

The Rushmere Estate

Interim Framework Summary Document



February 2011

Produced by the Greensand Trust on behalf of the Rushmere Estate Partnership



The Greensand Trust



Purpose of this Document:

Much research has been carried out into Rushmere Park since its purchase; its opportunities and constraints. This document summarises how this work has been used to create a vision for the Estate and plan for the future. It also provides an opportunity for your feedback. If you would like to see more of the detail then please refer to the following website:

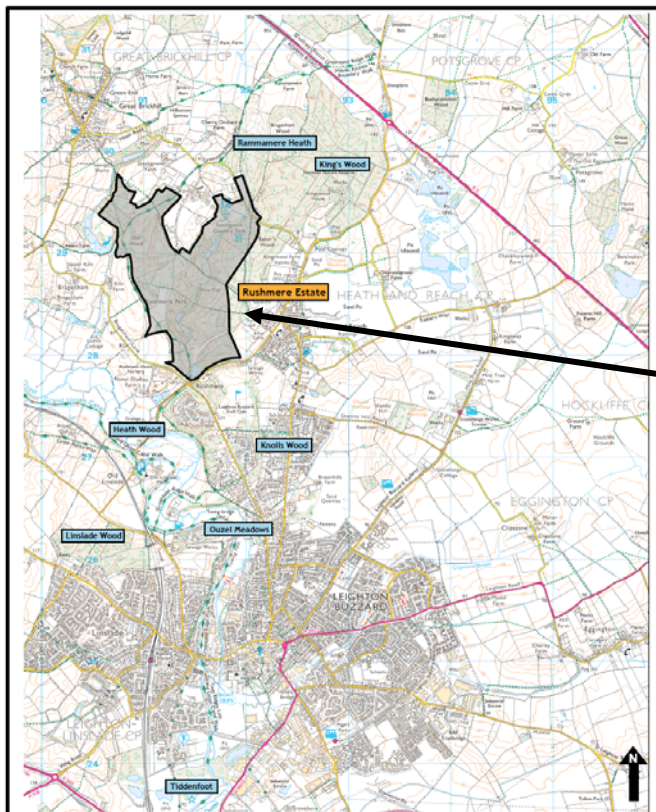
www.greensandtrust.org/RushmereEstate.html

Consultation responses are required by **31st March 2011**. Please use the feedback form provided (available with this document if you picked up a hard copy, or from the web link shown above) to help us capture responses.

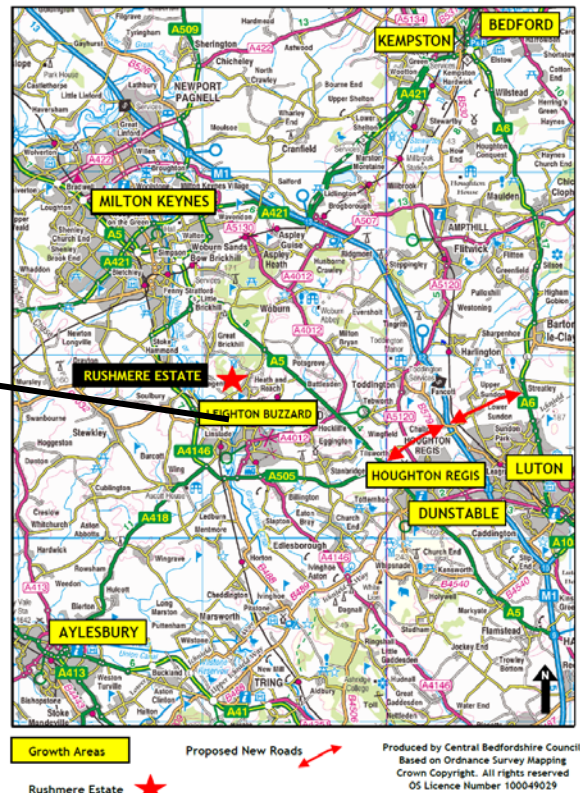
A final version of the Framework document will be produced in May 2011.

1. Introduction:

The Rushmere Estate consists of approximately 162 hectares (400 acres) of woodland, heath and meadow on the Greensand Ridge spanning the Central Bedfordshire / Buckinghamshire border to the north of Heath and Reach, 2 miles (3¼ km) from the centre of Leighton Linlslade.



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The Rushmere Estate consists of three main sites:

- **Stockgrove Country Park** – an existing Country Park, owned, in part, by Central Bedfordshire Council, the remainder leased from Buckinghamshire County Council, the park is managed by the Greensand Trust, a registered charity.
- **Oak Wood** – a publicly accessible site owned and managed by the Greensand Trust.
- **Rushmere Park** – a private estate acquired jointly by Central Bedfordshire Council and the Greensand Trust in September 2009

The combined Rushmere Estate is to be operated by a partnership of The Greensand Trust and Central Bedfordshire Council.

2. The Vision:

To create an attractive and accessible public open space, zoned in a manner that enables a wide range of leisure and countryside activities, whilst protecting and enhancing sensitive natural and historic environment areas and features and making the most of this unique landscape.

Four main principles under-pinned the reasons for the creation of the new facility:

- i. Overcrowding at busy times causing congestion and environmental damage at Stockgrove Country Park.*
- ii. The 'once in a lifetime' opportunity to create a high quality green space.*
- iii. The need to provide open space for public enjoyment against a background of continuing and significant pressures of development growth.*
- iv. The opportunity to create a financially self-sustaining site.*

3. Aims and Objectives:

To deliver the overall vision for the Estate the partners have agreed the following objectives:

- Preserve and enhance the Estate as a valuable cultural asset in terms of its natural history, biodiversity, local history, landscape, heritage and access network, promoting appropriately.
- Develop visitor facilities and a range of sympathetic attractions and businesses that guarantee the long term sustainability of the Estate
- Develop use of the site to positively encourage wider access, use and awareness for people of all ages and backgrounds, encouraging sustainable access and community involvement.

4. Progress to Date:

As a publicly funded project, it has been important to make some of the Estate safely accessible as soon as possible. When taking proposals forward great care has been taken to liaise with local communities and professional experts, including planning officers.

A significant amount has been achieved already:

- Access to the wider site via a range of new permissive footpaths
- Planning applications have been submitted and funding is in place to progress opening the site in a wider sense, creating vehicular, cycle and foot access, a car park and initial visitor facilities.
- The Estate is being brought back into active management, including health and safety works and conservation management.
- Funding has been secured to create initial natural play facilities

5. Overview of existing features:

Features and Assets:

The Estate has a rich and varied landscape with stunning views, 3 lakes, and important geological and archaeological features. A range of national priority habitats including heathland, acid grassland, ancient semi-natural and wet woodland, plus a range of other locally important habitats. A range of important and rare species, including adders, slow worms, badgers and several species of bats, plus a large heronry and veteran and other special trees in areas of ancient semi-natural woodland. There are also commercial conifer plantations.

Pedestrian access around Stockgrove and Oak Wood, with a wide and level circular 'access for all' route around the lake at Stockgrove. Permit based cycle and horse access around Oak Wood. The Stockgrove visitor centre includes a café, run as a franchise and existing bungalow in Rushmere Park.

Opportunities:

There are opportunities to create new areas of priority and locally important habitats. However, there are areas of low biodiversity and landscape value which can offer a range of recreational activities including the extension of horse and cycle permit schemes, retail and events which are complimentary to the landscape and vision for Rushmere Estate. The Estate is already linked to the Greensand Ridge Walk and offers more opportunities to enhance the local network for walkers, riders and cyclists.

Christmas tree plantations provide a potential long-term revenue stream and there is potential for future commercial timber production.

A facility could be created which supports a range of educational and training opportunities as well as engaging with the local community and increasing their involvement in decision-making and the management of the Estate.

Constraints:

The whole Estate is designated within an Area of Great Landscape Value (AGLV), subject to Green Belt designation and has substantial areas designated as either Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) or County Wildlife Site (CWS). This also limits the expansion of visitor centre facilities in Stockgrove CP.

An existing paintball operation occupies a significant area of the site for a relatively low income. An underground pipeline runs across the Estate and rights for a mobile telephone mast were agreed by the previous landowners.

The Estate has 2 road access points and access on foot, cycle or horse is limited as is the current public transport (i.e. bus stop locations and number of services). Car parking at Stockgrove CP is limited to 50 cars, and is often over-capacity. The site has a varied topography, making it difficult to create level access routes in places. Increased access would reduce the biodiversity value in some of the more sensitive areas.

6. Principles:

A series of principles, based upon research already carried out, have been developed to guide the vision.

Visitor Catchment

The Estate needs to be developed sensitively, balancing local and strategic needs considering the capacity of the Estate and the future pressure on open space due to increased housing in the region.

Vehicle Access

In the absence of a convenient public transport system realistic levels of car use must be recognised, but careful consideration given to reduce their impact on both the local network and on the rural nature of the site whilst benefiting walkers, cyclists, horse riders and others.

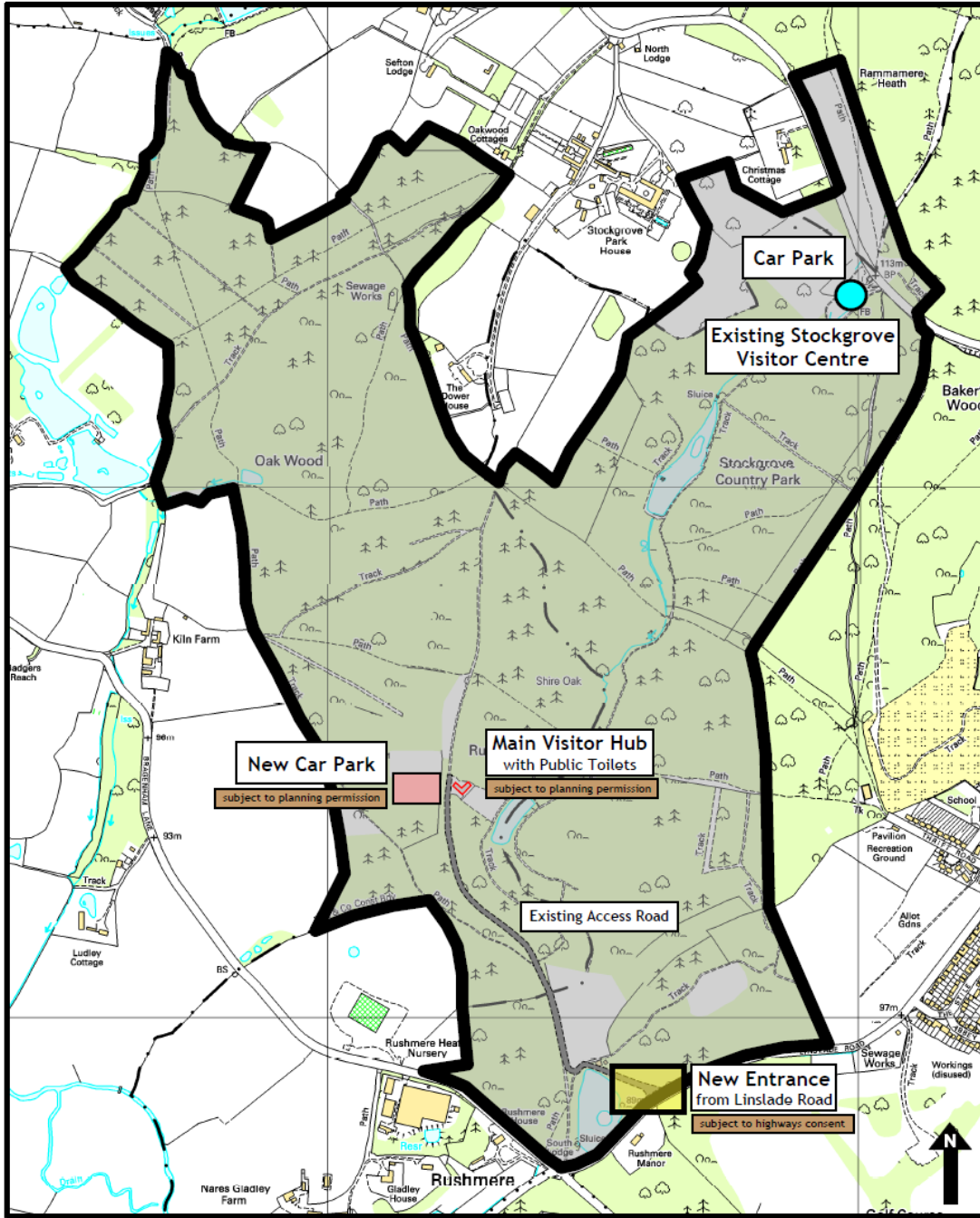
Visitor Facilities

Good quality, well-located visitor facilities providing a base for educational and other activities and information for visitors are key to the development of public use. The site is large (400 acres), with multiple points of entry, so it is considered that it is appropriate to have a main hub and smaller 'satellite' hubs to provide key facilities. The main hub and car parking should be located centrally, improving access and encouraging exploration across the whole Estate.

- The **Rushmere Bungalow** has a central location enabling positive visitor management across the whole Estate. It has fantastic views over the surrounding valley and countryside.
- The **Stockgrove Visitor Centre** has facilities which could be utilised as a satellite location. Limiting external parking will help to constrain the present overuse of the area.
- The **Barns in the Southern Meadow** are closest to housing and thus a primary point for walking and cycling access. The southern meadow area and adjacent lake are ideal sites for picnics, ball games, concerts and events. A flexible car park could provide disabled parking and act as an overflow at peak periods.

The preferred approach is the sympathetic and cost-effective refurbishment of the Rushmere Bungalow, utilising satellite hubs at Stockgrove and the Southern Meadows. Development and use of the bungalow as a visitor facility must also avoid disturbance to the significant heronry located in the valley below and bat roosts.

The Rushmere Estate – Proposed Initial Facilities



- New Car Park
 - Main Visitor Hub
 - Access Road
 - Visitor Centre & Car Park
- Produced by Central Bedfordshire Council
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Public Access

The aim is to create a facility accessible to people of all ages, abilities and backgrounds, giving them an interesting, enjoyable and varied experience in the countryside. There is a need to protect the more sensitive habitats from visitor pressure, particularly at vulnerable times of the year.

It is proposed that the following are developed:

- Walking, cycling and riding from the surrounding points of entry into the Estate
- Circuits of varying levels of length and difficulty from the Visitor Hubs including a main circuit which encompasses a large part of the Estate providing an enjoyable experience of significant duration.
- Routes to cater for, and ideally integrate, different interests, providing a 'family experience' for a variety of ages and abilities on the same general route or areas.
- Signage and interpretation should be used to highlight specific features and create special interest walks, encouraging repeat visits and new users
- Specialist routes for walkers, cyclists and riders providing for a range of experience, taking note that elsewhere the constraints of space and nature of the land will require co-operative multi-use of tracks.
- Events and activities to engage a wide range of people and raise awareness.

Wildlife, Landscape and Historical Heritage

The Estate has a substantial natural and historic heritage value which underpins the whole essence of the site, and will draw significant numbers of visitors seeking enjoyment in an attractive and tranquil landscape. This must be respected during development and used as a resource to increase people's knowledge and awareness of the natural environment.

Vulnerable areas of the Estate not yet open to the public must also be protected through visitor management, infrastructure, habitat management and buffering.

Proposals include:

- Creation of new areas of heathland, acid grassland, woodland and parkland
- Appropriate land management, including grazing
- Maintain, enhance and interpret key wildlife, landscape and heritage features

Commercial Activities

Commercial facilities are key to making the site sustainable, building upon the demand for a wide range of pursuits in the countryside that are deficient in this area. However, it must also provide areas for people to enjoy at little or no cost for health and quality of life. Where existing income generating activities and facilities exist, including catering, forestry, and Christmas tree production, these should be utilised if appropriate. The opportunity to use the site for film locations has also been considered and developed.

The elements of the Estate that are likely to generate income include:

- Car parking - a season ticket facility should be available for those making regular use of the Estate.
- Mountain biking facility –public bridleways and access cycling linkages should remain free for all, a specific area set aside for mountain biking and specialist ‘trail’ routes should attract a permit charge
- Horse riding permits, improving on existing Oak Wood permit scheme –public bridleways will remain free.
- Catering – provision of café or restaurant type facilities
- Retail – sale of local produce, wood products, activity-specific goods
- Self-contained adventure activities – e.g. an aerial assault course with aerial walkways.
- Adventure/survival activities
- Events and activities – including themed activities (e.g. Hallowe’en and Christmas), guided walks, children’s activities and concerts.

Other income generating facilities which could be considered include low-cost holiday accommodation such as chalets, caravanning or camping facilities. These can help rural tourism and provide facilities for schools and other groups for outdoor adventure.

Commercial activities should benefit the local rural economy and the Estate. They should employ local people, improving the prosperity of the area whilst not damaging the environment (wildlife, landscape and heritage) that supports it.

Climate Change and Renewable Energy

The partners fully acknowledge the need to reduce the impact of the site on the local and global environment, including the minimisation of the contribution to human-induced climate change; using opportunities for incorporating renewable energy/energy efficiency and the interpretation and demonstration of such technologies.

- Woodfuel may provide heat and hot water for visitor hubs, and the Estate may be able to supply to the local area.

Built Development

Development will be required to help make the Estate financially sustainable. It must be appropriate to the leisure use within the Green Belt and other designations covering it. The Estate must not become subject to overdevelopment and particular care must be given to matters such as visibility and light spill from surrounding areas. Housing is considered inappropriate; however tourist accommodation may be suitable.

7. Site Development

Because of its size and complexity the Estate has been zoned, with each area playing to its particular strengths and complementing the whole of the Estate.

Exclusion Zones: Public excluded from some areas to keep disturbance to a minimum and from others whilst appropriate use is investigated.

Quiet Recreation Zones (i): Main emphasis is on tranquillity and conservation, but with footpath access (no cycles or horses).

Quiet Recreation Zones (ii): Main emphasis is on creating a peaceful countryside experience, but with a greater range of access and leisure activities allowed. May include cycle and horse transit routes in addition to footpaths.

Recreation Zones: Areas of recreational activity where numbers of visitors and activities may be greater and more evident.

Commercial Zone: Areas with more active leisure pursuits and other activities, some may only be accessible on a payment basis. Significant levels of people and activities may be present and will require mitigation (does not exclude environmental enhancements).

8. Next Steps:

This document is being used to consult with a range of key stakeholders, including statutory bodies, local organisations and interest groups and the wider public, to draw in wider expertise and information. The overall process will run until the end of March 2011. Once feedback has been considered, a final Framework document, complete with 'masterplans' for the site and individual zones as appropriate, will be produced in early May 2011.

As mentioned above, proposals for creating basic visitor infrastructure, including a vehicular access and car parking facilities at the Rushmere end of the site have already been taken forward to ensure that the Estate is able to open to the public at Easter 2011.

The final Framework will provide a blueprint for taking the Estate forward over the next 5-10 years. It is likely that, due to current economic conditions, significant further development will not take place for a further 2-3 years, unless an appropriate external investor can be found.

It may be necessary to develop some elements of the Estate in advance of completing the Framework. In any such instances proposals will need to be guided by research work done to date. Where required, planning applications will need to be developed and submitted, with an appropriate consultation period applying.

YOUR FEEDBACK IS IMPORTANT!

We value your thoughts and ideas. The feedback form (provided with this document if you picked up a paper copy, or available to download from www.greensandtrust.org/RushmereEstate.html) includes questions we would like your answers to. Please do not limit your response to just answering these questions if there is something else you would like to tell us.

Please send completed forms to info@greensandtrust.org or post them into the boxes provided if you have picked this document up at an event or display. Alternatively please post to The Greensand Trust, Suite 5, The White House, Hockliffe Street, Leighton Buzzard, LU7 1HD



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