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Manchester Digital Campus

Response to the Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy for Manchester

November 2024

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1. Introduction

1.1. This 'Response to the Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy for Manchester' ("the Statement") accompanies an application for Full Planning Permission submitted to Manchester City Council (MCC) for Manchester Digital Campus, including forming the new ground levels for the proposed new park ("the Proposed Development"). The design of the park is submitted as a separate planning application by MCC.

1.2. The Applicant is the Government Property Agency (the 'Applicant').

1.3. The Statement sets out how the Proposed Development responds to the vision and objectives set out in the Manchester Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy (2022) ('The G&BI Strategy').

1.4. In turn, this Statement also demonstrates how the Proposed Development is in compliance with the following policies from the Local Development Plan:

Manchester Core Strategy (2012) – Updated March 2024 following adoption of Places for Everyone Joint Development Plan	Policy EN9 – Green Infrastructure Policy EN15 – Biodiversity and Geological Conservation
The Places for Everyone Plan (2024)	Policy JP-Strat13 – Strategic Green Infrastructure Policy JP-G2 – Green Infrastructure Network Policy JP-G3 – River Valleys and Waterways Policy JP-G6 – Urban Green Space Policy JP-G7 – Trees and Woodland Policy JP-G8 – A Net Enhancement of Biodiversity and Geodiversity

1.5. It should be read in conjunction with the Design and Access Statement (prepared by AtkinsRéalis), Chapter 8 (Biodiversity) of Environmental Statement Volume 1 and associated appendices: 8.1 Target Notes and Photographs; 8.2 Biodiversity Net Gain Assessment; and 8.3 Arboricultural Impact Assessment submitted in support of the application.

The G&BI Strategy

1.6. Manchester's Great Outdoors: A Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy for Manchester 2015-25 was adopted by MCC in July 2015 and subsequently updated in 2022, highlighting approaches, challenges and projects that will help bring the Strategy to life over the coming years.

1.7. MCC recognises that green and blue infrastructure is an essential part of creating a successful, liveable city. Parks, river valleys, gardens, street trees, green roofs, canals and many other components all form part of a rich network that is integrated with the built environment in the world's most popular cities.

1.8. The overarching vision for the Strategy remains as follows:

"By 2025, climate-resilient well-maintained green and blue spaces remains an integral part of all neighbourhoods. The city's communities will be living healthy, fulfilled lives, enjoying access to parks and green spaces, and safe green routes for walking, cycling and exercise throughout the city. Green and blue infrastructure will be supporting Manchester's growth."

1.9. Four objectives have been established to enable the vision to be achieved:

- Improve the quality and function of existing green and blue infrastructure;

- Use appropriate green and blue infrastructure as a key component of new developments to help create successful neighbourhoods and support the city's growth;
- Improve connectivity and accessibility to green and blue infrastructure within the city and beyond; and,
- Improve and promote a wider understanding and awareness of the benefits that green and blue infrastructure provides for residents, the economy and the local environment.

1.10. Section 3 of the updated G&BI Strategy outlines the progress to date and noted that the G&BI Strategy has acted as catalysts for some of the most groundbreaking environmental projects in Manchester. The Strategy has encouraged collaboration, bringing together organisations in order to deliver bold, innovative action that will benefit Manchester for many years to come.

1.11. Section 3.4 of the G&BI Strategy recognises that Manchester is a growing city, with plans for significant growth and development over the coming decade. High quality, green and open space that is appropriate to its location, well designed and well maintained will be an important and integral part of creating successful developments and supporting the city's growth.

1.12. The G&BI Strategy provides initial guidance on how developers can achieve this and recognises that different approaches will be required for different types of development and that different solutions, appropriate to the location, will be needed on each scheme. By considering green infrastructure from the beginning of the design process, developers will be able to understand the surrounding landscape, opportunities to enhance and link to it, and the types of green and open space that could be incorporated within and add value to the development itself.

The Application Site

1.13. The Application Site ("the Site"), comprises 2.98ha, is located within New Islington and forms the western portion of the Former Central Retail Park Strategic Regeneration Area ("the SRF Area"), the redevelopment of which is a long standing strategic priority for MCC. MCC endorsed a Strategic Regeneration Framework (SRF) for the Former Central Retail Park in 2023, which sets out the vision to create a high quality, sustainable office district with an attractive public realm at its centre, including a new green space.

1.14. The Site is bound by the Co-op Academy primary school and associated playground and Cotton Field Park to the north, and the Rochdale Canal and associated towpath to the west. Great Ancoats Street, the inner-city ring road, runs along the southern boundary of the Site and the remainder of the former Central Retail Park lies to the immediate east of the Site, separating it from Old Mill Street.

1.15. Although the Site is not located within the Ancoats Conservation Area, the boundary of the Conservation Area runs adjacent to the Site along the banks of the Rochdale Canal.

1.16. Great Ancoats Street, the inner-city ring road, runs along the southern boundary of the Site beyond which lies the Urban Exchange Retail Park, residential apartments in the Grade II* Listed Brownsfield Mill, and serviced apartments on Laystall Street to the south.

1.17. The remainder of the SRF Area lies to the immediate east of the Site, separating it from Old Mill Street. A number of residential apartments line Old Mill Street and rise up to 16 storeys in height, and beyond this to the east lie further residential uses, the Ashton Canal and the New Islington Metrolink stop.

1.18. Whilst the Site does provide some ad-hoc green infrastructure, it does not currently contribute to the wider network of spaces which can be enjoyed and experienced by members of the public and the local community. It does not include any areas where people can meaningfully experience high-quality green and blue infrastructure and as such makes little to no contribution to the vision of the G&BI Strategy.

2. Assessment of the Proposed Development

2.1. This section outlines the vision and objectives of the Manchester Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy 2022 and response from the Proposed Development.

Green and Blue Infrastructure Objectives

2.2. As set out in Section 1, the G&BI Strategy establishes four objectives to enable the vision to be achieved. Table 2.1 below considers the Proposed Development (as described in Section 1) against these objectives.

Table 2.1 The Proposed Development's Response to Green and Blue Infrastructure Objectives

Objective:	Responses:
1. Improve the quality and function of existing Green and Blue Infrastructure to maximise the benefits it delivers.	As a vacant, brownfield site mostly comprised of hardstanding with some mixed trees and scrubs, the Site does not currently positively contribute to Manchester's existing green and blue infrastructure. The Proposed Development will significantly improve the overall quality and function of the city's existing green and blue infrastructure. The G&BI Strategy notes that the rejuvenation of the existing canal network will be a key asset for the City Centre and beyond. The Proposed Development will contribute to this rejuvenation – through introducing a new, high quality, Canal Plaza to the Rochdale Canal and creating a new lively and engaging place accessible to all. The proposals include the removal of the boundary to the towpath and ensuring the public realm links directly to this space. In doing so, the Proposed Development will make the towpath a more attractive environment, enhance the setting of the Rochdale Canal and the adjacent Conservation Area, and encourage increased access to this key blue route through the city. It will also support improved links to Cottonfields Park through creating site levels for the new park (being brought forward concurrently by MCC under a separate planning application). MCC's proposals will integrate into Cottonfields Park and expand the amount of accessible green space available to the local community. Therefore, the Proposed Development will improve the quality and function of the City Centre's existing Green and Blue Infrastructure and maximise the benefits it delivers to this existing infrastructure. In addition, to ensure that the Proposed Development complies with the requirement to deliver 10% biodiversity net gain, a biodiversity gain plan will be produced (secured by condition). In satisfying this condition, the Applicant commits to seek to achieve

Objective:	Responses:
	the BNG requirements offsite within Manchester in the first instance, with the fall back to purchase Biodiversity Credits from a Greater Manchester Habitat Bank only where it has been evidenced that it cannot be met offsite within Manchester within the timescales for commencement of development.
2. Use appropriate green and blue infrastructure as a key component of new developments to help create successful neighbourhoods and support the city's growth.	The Proposed Development will re-activate a key regeneration site within the City Centre which is currently vacant. It will contribute to the creation of new active frontage along a significant stretch of Great Ancoats Street. Whilst the building footprints and supporting hard landscaping for the Proposed Development takes up the majority of the Site, the Proposed Development has sought to creatively maximise green and blue infrastructure within the proposals, which include five new accessible key public realm spaces, which will help to establish the development as a new part of the City Centre. The new public realm and green infrastructure proposed will further support the success of the relatively new neighbourhoods built in Ancoats and New Islington. The Proposed Development will also act as a catalyst for further investment both within the remainder of the SRF Area and the wider City Centre. In doing so, the Proposed Development aligns to the vision of the Greater Manchester Strategy 2013 – 2020, maximising the sustainability potential of the Site, through capturing new opportunities for growth in the commercial economy, creating jobs across the City Region, as well as being a place at the forefront of action on climate change with clean air and a flourishing natural environment.
3. Improve connectivity and accessibility to Green and Blue Infrastructure within the City and beyond.	The Proposed Development will ensure connectivity and accessibility to Green and Blue Infrastructure are improved whilst assimilating sustainably into the existing landscape in this part of the City Centre. The landscaping and public realm design has been fully coordinated with the design for the new park (being brought forward concurrently by MCC under a separate planning application). The Proposed Development will facilitate this through creating the levels for the park, which will integrate and improve connectivity and accessibility into the existing Cottonfields Park and improve connectivity across New Islington. The Applicant is also contributing to the cost of designing the new park and will contribute towards the future maintenance of the park. In terms of blue infrastructure, through the introduction of the new Canal Plaza to the Rochdale Canal, the Proposed Development will encourage increased access to this key blue route through the city by making its towpath a more attractive environment, increasing safety and subsequently increasing footfall. In doing so, it will improve pedestrian and cyclist

Objective:	Responses:
	connectivity and will encourage the City's communities to use these active modes of travel. This demonstrates that the Proposed Development is dedicated to improving connectivity and accessibility to green and blue infrastructure within the city and beyond.
4. Improve and promote a wider understanding and awareness of the benefits that Green and Blue Infrastructure provides to residents, the economy and the local environment.	The Proposed Development will only include c.50 car parking spaces for disabled users only and has been designed to promote the use of active and sustainable modes of transport, both through the provision of significant secure cycle parking spaces and supporting amenities, but also through the public realm design. The Proposed Development will open the currently vacant site up to the general public, providing routes through the site, improved routes along the Rochdale Canal and Great Ancoats Street – in turn promoting the use of the City's green and blue infrastructure. It also includes places to dwell and enjoy for the local community and future users of the Site. Local residents will also benefit from the additional accessible public realm and places to dwell, as provided directly as part of the Proposed Development, or facilitated (on the remainder of the SRF Area). Providing a new public realm environment for all to enjoy will promote the benefits associated with the blue and green infrastructure environment, including supporting active travel, community cohesion, and health and wellbeing.

Relevant Local Development Plan Policies

Manchester Core Strategy (2012)

Policy EN9 Green Infrastructure

2.3. Core Strategy Policy EN9 sets out that new development will be expected to maintain existing green infrastructure in terms of its quantity, quality and multiple function. Where the opportunity arises and in accordance with current G&BI Strategy, the Council will encourage developers to enhance the quality and quantity of green infrastructure, improve the performance of its functions and create and improve linkages to and between areas of green infrastructure.

Policy EN15 Biodiversity and Geological Conservation

2.4. Core Strategy Policy EN15 states the Council will seek to maintain or enhance sites of biodiversity throughout the City and that developers will be expected to identify and implement reasonable opportunities to enhance, restore or create new biodiversity, contributing to linkages between valuable or potentially valuable habitat areas where appropriate.

Places for Everyone Plan (2024)

Policy JP-G2 – Green Infrastructure Network

2.5. Policy JP-G2 states *"a strategic approach will be taken to the protection, management and enhancement of our Green Infrastructure in order to protect and enhance the ecosystem services which the Green Infrastructure Network provides, including flood management, climate change mitigation and*

adaptation." Where it is deemed feasible, new and existing green infrastructure should be integrated into new development so as to protect, enhance, and expand the green infrastructure network.

Policy JP-G3 – River Valleys and Waterways

2.6. Policy JP-G3 states *"river valleys and waterways will be protected and improved as central components of our Green Infrastructure Network and a vital part of a Nature Recovery Network, making a major contribution to local identity, quality of life and the natural environment."*

Policy JP-G6 – Urban Green Space

2.7. Policy JP-G6 stipulates that existing urban green space will be protected whilst new urban green space is encouraged to be delivered. Development should be designed to support the positive use of nearby green spaces, such as by offering a high-quality setting, providing natural surveillance, and facilitating easy access by walking and cycling.

Policy JP-G7 – Trees and Woodland

2.8. Policy JP-G7 references there should be a considerable increase in provision of street trees within urban areas, and public access to trees should be enhanced particularly by sustainable travel models.

Policy JP-G8 – A Net Enhancement of Biodiversity and Geodiversity

2.9. Policy JP-G8 promotes biodiversity enhancement through various initiatives and put strong emphasis on nature conservation, access to nature, and habitats enhancement.

Applicant's Response to Relevant Planning Policy

2.10. The existing Site does not effectively contribute to the City's green and blue infrastructure as it is a vacant site that mainly consists of hardstanding and some mixed trees and shrubs. As set out within this Statement, the Proposed Development has taken the opportunity to enhance the green and blue infrastructure of the Site through the provision of high-quality private and publicly accessible landscaping and public realm (including extensive tree and shrub planting).

2.11. The Proposed Development will open-up a vacant site and provide new routes through the Site for the public to enjoy. It will improve the quality of the pedestrian and cyclist environment and improve linkages to and between areas of green infrastructure, including other areas of open space in the city.

2.12. Along Great Ancoats Street, the proposals seek to take pedestrians away from traffic, creating new attractive and green pedestrian route adjacent to the South Building and its active frontage. Street trees form part of the landscaping proposals which creates an attractive and soft edge to the Site, greening Great Ancoats Street.

2.13. The Proposed Development will also provide a more attractive interface between the Site and the Rochdale Canal through the removal of the boundary wall and a new high quality and attractive Canal Plaza adjacent to the Canal. This new space will have a local identity and will provide an area where people can dwell, relax and enjoy the canal and its heritage setting, contributing to the overall quality of life and natural environment.

2.14. This new public realm space will encourage increased access to this key blue route by making its towpath a more attractive environment, increasing safety and subsequently increasing footfall, which will improve wider pedestrian and cyclist connectivity within this part of the City Centre.

2.15. The landscaping and public realm has also been designed to link seamlessly into the adjacent proposed new park (being brought forward concurrently by MCC under a separate planning application). The Proposed Development will facilitate this through creating the levels for the park, which will integrate and improve connectivity and accessibility into the existing Cottonfields Park and improve connectivity across New Islington to enhance the city's overall green infrastructure provision. The Applicant is also contributing to the cost of designing the new park and will contribute towards the future maintenance of the park.

2.16. The enhancement of public realm and design of the proposals seek to increase passive surveillance, making a positive contribution to reducing localised crime and increasing safety. Overall, local communities will benefit from activated streets, thereby enhancing the vitality of the local area.

2.17. Planting proposals have been carefully considered to create an attractive public realm, introduce vertical scale, provide seasonal interest, improve biodiversity as well as provide numerous wider environmental benefits such as shade, shelter and support with rainwater management.

Biodiversity Net Gain

2.18. Notwithstanding the required removal of existing trees and shrubs on the Site, the landscaping proposals aim to maximise biodiversity delivery by incorporating an extensive area of accessible public realm within the Proposed Development.

2.19. Overall, the Proposed Development will deliver 1.29 area-based biodiversity units. Whilst this results in a net loss of -52.95% accounting for the clearance of the existing vegetation, the assessment accounts for on-site changes only as a result of this Application. Therefore, it takes accounts for the Applicant undertaking all the initial vegetation clearance across the whole application boundary (including the area where the enabling works to establish the levels for the Park will be carried out) but does not include any new units created by the planting of the Park itself (given that falls under the separate application being brought forward by MCC). Hence, in line with the relevant BNG legislation to achieve a 10% net gain, opportunities for off-site compensation will need to be identified within the boundary of the same local planning authority (i.e. Manchester City Council) or National Character Area (i.e. Manchester Conurbation) to satisfy the trading rules. The Applicant has been engaging proactively with Manchester City Council in respect of this and in advance of the submission of this application.

2.20. This will be secured through the use of a planning condition which requires a Biodiversity Gain Plan to be submitted to and approved by the Local Planning Authority before the commencement of development. In satisfying this condition, the Applicant commits to seek to achieve the BNG requirements offsite within Manchester in the first instance, with the fall back to purchase Biodiversity Credits from a Greater Manchester Habitat Bank only where it has been evidenced that it cannot be met offsite within Manchester within the timescales for commencement of development.

3. Summary

3.1. The existing Site does not effectively contribute to the City's green and blue infrastructure as it is a vacant site that mainly consists of hardstanding and some mixed trees and shrubs.

3.2. The provision of high-quality public realm and improvements to green infrastructure on-site are therefore a core ambition for the Proposed Development. Indeed, so too has the aim to facilitate improvements off-site through creating new site levels for, and linking seamlessly into, the adjacent proposed new park, as well as contributing to the costs of the new park design and future maintenance (being brought forward concurrently by MCC under a separate planning application). Integral to the Applicant's ambition is the need to contribute to Manchester's rapid transition to a zero-carbon city, rich with wildlife and green infrastructure.

3.3. The Proposed Development will introduce high quality public realm spaces for use by the new building users and the wider community, including a new streetscape along Great Ancoats Street, a Canal Plaza, a pedestrianised Boulevard between the two buildings, and additional private areas of landscaping for building users.

3.4. The new public realm will enhance biodiversity on-site through the provision of new planting, including tree and shrub planting, whilst also improving the pedestrian and cyclist environment across the Site and encouraging the use of the City's existing and proposed network of blue and green infrastructure, including the Rochdale Canal and Cottonfields Park.

3.5. In addition, to ensure that the Proposed Development complies with the requirement to deliver 10% biodiversity net gain, a biodiversity gain plan will be produced (secured by condition). This will seek to achieve the biodiversity net gain requirements offsite within Manchester in the first instance.

3.6. The Proposed Development therefore accords with the vision and objectives of the G&BI Strategy and the relevant Local Development Plan policies when taken as a whole.

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