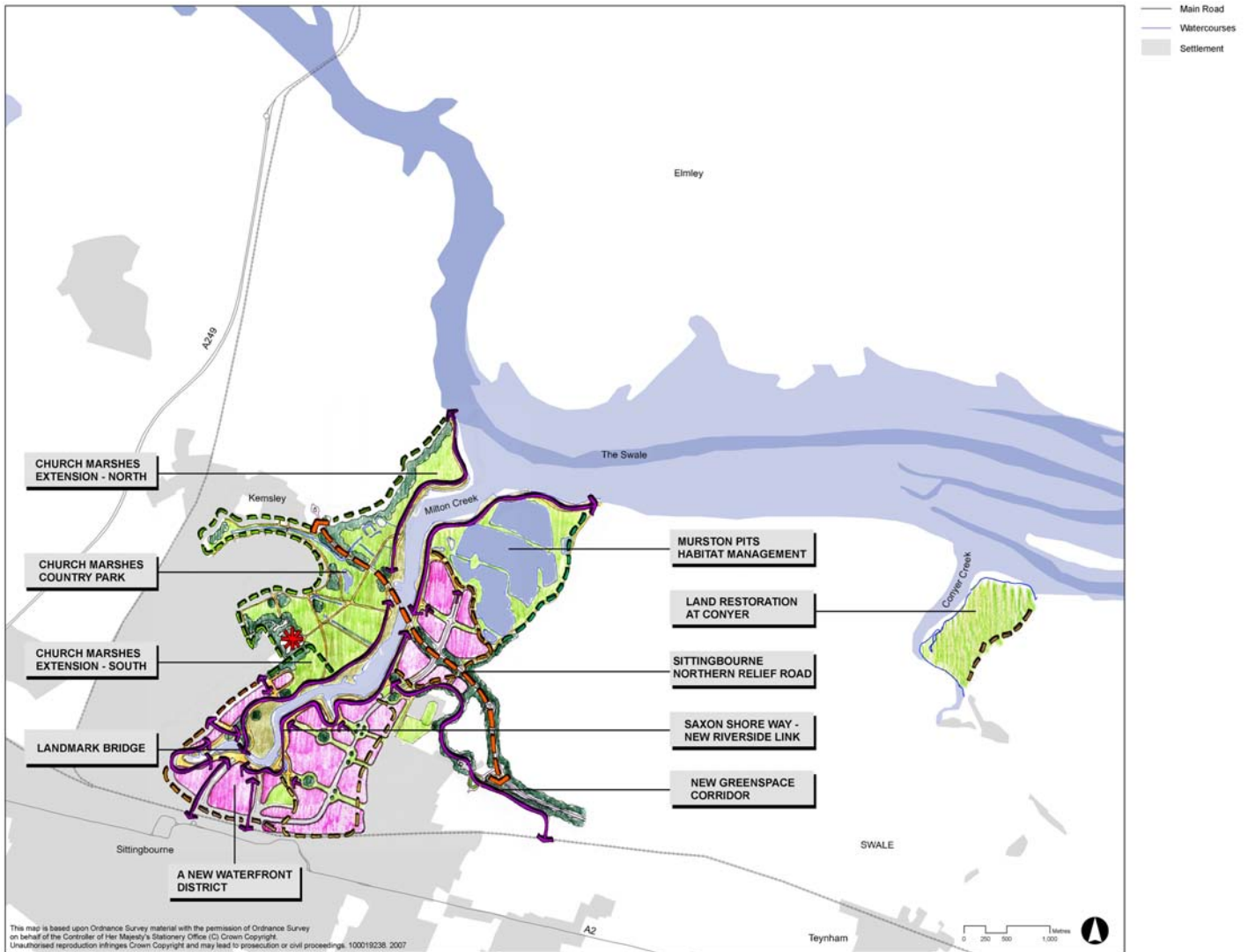
However the creek itself is a fascinating and attractive landscape. Local views along the creek give a wonderful sense of connection to the wider Swale and the proximity of the industrial buildings does not detract from the inherent character of this superb natural asset. The Northern Relief Road bridge will open up views to the creek so that it becomes a gateway landscape for Sittingbourne and the local landmarks - the paper mill chimneys, the landfill mounds and views along the creek will be prominent along this key route. However, the bridge (and its associated embankments present a (future) barrier to pedestrian, visual and wildlife connectivity along the creek so the road is potentially a severance as well as a gateway.

At a local scale, the historic (derelict) Murston Church is isolated in the middle of the industrial area and a historic moat is 'lost' amidst the roads and tarmac of the industrial estate close to the creek.



5 Milton Creek - Vision framework

Milton Creek has the potential to be Swale's landmark environmental project, demonstrating the strong, cultural links between Sittingbourne and its stunning estuarine landscapes. A new waterfront district at the head of the creek will look out over a lively creekside setting, with quayside walks and cafés. A sculptural footbridge connects both banks of the creek just beyond extensive reedbeds and from this point onwards the creekside landscape changes to become a sequence of winding pathways, boardwalks, reedbeds and superb, ever expanding views. Paths connect local neighbourhoods to the Saxon Shore Way via the Church Marshes Country Park to the west and along the green corridors which permeate the mixed use districts to the east. The restored landfill sites along the route provide elevated viewpoints and the whole environment is a rich mosaic of wetland, scrub and grassland habitats.



Milton Creek: Vision Framework



Key opportunities and components of the vision are:

- **Make the most of Sittingbourne's greatest asset** - a green corridor of water, reeds, open spaces and pathways which will link the town to the wider Swale marshes, bringing valuable leisure, recreational and health benefits to an urban population. The whole of Milton Creek is a wonderful wetland landscape which changes in character as it opens up towards the estuary. The landscape at the head of the creek offers a potentially stunning waterfront setting for the new mixed use district. The inner creek winds around an extensive reedbed and there is scope to open up a couple of historic narrow tributaries which could provide an intimate waterfront character within a smaller scale, pedestrian friendly public realm. The alignment of these creeks also focuses connections towards the town centre and the tributary to the south east ends at a historic moat, which could provide a feature of public interest and an opportunity for interpretation
- **A new waterfront district** - The Vision Framework drawing assumes that the older industrial area at the head of the Creek has been transformed into a new mixed use waterfront district accessed via a bridge over the railway lines. This major development will unlock the inherent high land values potentially associated with Milton Creek, turning a backwater into a waterfront opportunity. The Local Plan Inspector's Report states that a link is needed between the High Street and Milton Creek and a recent masterplan framework prepared for Sittingbourne demonstrates how these historic connections might be realised once again
- **The Northern Relief Road** is a potentially divisive element which could sever or limit connectivity for people and wildlife and intrude within views along the creek. But the bridge also provides a valuable road/cycle connection and opens the creek up to become a new gateway landscape with dramatic landmark views. The detailed design of the road will be crucially important in determining the result of the balance between gateway opportunity and severance.
- **Shared space** - Once the Northern Relief Road is in place, there will be opportunity for a radical transformation of the busy Eurolink Way which separates the Milton Creek district from the town centre. This road is used for routine daily school trips by numerous children who would benefit from a more pedestrian-friendly environment.
- **Saxon Shore Way** - As land values increase, there will be opportunities to restructure the land uses surrounding the creek. For instance the waterfront part of the Eurolink estate is the most degraded area, with substantial areas of underused or derelict land. There will be opportunities to build in greater permeability for pedestrians and wildlife and to develop planning policy about how future industrial development addresses the creek with a more positive frontage. A key objective will be to realign the Saxon Shore Way so that it runs along the edge of the creek. On the western bank, there may be opportunities to re-use the corridor of land between Sittingbourne and Kemsley which is presently occupied by the light railway.
- **Green corridor** - the intervention of the new Sittingbourne Northern Relief Road brings potential for a new green corridor which wraps around the East Hall Farm buildings and the sports facilities and links through to the historic (but currently derelict) Murston Church, picking up on existing footpath connections. The church might be converted to become a centre for Kent Wildlife Trust's Community Liaison Officer, with a wildlife garden and small café.
- **Enhanced valuable wildlife habitats** - Milton Creek is already an important mosaic of habitats; the creek itself is a Local Wildlife Site and the head of the creek links to the internationally important Swale designated Ramsar and SPA areas. There are opportunities to enhance the value of the wetlands by creating and enhancing links to public spaces and urban areas along the wider creekside corridor, including an extended Church Marshes County Park, Murston Pits and sites within new and existing built development.
- **Architectural landmarks** - A future multi-use visitor centre will be designed as a landmark building seen from the new Northern Relief Road Bridge and influencing people's perceptions of the creek environment. Overall, Milton Creek is a large-scale landscape and Green Grid connections around, along and across the creek would be dramatically enhanced by the construction of a pedestrian bridge relatively close to the head of the creek. This new pedestrian footbridge might also be a superb sculptural design, which will transform first impressions of the new waterfront development.



6 The Bigger Picture

The **Thames Gateway Parklands Programme** is a strategic planning and development initiative, overseen by the Department for Communities & Local Government. It builds on the *Greening the Gateway Strategy* first set out in 2004² and aims to transform the identity of the Thames Gateway, increasing economic social and environmental value so that the area becomes a flagship for sustainable living.

In north Kent, the regeneration process is well underway, but there is much to be done to make the most of the current opportunities, raise expectations and articulate an ambitious vision to secure high quality environments for sustainable living. *The Greening the Gateway Kent & Medway initiative* (GGKM) is one of three partnerships engaged in promoting and delivering this vision in the Thames Gateway (the others are in East London and South Essex).

High level regeneration outcomes for the Thames Gateway: - The **Thames Gateway Parklands Programme**, providing the context for a network of accessible, high quality and sustainable landscapes and waterways, which capitalize on existing natural, built, historic and cultural assets, to support their conservation, enhancement and ongoing use, and boost the Gateway's rich biodiversity assets, strengthen character and identity, transforming perceptions and making it a great place to live, work and invest. *Thames Gateway Delivery Plan, December 2007.*

The Thames Gateway Parklands Programme offers new opportunities for investment which will be delivered via **five transformational themes**:

- *Thames Waterfront* - a new estuary path, which will eventually run along both banks of the River Thames, waterfront projects featuring public access and an improved river environment
- *Thames Gateway World Class Heritage* - finance for the bid for Chatham Historic Dockyard and improvements on other heritage sites
- *Thames Gateway Landscapes* - large scale public green spaces of regional importance
- *Thames Gateway Corridors* - environmental improvements to some strategic transport corridors, including key rail routes and A-roads to provide carbon offsetting schemes, easier travel and an enhanced first impression
- *Thames Gateway Squares* - two or three large urban squares with a focus on cultural, economic and environmental activities.

² DEFRA and ODPM, *Creating sustainable communities: Greening the Gateway, 2004*



7 Delivery

The Green Cluster Studies provide a framework for delivering Thames Gateway Parklands 'on the ground'. The vision expressed in this *Technical Report*, captures many of the individual visions and ideas being promoted by stakeholders, combining them all into an overarching vision for the Milton Creek Cluster which all stakeholders recognise and can buy into. So far, we have a vision framework to help inform funding decisions, but it is only the starting point and will be followed by a rolling programme of consultation, planning, funding bids and, for some projects, design development and implementation.

Action Planning

This *Technical Report* is accompanied by a separate *Action Plan* which sets the broad agenda for the transformation of the Milton Creek Cluster, emphasising the scope for delivery of green infrastructure. The *Action Plan* sets out the issues to be addressed and the type of funding required to achieve the Green Clusters vision. Greening the Gateway Kent & Medway will establish a Cluster Steering Group for each of the Green Clusters. The *Action Plan* will be a working document, which will identify (for each project):

- who will be the lead partner (champion) and how stakeholder involvement should be broadened
- how it will be taken forward, in terms of funding, consultation, resourcing and procurement
- a clear timetable for planning and implementation which takes account of all other relevant projects plans and revenue funding for ongoing monitoring and management.

8 References

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