

Submission to the consultation on The Greater Manchester Spatial Strategy



Introduction: The Ramblers

This submission is made on behalf of the Greater Manchester and High Peak Area of the Ramblers. We have local groups covering each borough and area-wide groups and activities. We are an organisation dedicated to looking after paths and green spaces, leading walks, opening new places to explore and encouraging everyone to get outside and discover how walking boosts health and happiness. This submission will concentrate on issues in which we have particular expertise and policy areas on which we can speak authoritatively.

The Plan for jobs, homes and the environment

We share the overall objectives set out by the Mayor, of decent homes and good jobs, and for everyone to have green space to enjoy and clean air to breathe and we are encouraged by the fact that walking and cycling are mentioned from the beginning of the document.

However, in seeking to meet anticipated demand for new housing and employment, despite an explicit preference to develop land already in use or brownfield sites, it is very disappointing to note that greater efforts were not made to produce a plan that has no net impact on the green belt. This version of the plan proposes to release significant less green belt than the previous version, but there will undoubtedly be local campaigns to save areas of green belt that are significant to local communities and we support local Ramblers groups views of those issues. (1.19)

Local groups are best placed to comment on geographically specific questions, so this submission concentrates on GM-wide principles and commitments.

Vision and Strategic Objectives

The vision of Greater Manchester as one of the best places in the world in which to grow up, get on and grow old is admirable and we wholeheartedly agree that the city-region should be a place at the forefront of action on climate change with clean air and a flourishing natural environment.

“Our Strategy” (Chapter 4)

We very much agree that development will need to be undertaken at an appropriate density and with suitable provision for green infrastructure and for policies to help to maximise the ability of people to travel by walking, cycling and public transport, and reduce reliance on the car. (4.11 and Policy GM-Strat 14)

We support the objective of sustainable development and the clear preference to use brownfield land for development needs. (Policy GM-S 1)

We strongly agree that we should leave fossil fuels in the ground, and also support the restoration of peat-based habitats and woodland, and agree new developments should be carbon neutral. (Policy GM-S 2)

“A Greener Greater Manchester” (Chapter 8)

This chapter is of particular significance. The chapter begins with a very clear recognition of the imperative to value important landscapes and continues by emphasising the significance of green and blue infrastructure, including green belt land itself to promote good mental and physical health, create liveable places and support economic growth.

While other chapters of the document seek to address the housing and economic needs of the city region and to ensure that there is more inclusive and sustainable growth, we very much welcome this chapter as it underpins the opening commitments of a safe home and a good job and for everyone to have green space to enjoy and clean air to breathe.

Valuing Important Landscapes: We strongly support the approach to valuing important landscapes, and the requirement that any development should reflect and respond to the special qualities and sensitivities of the key landscape characteristics. We also agree that transitional areas around new development and the interface of new development with the surrounding countryside/landscape require well-considered and sensitive treatment. We particularly welcome the inclusion of rights of way as one of the landscape characteristics to be taken account of. (Policy GM-G 1)

GM’s Green Infrastructure Network: We also support the commitment to protect and enhance the network of green infrastructure throughout Greater Manchester and to provide green travel routes, enabling more trips to be made by walking and cycling. As the existing network of footpaths and public rights of way are a critical building block of our green infrastructure and are the key means of access to green infrastructure, they should therefore be classed as “Strategic” in planning terms. We believe that this should be added to this policy statement.

We would also suggest the wording in final paragraph of this policy statement is amended. The words, “where practical” are unnecessary and the policy should set as a default an expectation that all new developments would in every instance “protect, enhance and expand the green infrastructure network”. (Policy GM-G 2)

The document identifies four key elements of the green infrastructure: river valleys and waterways; lowland wetlands and mosslands; uplands; and urban green spaces, with trees and woodlands being present in all.

River Valleys and Waterways: We would particularly like to endorse the following priorities: to retain the remaining open character of the river valleys; promote public enjoyment of the river valleys and retain existing pockets of relative tranquillity and seclusion. We also support the increased use of canals and watercourses for active travel, and agree strongly that improving and extending rights of way alongside the water is essential to providing walking and cycling routes for both recreation and commuting. There is an issue, however, on some canal towpaths with regard to potential conflicts of use. Existing guidance suggests a minimum width of 3 metres for unsegregated shared-use paths and 4 metres on busier routes. Many canal towpaths are much narrower and have significant side constraints. Site-specific consultations with user representatives should be undertaken to seek to resolve these conflicts. (Policy GM-G 3)

Lowland wetlands and mosslands: These are also significant elements in the infrastructure that the GMSF proposes to protect. We support this aim and also the intention to place a strong emphasis on reconnecting local communities to the natural and historic environments. We strongly support expanding public access and the creation of new circular routes, and enhancing recreation opportunities. (Policy GM-G 4)

Uplands: The document recognises the importance of the uplands and moorland as key habitats and also their role in providing a strong sense of place and orientation. Greater Manchester’s uplands are also recognised as part of much larger areas of moorland landscape stretching eastwards into the Peak District and north to the West Pennine Moors and the Lancashire South Pennines. The summary policy statement at the end of this section contains positive measures to protect and enhance the uplands, but – in contrast to the preceding section on “Lowland Wetland and Mosslands” – does not cover public enjoyment of the moorland. We believe that this may be an oversight and that a similar point 6 should be added to Policy GM-G 5 (on p. 156) as is found in Policy GM-G 4 (on p. 154), i.e.: “Expand public access across the area considerably, including through the creation of new circular routes, and enhance recreation opportunities”. In the body of the text, it recognises that the uplands provide important opportunities for outdoor recreation. It goes on to say, “There are large areas of Open Access Land, several long-distance trails, and reservoirs that form popular visitor destinations. Enabling more people to enjoy the distinctive character of the uplands could help to increase the attractiveness of Greater Manchester as a place to live and visit, and generate local economic benefits” but adds, “this will need to be balanced with the pressures that increased access brings.” We recognise these pressures but believe that the further encouragement of responsible access by walkers and where appropriate other low-impact visitors should also be an important element of this policy statement. (Policy GM-G 5)

Urban Green Space: We welcome the recognition of urban green spaces as one of the key elements of the green infrastructure network. They are essential to the liveability of urban areas, making a vital contribution to mental and physical health, and they often form part of the network of green transport routes, supporting more walking and cycling and less car use. We strongly support the protection and enhancement of existing urban green space and the commitment to work with developers and other stakeholders to deliver new urban green spaces, and for existing and new green space there should be provision for its long-term management and maintenance. Urban green spaces should also have easy access by walking and cycling. (Policy GM-G 6)

Trees and Woodland: We support the plans to increase tree cover and protect existing woodlands because that they provide important habitats and for their contribution to flood risk management and carbon storage. They are also key parts of the green infrastructure and improving public access to woodland areas should be a driver of this policy area. We recognise the value of the provision of street trees in urban areas, but this needs to be managed so as not to restrict footways in order that they do not fall below the Made to Move “double buggy” standard. (Policy GM-G 7)

The document also sets out a commitment to the use of defined standards for the provision of green infrastructure. Given the importance of green space to wellbeing and the liveability of our urban areas, we urge the adoption of high and demanding standards. We endorse the idea of a specific Greater Manchester “Green Factor” for all new developments. However, we are concerned that the wording at the end of this particular policy statement lacks ambition and would prefer a stronger commitment to actively seek to ‘retrofit’ existing built-up areas with green spaces and safe and enjoyable cycling and walking routes. (Policy GM-G 9)

With regard to the whole chapter, we would further note that the proposed long-distance walking trail for Greater Manchester – the “GM Ringway” (gmringway.org) – represents an excellent low-impact means for residents and visitors to access all of the identified categories of landscape within the green infrastructure network.

The Greater Manchester Green Belt: We strongly support the proposed strong protection of the green belt and improved public access and habitat restoration. Detailed comments on proposed release and additions to the green belt will be made by our local groups. (Policy GM-G 11)

“A Greater Manchester for Everyone” (Chapter 9)

Within this chapter, we welcome the recognition of the contribution that walking makes to sustainable places and to health and wellbeing. The document refers to the Greater Manchester Moving programme, which we support, and we welcome the recognition of the need to improve public access to recreational opportunities. We particularly welcome the objective of ‘Protecting and enhancing the public rights of way network’, including access to green infrastructure, expand longer-distance opportunities for walking, cycling and horse-riding and providing everyday options for green travel (Point 6 of Policy GM-E 6). It would be very helpful, as we have noted elsewhere, if the significance of footpaths and public rights of way were also reflected in other parts of the document. We also believe that it is essential that the plan recognises that rights of way need to be recorded properly, and sets down a specific commitment for the ten local authorities to facilitate this, as the current position is that where historic paths are not recorded on Local Authority Definitive Maps by 2026 they will be lost. (Policy GM-E 6)

“A Connected Greater Manchester” (Chapter 10)

We agree that to tackle for example issues of congestion and air quality then we need a massive change in people’s travel behaviour so that walking and cycling become the natural choice for short journeys and public transport for longer trips. To enable that change it is necessary that transport investment is based on people not just vehicles, and we agree that the Global Street Design Guide hierarchy should be followed. (Policy GM-C 1)

We strongly support the measures set out to achieve a dramatic improvement in the quality and extent of Greater Manchester's walking and cycling network. We agree that routes should be safe and attractive and integrated with public transport. We also specifically agree that there should be dedicated separate space for people walking and cycling, with pedestrians and cyclists given priority at junctions. (Policy GM-C 3)

It is important that Greater Manchester’s authorities require all new development to be designed to encourage walking, cycling and public transport, to reduce the negative effects of traffic, and improve health. (Policy GM-C 5)

We agree that targeted improvements to the highway network should be sought where they complement the aim of securing a significant increase in the proportion of trips made by walking, cycling and public transport. (Policy GM-C 6)

We strongly support the proposed “Streets for All” approach that would incorporate the goals of:

- Reduce car dependency and increase levels of walking, cycling and public transport.
- Focus on improving the movement of people and goods, rather than traffic.
- Create healthy, active streets for all.

(Policy GM-C 8)

“Delivering the Plan” (Chapter 12)

The final chapter describes the various partnerships and investment sources that will be required to deliver and monitor the plan. It is focused on statutory agencies and specific providers.

We believe that organisations that are not governmental or private-sector businesses also have a role to play in advising, supporting and challenging. It would be useful to support a range of pilot schemes to test innovative ways of delivering the plan's objectives, particularly around active travel.

Through our networks of groups and volunteers, The Ramblers look after paths and green spaces, lead walks, open new places to explore and encourage everyone to get outside and discover how walking boosts health and happiness, and we are ready to make our contribution to this plan for Greater Manchester.