

Date: 15 December 2025  
Our ref: 532053



Strategic Planning Team  
Maidstone Borough Council

Hornbeam House  
Crewe Business Park  
Electra Way  
Crewe  
Cheshire  
CW1 6GJ

**BY EMAIL ONLY**

T 0300 060 3900

Dear Sir/Madam,

**Planning consultation:** Maidstone Local Plan – Heathlands Garden Settlement Supplementary Planning Document (SPD)

Thank you for your consultation on the above dated 03 November 2025 which was received by Natural England on the same date.

Natural England is a non-departmental public body. Our statutory purpose is to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced, and managed for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development.

To inform our comments we have reviewed the following documents made available to us during the consultation period:

- Heathlands Garden Settlement Supplementary Planning Document (October 2025)
- Heathlands, Maidstone SPD: Landscape Strategy (July 2025)
- HGC Ecology SPD Evidence Base (August 2025)
- HGC Nutrient Neutrality SPD Evidence Base (August 2025)

We would like to thank your authority for your work in developing this SPD but we feel that further detail is required to ensure that the development meets the criteria set out in LPRSP4(A).

In our view, the SPD should incorporate a Strategic Masterplan and Design Code to ensure that good quality design is implemented from the outset, rather than attempting to embed these at the later planning stages. If this cannot be provided as part of the SPD then we recommend that a separate document is produced and agreed prior to the submission of an outline application.

Furthermore, we recommend that clarity is provided on the weight of the Landscape Strategy (July 2025) in decision making as this is not currently clear. If the Landscape Strategy has been developed as more of an evidence base, then we recommend that certain elements (e.g. high level landscape codes, structural planting parameters) are brought into the SPD to ensure that they will be considered by the applicant.

Please note that we have not provided comments on all aspects of the SPD, only those which are relevant to our remit. Our answers to the specific questions posed can be found in Annex 1 and further comments can be found in Annex 2.

We would be happy to comment further should the need arise but if, in the meantime, you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact us.

For any queries relating to the specific advice in this letter only please contact [Sophie.Moore@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:Sophie.Moore@naturalengland.org.uk). For any new consultations, or to provide further information on this consultation please send your correspondence to [consultations@naturalengland.org.uk](mailto:consultations@naturalengland.org.uk).

Yours faithfully,

**Sophie Moore**

Senior Officer for Sussex – Sustainable Development  
Sussex & Kent Team

## **Annex 1: Natural England's Answers to Specific Questions Posed**

### ***Do you agree with the principle of introducing additional planning guidance for the Heathlands Garden Settlement in the form of a Supplementary Planning Document?***

Given the location of the site in the setting of the Kent Downs National Landscape (KDNL) and the quantum of development proposed, we not only agree with the principle of producing a SPD but feel it is central to delivering a truly landscape-led development which protects and enhances the setting of the KDNL by ensuring good design, appropriate location of buildings and natural screening.

### ***Do you agree that the correct key issues and elements have been identified in relation to the context of the site?***

As the site is located within the upper Stour catchment and therefore subject to nutrient neutrality requirements, we recommend that the need to mitigate additional nutrients entering the catchment as a result of the development is listed as a key element to be considered (Figure 9).

### ***Do you agree with the Vision & Objectives for Heathlands Garden Settlement as set out in the SPD?***

Natural England supports the Vision & Objectives for Heathlands Garden Settlement, in particular its focus on providing a 'landscape-led settlement' and the importance it places on responding to the landscape setting. We are also pleased to see that both the vision and objectives reference the need to safeguard existing ecological assets while providing new green spaces, and highlight the importance of connecting these via a 'green network'.

### ***Do you suggest any changes to the Vision & Objectives?***

In our opinion there could be more focus on providing spaces for biodiversity within the Vision, as currently the 'Green Integration' section focuses on providing landscaped spaces for the benefit of future residents (i.e. village greens, parks). We therefore recommend that this section be reworded to:

'There will be a sensitive transition between the National Landscape and Heathlands, with strong planting in the northern parcels, and landscaped spaces for village greens, parks, commons, and naturalistic biodiverse green spaces throughout.'

### ***Do you agree with the framework plans as set out in the SPD?***

Having reviewed the framework plans (Figures 10, 11, 13, 14 and 15) we are pleased to see the inclusion of a strategic green corridor, in particular in the proposed location along the River Stour as this maximises opportunities to link up existing access routes (PRoW) and communities with new services and the proposed country park via active travel modes.

We support the inclusion of the east-west structural planting in Figure 10, as required by LPRSP4(A) (3b), as well as structural planting on the northern boundary and in key areas of Parcel B. While we support the inclusion of green connections throughout the site, we note that there is an opportunity to connect these with existing access routes to the KDNL which does not appear to have been maximised.

Looking at Figure 13, we are pleased to see that limited built development is directed to the north of Parcel A, however we note that employment and sports provision, a local centre and primary school are proposed in the south of the parcel. Though this is further away from the KDNL boundary it is important to acknowledge that these buildings will still need to be sensitively designed taking into consideration aspects such as scale, building height and orientation, lighting and colour to ensure they are not of detriment to the landscape setting.

***Please set out any changes to the framework plans, and which plans these changes should relate to.***

Though we support the creation of a Placemaking Framework (Figure 14) to inform good design, we are concerned that only small areas of Parcel A are marked for lower density development as well as opportunities for higher density development indicated along the principle movement corridor.

As highlighted in pre-consultation engagement between Natural England, Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) and KDNL Unit, development in Parcel A should be a maximum of 2 storeys so as not to intercept key views from the KDNL. We therefore recommend that the 'indicative opportunity for higher density' shading is removed from Parcel A at this stage or alternatively, building parameters included within the SPD (i.e. density, height, massing) for each parcel.

In addition, it is unclear to us how MBC intends for the future applicant(s) to utilise these framework plans in formulating their approach to the development. In the absence of a Strategic Masterplan developed through the SPD, we recommend the addition of the following text in paragraph 5.1.5:

'A final plan draws together the key elements into an overall composite spatial framework. **Future applicants must demonstrate how their planning application/masterplan is in accordance with the framework.**'

***Do you have any other comments on the Draft Supplementary Planning Document?***

We have set out further comments on the Draft SPD and Landscape Strategy in Annex 2.

## Annex 2: Table of Natural England's comments on Heathlands Garden Settlement: Draft Supplementary Planning Document

|  | Heading, paragraph & page of SPD Quote                    | Quote taken from the SPD  | Natural England's Comments   |
|--|---|---|--|
| <b>Section A: Background</b>                                 |   |   |  |
| 1  | <u>Future Stages of Work</u><br>1.4.2.<br>Pg 11           | <i>'...it is envisaged that detailed work to set out the design and layout of the site will come forward on a phasd basis and be subject to future stages of decision making'</i>             | While we acknowledge that high level design codes have been presented in the Landscape Strategy, in our view it would have been more appropriate to formulate the site wide design code as part of the SPD to ensure that good quality design that works with the KDNL is embedded from the start.   |
| 2  | <u>Landscape and Topography</u><br>3.2.2.<br>Pg 18        | <i>'The topography of the site means it is reasonably well contained visually...though there are points of higher ground visible from beyond the boundary'</i>                                | <p>We do not consider this to be a true reflection of the site. As discussed in the Landscape Strategy, Parcel A is highly visually connected to the KDNL and Parcel B has a medium/high-medium connectivity. We recommend that the visibility of the site from the KDNL is discussed in this section for completeness.</p> <p>In addition, it is unclear to us how the topography of the site has influenced the Framework Plans that have been produced and the location of certain buildings. It would therefore be helpful for a topography layer to be included on Figure 13 to demonstrate how this has been considered.</p> |
| 3  | <u>Flood Risk and Water Management</u><br>3.2.16<br>Pg 22 | <i>'Any future development of Heathlands will require further consideration of nutrient loading and operational capacity at the current WwTW including any necessary mitigation measures'</i> | Natural England strongly supports the inclusion of wording highlighting the importance of mitigating the impacts of additional nutrients entering the catchment, given the impact this is having upon the Stodmarsh designated sites.  |
| <b>Section B: Vision, Objectives &amp; Spatial Framework</b> |   |   |  |
| 4  | <u>Green &amp; Blue Infrastructure Framework</u>          | <i>'Within the northern part of the site, development will need to respect the topography of the land, the proximity to the</i>   | We strongly support the reference made to the 350m buffer as required by LPRSP4(A) 3(e) here and are pleased to see that development will be required to respect the existing  |

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|          | <p>5.2.4<br/>Pg 33</p>  | <p><i>KDNL and areas of ecological significance. The northern most part of this area is identified to be protected from inappropriate built development, providing a 350m offset to the National Landscape.'</i></p> | <p>topography and proximity to the KDNL. In our view this could be expanded upon to provide examples of how development could show respect to KDNL. Examples include siting prominent buildings in lower lying areas, promoting lower density development, using local building styles and materials, incorporation of green infrastructure, sensitive lighting schemes and retaining the PRow network and key views.</p> <p>We would also like to highlight that Parcel B has a medium/high-medium visual connectivity to the KDNL and therefore development in this area should be required to respect the topography and landscape also.</p>  |
| <p>5</p> | <p><u>Green &amp; Blue Infrastructure Framework</u><br/>Figure 10<br/>Pg 35</p> |  | <p>We are pleased to see the inclusion of a strategic green infrastructure corridor, particularly in the indicated location following the River Stour as this provides the opportunity to link both existing and proposed communities with the new country park via active travel modes.</p> <p>We are also pleased to see that the east-west structural planting in Parcel A has been included on the Framework plan, as well as sections of structural planting throughout Parcel B in key locations, as required by LPRSP4(A) 3(b).</p> <p>It is positive that green connections have been planned in at an early stage, in particular the linking of these with existing PRow and National Trails such as Pilgrims Way to enable access to KDNL.</p> |
| <p>7</p> | <p><u>Land Use Framework</u><br/>5.4.7<br/>Pg 38</p>                            | <p><i>'Figure 12 sets out an indicative breakdown of land uses across the site. This will be evolved further through the preparation of a more detailed masterplan, planning applications and design codes.'</i></p> | <p>As mentioned in Annex 1, the purpose of the Framework Plan is unclear as the applicant will still be required to submit a masterplan and design code as part of the outline permission.</p> <p>In our view, a masterplan and design code would be most effective if they were developed and agreed as part of the SPD to ensure that good design is incorporated from the outset.</p>   |

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|   |   |  | <p>We therefore <b>strongly recommend</b> that a site masterplan and design code is provided as part of the SPD, or as a separate document prior to the submission of outline permission, to ensure that the design of the Garden Settlement meets the requirements and aspirations of the Local Plan and SPD.</p>  |
| 8 | <p><u>Land Use Framework</u><br/>Figure 13<br/>Pg 40</p>    |  | <p>We note that there are areas of employment, a local centre, primary school and sports provision indicated within Parcel A alongside the residential development.</p> <p>We are concerned that the employment areas are located on the highest points of Parcel A, which may increase their visibility. We recommend that these areas are reconsidered in line with the topography of the site and highlight that buildings in Parcel A will need to consider aspects such as scale, design, orientation and green infrastructure to ensure they do not impact upon KDNL.</p> <p>In addition, the sports provision is indicated within the 350m buffer between the development and KDNL and will therefore be highly visible from the landscape. We therefore recommend that the type of sports provision suitable in this location (i.e. limited built development, sympathetic/no lighting) is more clearly defined within the SPD.</p> |
| 9 | <p><u>Placemaking Framework</u><br/>Figure 14<br/>Pg 41</p> |  | <p>While we are pleased to see that areas of Parcel A have been earmarked for lower density development given the proximity to the KDNL, we note that areas along the principal movement corridor have been shown as areas of opportunity for higher density. We do not think it is appropriate at this stage to highlight areas of opportunity for higher density buildings, given the visibility between Parcel A and the KDNL. As stated in Annex 1, we recommend that this is removed or detailed building parameters for each parcel are included within the</p>   |

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| <b>Section C: Placemaking and Design Guidelines</b> |   |  |   |
| 10  | <u>Landscape, Views and Open Space</u><br>6.2.5<br>Pg 47                      | <i>'Structural planting must be provided to mitigate visual impacts as far as possible and be implemented in a phased manner to maximise the time to enable planted areas to become established in advance of adjoining built form being delivered'</i>  | While we are supportive of structural planting being delivered as early as possible to ensure the benefits are realised by the time built form is delivered, it must be recognised that the good design of buildings is just as important in mitigating visual impacts.   |
| 11  | <u>Biodiversity</u><br>6.2.12<br>Pg 48  | <i>'20% biodiversity net gain will be expected to be achieved on site through a range of measures, including...integral wildlife niches within buildings, such as bird and bat bricks.'</i>  | Natural England is supportive of wildlife niches being integrated into built development, however it should be noted that they are not a method of achieving biodiversity net gain. The focus should be on providing good quality, biodiverse natural spaces which encourage a variety of species to thrive.  |
| 12  | <u>Biodiversity</u><br>6.2.13<br>Pg 49  | <i>'As the garden settlement will be delivered through a number of phases, future planning applications must demonstrate how each phase and the development overall will reach the required level of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and avoid or mitigate harm to wildlife'</i>   | It is unclear to us how this is expected to be achieved without the production of a Strategic Masterplan at an early stage to guide the delivery of strategic elements and ensure each phase compliments each other.  |
| 13  | <u>Green Infrastructure and Landscape</u><br>Key Principles/Guidance<br>Pg 50 | <i>'(e) New structural planting must be provided at key locations across the site and implemented in a phased manner...This must include advance planting in particular relating to Phase 1 north of the railway...'</i><br><br><i>'(f) in accordance with LPR Policy LPRSP4(A) and the Framework Masterplan no built development will be located within 350m of the KDNL boundary with the exception of the new road, pedestrian and cycle access from the A20'</i> | We are pleased to see that a principle has been included highlighting the importance of a phased delivery of structural planting, in particular the requirement for advanced planting. <b>However, principle (e) should be strengthened to refer to the Infrastructure Requirements outlined in LPRSP4(A) which requires all structural planting to be delivered at the preliminary stage.</b><br><br>In line with comment 8, we recommend further clarity is provided around the sports provision proposed to be located within the 350m boundary as shown in Figure 13. |

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| 14 | <u>Blue Infrastructure</u><br>6.3.1<br>Pg 52                                       | <i>'New and enhanced areas of wetlands, or alternative mitigation may be required to assist with the filtratin of nitrates and phosphates arising within the upper Stour catchment'</i>   | We recommend that reference is made here to the Wetland Mitigation Framework as this is a key piece of guidance in the creation of nutrient treatment wetlands. This guidance, along with other information, can be found on the <a href="#">Constructed Wetland Hub</a> .   |
| 15 | <u>Minerals</u><br>Key<br>Principles/Guidance<br>Pg 55                             | <i>'(c) Development proposals must...optimise potential gains for landscape and biodiversity'</i>   | In our view, this principle could be strengthened by outlining some of the potential gains that could be made. For example, directing larger or higher density development to these locations as they will sit lower once restored thus naturally screening the development.   |
| 16 | <u>Placemaking, Density and Character</u><br>6.6.8<br>Pg 59                        | <i>'The approach to building heights must be informed by the visual analysis set out within the accompanying Landscape Strategy, and subsequent LVIA to be submitted at planning application stage. Building heights must be lower in the areas of greater visual connectivity with the KDNL in order to reduce visual impact as far as possible'</i> | Natural England strongly supports the requirement for building heights to be informed by an LVIA and recommends that this is reflected in other parts of the document (see comment 9).   |
| 17 | <u>Placemaking, Density &amp; Character</u><br>Key<br>Principles/Guidance<br>Pg 60 | <i>'(a) The overall design must demonstrate how a 'landscape-led' approach has been adopted, and in a way that addresses the overall vision and objectives for the Garden Settlement as a whole'</i>  | In our view, the role of the SPD is to define what is meant by 'landscape-led' in the context of Heathlands Garden Settlement and provide the design principles/code for the applicant(s) to follow.<br><br>There is also an opportunity to reference the KDNL's planning publications in this section.                                    |
| 18 | <u>Street Design and Hierarchy</u><br>6.11.4<br>Pg 72                              | <i>'A hierarchy of street types must be established and applied consistently throughout the site...They will include street trees and other planting and the use of sustainable drainage systems including swales and ponds to contribute to biodiversity and manifest Heathlands Garden Settlement character.'</i>                                   | Natural England has previously recommended the use of street trees to break up the built form so we are pleased to see that they have been included in the SPD. We do however recommend that the requirement for street trees is included in the 'Key Principles/Guidance' section given their importance in mitigating landscape impacts. |

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| 19 | <u>Mobility Hubs</u><br>6.11.18<br>Pg 74            | <i>'Mobility hubs will take advantage of locations where existing and proposed pedestrian, cycle and bus routes converge, thus providing opportunities for interchange and intensification of land use and development density'</i>  | <p>We note that a mobility hub is proposed in Parcel A (Figure 13) and highlight that there will be limited opportunities for the intensification of land use and density in this area. We recommend that reference is made here to the requirement to undertake an LVIA to inform development and your authority considers including information on building parameters for each parcel within the SPD.</p>  |
| 20 | <u>Phasing &amp; Delivery</u><br>Figure 18<br>Pg 84 | <i>'Structural planting across the development site, implemented as early as reasonable and practicable, in accordance with a scheme developed through the SPD'</i>  | <p>The early implementation of structural planting is an infrastructure requirement of the Local Plan Review, as stated in Figure 18. However, we note that this requirement refers to a structural planting scheme to be developed as part of the SPD.</p> <p>While the SPD has indicated areas of structural planting on the Composite Spatial Framework (Figure 15), we would not consider this a 'structural planting scheme'. In our view such a scheme would detail the types of vegetation to be used and the required size of each belt, as well as consider the phasing in relation to the growth of vegetation.</p> <p>We therefore recommend that this is completed to ensure the requirements of LPRSP4(A) are fulfilled.</p> |
| 21 | <u>Approach to Planning</u><br>9.1.2<br>Pg 88       | <i>'The promoters may wish to combine an outline approach with detailed information on a first phase. This form of 'hybrid' application would also be considered acceptable subject to all necessary information being provided'</i> | <p>Given that the design code is currently expected to be submitted post-outline consent, we are concerned by the possibility of a 'hybrid' application given that detailed design for the first phase (Parcel A) will need to be finalised at this point.</p> <p>This highlights the need for a strategic design code to be produced either as part of this SPD or as a separate document prior to the submission of an outline application, to ensure design remains coherent across the site and is in keeping with the setting of the KDNL.</p>   |

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| 22  | <u>Approach to Planning</u><br>9.1.3<br>Pg 88                    | <i>'...Proposals will need to be in accordance with a Strategic Masterplan to be prepared for the site allocation area as a whole'</i>  | As stated above, we <b>strongly recommend</b> that a Strategic Masterplan be produced as part of the SPD to ensure coherent delivery of strategic elements and that each phase compliments one another. This could draw upon the work undertaken to produce the Framework Plans in Section B.  |
| 23  | <u>Pre-application Working</u><br>9.3.3<br>Pg 89                 | <i>'Additionally, applicants must engage directly with any relevant statutory consultees including Kent County Council, National Highways, the Environment Agency, Sport England and others as appropriate'</i> | Natural England would be happy to work with the applicant(s) through our <a href="#">pre-application advice service</a> , particularly on the Strategic Masterplan and Design Code as well as Nutrient Neutrality mitigation.<br><br>We suggest that KDNL Unit are also approached for comments on the Strategic Masterplan and Design Code given their knowledge of the landscape.  |
| 24  | <u>Long Term Stewardship</u><br>Key Principles/Guidance<br>Pg 94 |   | We are pleased to see that approaches to long-term stewardship have been considered within the SPD, given the importance of this in maintaining good quality green spaces and biodiverse areas.<br><br>We strongly support the requirement to include community development opportunities as part of the long-term stewardship arrangement, as this will encourage residents to connect with nature and develop collective guardianship. |
| <b>Heathlands SPD: Landscape Strategy (July 2025)</b> |  |   |  |
| 25  | <u>General Comment</u>   |   | We are pleased to see that you have been engaging with KDNL unit in the preparation of this document and that they have agreed the scope of the visual assessment and locations of viewpoints.<br><br>We note that they provided comments in both April and June 2025 on the baseline analysis and principles and consider them best placed to do so, given their knowledge of the area.   |
| 26  | <u>General Comment</u>   |   | While we are supportive of the preparation of a Landscape Strategy at this stage, it would be helpful to have some   |

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|    |  |  | <p>clarification provided in the SPD as to the weight of the document in decision making.</p> <p>For example, the strategy gives much more detail on the content of the structural planting belts (e.g. types of vegetation) however this information isn't given in the SPD itself. If the document is being viewed as part of the SPD then the information within should also be a material consideration, however this is not currently clear.</p> <p><b>If the Landscape Strategy is being viewed as more of an evidence base for the SPD, then it is imperative that the High Level Landscape Codes and further information on structural planting are transferred across into the SPD to ensure that applicants will take these into consideration.</b> We have provided further comment on these codes below.</p> |
| 27 | <p><u>High Level Landscape Codes</u><br/>7.4.1<br/>Pg 40</p> | <p><i>'Development proposals must us layered planting- low scrub, hedgerow, and scattered trees – to create a soft transition between open countryside and built form, avoiding harsh urban edges in accordance with principles of KDNL Landscape Design Handbook'</i></p>   | <p>Strongly support.</p>   |
| 28 | <p><u>High Level Landscape Codes</u><br/>7.4.2<br/>Pg 40</p> | <p><i>'Built development must remain outside the 250m buffer...Built form <b>should</b> be orientated and located to reflect characteristic settlement edges within the clay vale at the edge of the KDNL. Elevations of lesser mass or gable ends should be orientated to face north wherever possible. New settlement edges <b>should</b> be softened and integrated into the landscape using characteristic planting forms as part of structural planting strategy'</i></p> | <p>We strongly support this code however recommend that the 'shoulds' highlighted in bold be changed to 'must'.</p>  |

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| 29 | <u>High Level Landscape Codes</u><br>7.4.2<br>Pg 40 | <i>'Building heights should be lower in the areas of Parcel A in closest proximity to, and of greater visual connectivity with, the KDNL (2-2.5 storeys maximum).'</i> '  | We recommend that this code is amended to read:<br><br><i>'Building heights should be lower in the areas of Parcel A in closest proximity to, and of greater visual connectivity with, the KDNL (2-2.5 storeys maximum) <u>and informed by a LVIA.</u></i>  |
| 30 | <u>High Level Landscape Codes</u><br>7.4.2<br>Pg 40 | <i>'Buildings of over 2.5 storeys in height should be located to the south of the London – Ashford railway line. These should be associated with areas of Parcel B at lower topographical levels and locations such as the District Centre, to ensure areas of greater density and height can be accommodated in locations of lesser visual connectivity'</i> | We recommend that this code is amended to read:<br><br><i>'Buildings of over 2.5 storeys in height should be located to the south of the London – Ashford railway line <u>and informed by an LVIA.</u> These should be associated with areas of Parcel B at lower topographical levels and locations such as the District Centre, to ensure areas of greater density and height can be accommodated in locations of lesser visual connectivity'</i> |
| 31 | <u>High Level Landscape Codes</u><br>7.4.2<br>Pg 40 | <i>'Building materials <b>should</b> be informed by the KDNL Guidance on the Selection and Use of Colour in Development to reflect local vernaculars and to avoid or minimise visual impact. Pale colours on north facing elevations and roofs <b>should</b> be avoided in prominent locations...'</i>  | We are pleased to see reference to the KDNL colour guidance but recommend that the 'shoulds' highlighted in bold be changed to 'must'.  |
| 32 | <u>High Level Landscape Codes</u><br>7.4.2<br>Pg 40 | <i>'The structural planting for each development phase <b>should</b> be implemented during the prior phase or sooner where possible to maximise the time to establish in advance of built form being delivered.'</i>  | The Infrastructure Requirements outlined in the Local Plan makes it clear that structural planting will be delivered in the Preliminary Phase of development. We therefore recommend that this code is strengthened by changing the 'should' to a 'must' to fall in line with the requirements of policy LPRSP4(A).   |