

Rushmere Interim Framework Consultation

Seeking your views on creating somewhere special

Consultation Report

July 2011

Produced by the Greensand Trust on behalf of the Rushmere Partnership



The Greensand Trust



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 Linlade. It consists of three main sites:

- Stockgrove Country Park – an existing Country Park, owned by Central Bedfordshire Council and leased from Buckinghamshire County Council, managed by the Greensand Trust, a local environmental charity. Receives between 200,000 and 300,000 visitors every year (taken from car park counts, 1989- present day).
- Oak Wood – a publicly accessible site owned and managed by the Greensand Trust as part of the same landholding as Stockgrove CP.
- 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 governed by a partnership of The Greensand Trust, a registered charity, and Central Bedfordshire Council. The partners have created a legal 50-year Joint Agreement to combine, develop and conserve the total Estate, with the entire site operated and managed by the Greensand Trust, on a 'not-for-profit' basis in line with agreed objectives set out below.

The overall vision is 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.

The Consultation:

Both partners considered it essential to seek the views of residents, partner organisations, local groups and organisations in taking the Rushmere Estate forward. The Interim Framework was produced once required background research had been completed, and presented an ideal opportunity to consult and engage at a stage when the overall direction of the Estate was being developed.

The Interim Framework asked a range of questions relating to the proposed strategic direction and basic elements being proposed. Feedback was sought via a web-based consultation form, and provision of information and paper questionnaires at various roadshows, a range of library and local authority offices, as well as at the existing Stockgrove Country Park Visitor Centre. A full list of places where the consultation was promoted is listed in Appendix A.

The Interim Framework was produced by the Greensand Trust, who also managed the consultation process with support from Central Bedfordshire Council's Consultation Team.

The consultation period ran from 14th February until 31st March 2011, a period of just over 6 weeks. Where particular sectors have not responded, an opportunity to submit a late response has been offered. The consultation was promoted via the local press, local libraries and council offices, Greensand Trust and CBC websites, the Aylesbury Vale Residents Panel and through partner networks including the Ouzel Valley Park Steering Group and the Bedfordshire & Luton Green Infrastructure Consortium.

The consultees were offered the opportunity to respond to either the full Interim Framework, or a shorter summary document, using a 'Stakeholder Questionnaire' or a 'Public Questionnaire'. The two questionnaires asked different questions – the Stakeholder Questionnaire covered issues of strategy, principle and direction, while the Public Questionnaire looked more into some of the detail, in order to engage people and encourage a response. Following a brief summary of the separate elements of the consultation, this analysis brings both of these together, highlighting where conclusions are drawn from the Stakeholder response, the Public response, or a combination.

A range of recommendations are developed. These relate to three main areas of focus:

- a. Changes to the Framework document where consultation has indicated that intentions have been misunderstood, to enable it to better represent the proposed direction;
- b. Changes to the overall approach where consultation has indicated strong disagreement (or viable and attractive alternative suggestions have been made) – which will also require amendments to the Framework document;

- c. Further research/studies required to look at specific elements/areas in more detail.

Following this report, a final version of the Framework will be produced, providing a strategic overview of future potential development of the Estate, incorporating the views of consultees.

The Stakeholder Consultation:

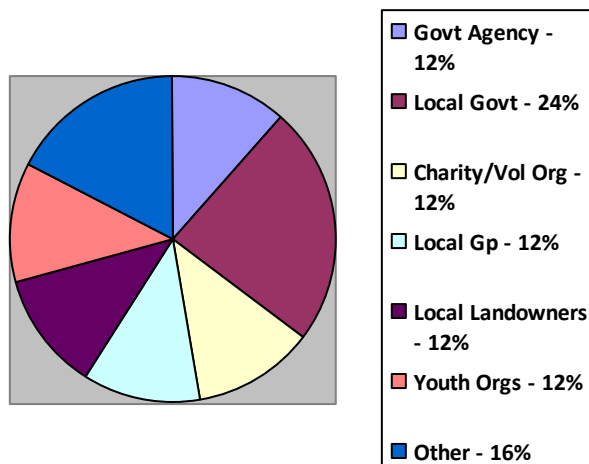
A total of 13 agencies, organisations and local groups responded specifically to the stakeholder questionnaire. Although this seems a disappointingly low result given the efforts made to promote the Interim Framework, a number of organisations responded by written submission in a different format (usually a letter) and some respondents responded on behalf of a number of people or organisations (see below). Some follow-up consultation was carried out to boost the number of responses. Unfortunately, because few organisations put their contact details on the questionnaire it is not possible to state definitively how much overlap there was and how many stakeholders responded overall. It is known that an additional two local authorities responded without using the questionnaire, as did three youth-related groups, so the assumption can be made that there were **at least 18 stakeholder respondents**. It is also known that private individuals (adjacent landowners) chose to respond to the Stakeholder Consultation rather than the Public Consultation, either as individuals or collectively (there were no restrictions on which questionnaire could be used, only guidance). Care must be taken in the interpretation of the questionnaire responses – the relatively low response means that individual responses had a relatively significant affect on results.

Because not all of the responses were in the questionnaire format, it has not always been possible to analyse the results as a ‘whole’. Where possible responses received in a ‘non-questionnaire’ format have been incorporated into the questionnaire analysis - it is made clear where this has been done. It is particularly useful to do this because of the low response rate to the questionnaire.

Who were the Stakeholders?

The stakeholders represented a range of organisations:

Figure 1: Stakeholder Mix



The majority of stakeholders responding were local (**60%** from Leighton Buzzard) but with others (including national and regional organisations) from further afield.

In terms of the 'other' organisations, two of the respondents were private individuals/groups of private individuals, as mentioned above. The other was from the Bedfordshire and Luton Joint Local Access Forum. The Forum instigated a collective response from its members, who represent a range of organisations and interest groups relating to access. Although technically Forum members are there as private individuals, it is highly likely that their representations were at least partly influenced by their background. It may also help to explain the low response, as Forum members may have responded via the Forum and not through any other means.

The largest single sector represented was countryside/environment (**33%**) and there was good representation from other sectors, including regeneration and community development.

Young people were also actively targeted for their views as part of the consultation process. It was felt it would be particularly useful to engage directly with young people, but considered unlikely that many would respond via the questionnaires (this was very much borne out). Therefore specific groups were targeted, these being the Central Bedfordshire Youth Parliament and the Greensand Trust 'Youth Rangers'. They were chosen because they represent a range of interests and ages, and because it offered an opportunity to consult and engage directly with young people.

The Public Consultation:

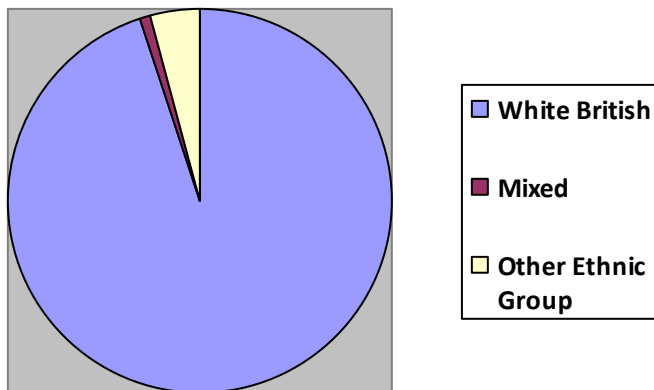
A total of **96 people** responded to the public questionnaire. This figure is considered comparable with other consultations run by Central Bedfordshire Council, but is disappointingly low considering the promotional efforts. This level of response allows some detailed analysis to be undertaken, though due to the limited number of responses, care needs to be taken when looking at any subdivisions within the overall group of respondents – these subdivisions can be relatively small, and a differing response from an individual amongst a small group of respondents could significantly change overall results. Therefore this analysis focuses chiefly on the overall response.

Who were the respondents and where were they from?

Perhaps unsurprisingly with a site that straddles the Central Bedfordshire/Buckinghamshire border, and with an existing Country Park facility attracting visitors from a wide catchment, not all of respondents were from Central Bedfordshire. Just over three quarters (78%) of respondents were from Central Bedfordshire, with 12% from Milton Keynes. The remainder were from Bedford, Luton, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Berkshire. 30% considered themselves 'local' to the site (a quarter of these were immediate or very close neighbours), and 63% came from either Leighton Buzzard or Linslade. These percentages approximately reflect the existing visitor profile experienced at Stockgrove Country Park.

94% felt they are 'white British', reflecting local demographics. No other single ethnic grouping was significantly represented. 53% were male, 47% female.

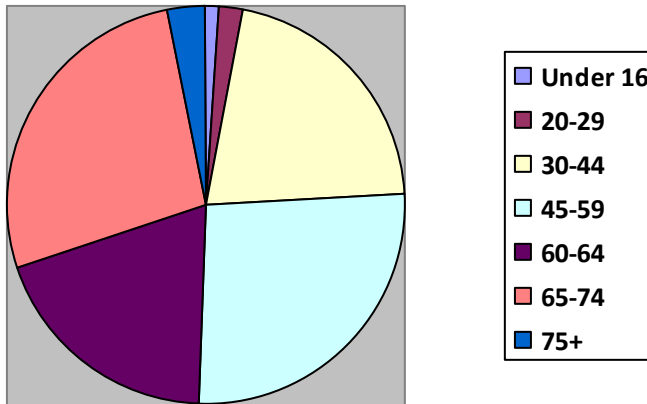
Figure 2: Ethnicity



The bulk of respondents were in the 30-74 years age groups (93% fell within age groups within this range). This was anticipated, and as part of the Stakeholder Consultation process various

youth groups were engaged. The only age group which it is felt are still under-represented is therefore the 20-29 year group.

Figure 3: Age Breakdown:



Only 3% considered themselves to be disabled in some way, which is not comparable with the wider population (There are approximately 10 million disabled people in Great Britain covered by the Equality Act, which represents around 18 percent of the population - Family Resources Survey, Disability prevalence estimates 2008. For Central Bedfordshire, estimates indicate that in 2009 there were 4,002 adults aged 18-64 with learning difficulties and 16,800 with physical disabilities, representing 10% of the Central Beds adult population – estimate from 2010 Joint Strategic Needs Assessment). In order to ensure the views of a range of disabled people are taken into account the Central Bedfordshire Access Group were engaged in the Stakeholder Consultation, and while a response was not received during the timeframe they are seeking to make a response.

96% of respondents had visited a Country Park facility in Central Bedfordshire. Given the high percentage of respondents from the Leighton Linlade area, a significant proportion of these are likely to have visited Stockgrove. Of these 56% visit weekly and 33% monthly – a significant number of frequent users. Respondents were asked why they visited Country parks, and a wide range of reasons were given, the most popular being walking (77%), enjoyment of open space (66%), wildlife (60%), exercise (53%) and relaxation (48%). A lower than expected percentage (36%) gave 'dog walking' as their reason.

Recommendation:

1. Any future research should target a range of potential new audiences/people who do not currently use Country Parks.

The Response:

The production of the Interim Framework and the opportunity for stakeholders to comment was well received. Several recognised that this is a unique opportunity to plan strategically, balancing a range of needs, and create somewhere special, safeguarding the area for people to enjoy.

Potential Catchment:

While information on the potential catchment of the site was provided to both Stakeholder and Public audiences, only the Stakeholder questionnaire specifically asked about it. There was a split of opinion among stakeholders. While **27%** agreed with what had been suggested, **36%** disagreed or strongly disagreed, and a further 36% neither agreed nor disagreed. This reflects the geographical spread of stakeholders – most were very local, and more likely to see the facility as a local one, while others with a wider role are likely to see the strategic importance of such a site. This reflects the need for the site to appeal to, and provide for, both local users and others from further afield. Few additional comments provided related to the catchment – one responded noted that the catchment should be able to financially support the site.

Recommendations:

- 2. The proposed catchment should remain unchanged, but it should be made clearer that the site needs to support both the local and wider catchment.*
- 3. If the site is to provide a countryside experience to as wide a possible range of people, any future consultation needs to better capture the views of non-users / potential users.*

Improving Access and the Visitor Experience:

The majority of stakeholders (**42%**) agreed with the principle of improving access across the whole site, while 25% disagreed . Again, a significant percentage (33%) were ambivalent.

The public response was also in favour of improving access. There was good support for facilities such as walking and family cycling trails, viewing points, picnic areas, café, interpretation and information. Family cycling trails also scored relatively high, although mountain biking trails were less popular, perhaps reflecting the fact that a significant proportion of respondents were aged 50+, and 96% of those who said that they used Country Parks were existing users of Stockgrove Country Park where cycling is not permitted. The stakeholder response from young people in particular was more positive. The least desired things were self-catering accommodation, large scale events, aerial assault courses, camping, archery and boating, again reflecting the fact that the vast majority of respondents were users of Stockgrove Country Park where none of these activities take place.

Additional comments received from both stakeholders and the public suggested people were generally supportive of the principle of improved access, but that access must be created in a way that does not detract from the site's aesthetic qualities. Fragmented networks in both Central Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire and the existing lack of route connectivity was raised as an issue, particularly by stakeholders with a wider remit. They suggested that this site could help solve, creating benefits at a wider scale. People also suggested more could be done in providing access for disabled people.

Almost twice as many stakeholders agreed with the suggested approach to improve the visitor experience, (33% strongly agree + agree), with 17% disagreeing. **54%** agreed with proposed opportunities for public access to the site, with only 9% disagreeing. The opportunity to create benefits at a wider scale was highlighted by stakeholders with a wider remit, including the opportunity to join up fragmented access networks in both Central Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire.

Protecting and Enhancing the Wildlife, Landscape and Historic Heritage:

The vast majority of stakeholders (**80%**) agreed with the principles identified to protect and enhance the wildlife, landscape and historic heritage of the site. The public also felt very strongly about conservation of wildlife and landscape. It is obvious through this and comments received (from both the stakeholders and the public) that the area is valuable and special to people, and many (particularly public) responses are fearful of the impact of 'commercial' activities. Additional comments show that the principle of zoning is considered an important element of this, alongside management of people and dogs through access routes, dog control and exclusion areas (people and dogs).

The importance of the site from a biodiversity, landscape and historic heritage perspective is very much recognised by both stakeholders and the public. Stakeholders in particular recognised the opportunity to re-create elements of the historic landscape and restore lost habitats at a significant scale. Generally it is felt there is much common ground between these objectives, but that opportunities need to be planned strategically.

Two stakeholder organisations suggested that an analysis of 'site sensitivity' from an ecological perspective should be carried out, to ensure vulnerable areas are protected. As a result a "Site Sensitivity Analysis" has been carried out and the results will feed into the revised Framework and zoning. Stakeholders also felt it was important to get management right 'from the start' with this new opportunity.

Recommendation:

- 4. Further strategic planning work is required, particularly in terms of historic landscape restoration.*

Revenue Generation:

Nearly half of the stakeholders (**45%**) agreed with the need to create opportunities to generate revenue, while 73% did not disagree with the suggested approach. Through additional comments, concern was expressed about the level of commercial activity proposed and its impact upon the wider site – stressing the need to balance these activities with nature conservation and landscape interests. This is something some stakeholders and a significant proportion of the public respondents felt very strongly about.

The most desired activities and facilities indicated by public respondents were walking trails, interpretation boards, picnic areas, café, hides and viewing areas. The least desired were self-catering accommodation, large scale events, aerial assault courses, camping, archery and boating.

The results were mostly as expected as the majority of respondents were country park users, and these are all things typically found in a country park. It is important that the Framework stresses the fact that Rushmere will not be a typical 'Country Park', and that wider audiences will be targeted to ensure a wider cross-section of the population gets to experience the benefits of access to the countryside. It was surprising that camping scored as low as it did, while the potentially controversial 'green burial area' idea received little comment and an average score. It is possible that for camping respondents had larger scale campsites in mind, potentially with caravans or camper vans. This is backed up by the fact that several respondents to the public questionnaire then went on to suggest smaller scale camping facilities when asked about other ideas. The Framework will need to make it clear that it is only a strategic document and cannot provide detail, and when detailed proposals are considered they will need to be clearly defined.

A range of proposals were consulted on via the public questionnaire to get an idea of those that would be more popular. It appears that this created the false impression that *all* facilities and activities presented will be developed, which will need to be reflected in the framework.

Few ideas for other ways of generating revenue which hadn't already been identified were suggested by stakeholders, but the public respondents were much more forthcoming. The volume and variety of suggestions they made suggest that many support the principle of revenue generation as long as the activities are 'suitable'. Ideas they suggested included dog agility areas, horse jump course, photography courses, weddings, birthday parties, orienteering,

running routes and fishing. The idea of guided walks as a revenue generating activity was made by some respondents. It will be important to communicate that while some activities might be positive things to do, revenue generated may be low compared to costs (as has been the partners' experience).

Young people consulted welcomed the potential for exciting activities in the countryside, but stressed the importance of affordability.

Recommendations:

- 5. The Framework should stress the fact that Rushmere will not be a typical 'Country Park', and that wider audiences will be targeted to ensure a wider cross-section of the population gets to experience the benefits of access to the countryside.*
- 6. The Framework should reflect the fact that a significant part of the site is zoned for quiet recreation, and that any revenue-generating activities will have to come through a process where their suitability (in terms of the wider site and wider countryside as well as immediate impacts) is assessed. It should also reflect the fact that facilities will be developed sympathetically, over time, and will not be created overnight. It should stress the fact that it is a strategic document, and that a more detailed process will be required to take things forward.*
- 7. Any documentation issued through the 'Expression of Interest' process will need to clearly define what is important about the site and what will/will not be acceptable. It should highlight the fact that local communities value their environment very highly. Environmental impact will need to be a key assessment criteria.*
- 8. Further consultation work may be required in advance of planning applications for the site, to ensure that applications are not rejected because of misunderstanding/lack of knowledge.*
- 9. The Framework should clearly highlight the fact that although we consulted on a wide range of potential activities and facilities, they will not all happen, and those that do will be phased over a significant period of time.*
- 10. It may be useful to clearly communicate through the Framework that although some activities, such as guided walks, are desirable from the perspective of raising awareness, they do not generate significant revenues and rarely cover their own costs. Therefore such activities will need to be supported by other revenue-generating activities, not generating revenue themselves.*

Approach to Visitor Hubs:

Two-thirds of stakeholders (**67%**) agreed with the proposal to re-use the Rushmere bungalow to deliver the main initial visitor hub, only 8% disagreed. Alongside this, **83%** agreed with the proposal to keep the Stockgrove Visitor Centre as a satellite hub, but with a lower profile. No disagreement was indicated to this principle. The potential for people to be able to observe the heronry from the bungalow without disturbing it was highlighted by stakeholders and the public as an important opportunity, but stakeholders did suggest a need for careful management. Some significant concerns, both stakeholder and public, were expressed about the possibility of a car park within the poplar belt adjacent to the Old Linslade Road. Over a third of stakeholders (38%) agreed with the wider approach to buildings across the site, but a significant proportion (25%) disagreed. The use of materials (for any structures, not just buildings) appropriate to the site is considered important.

Recommendation:

- 11. The option of creating a car park in the Poplar Belt should be reviewed carefully as part of detailed work regarding use of the southern part of the Estate and taking into account likely public concerns about visual amenity and external spill of vehicles onto local roads.*

Sustainable Access:

Stakeholders felt strongly that opportunities should be readily available to use more sustainable means of transport to access the site, and this was also supported about the public respondents. Access to the local network (including the Grand Union Canal and National Cycle Network) is highlighted as an opportunity. The issue of reducing pressure on roads was another that split the stakeholders, with a 50/50 split between those that agreed and those that disagreed. Again, this potentially reflects the geographical split of stakeholders, with road/congestion-related issues high on the agenda of local groups and immediate neighbours. Public respondents also expressed concern over traffic generation.

Recommendations:

- 12. The Framework should even more strongly reflect the principle of getting people to (and around) the site sustainably, within the limitations it has.*
- 13. A sustainable visitor travel plan should be developed quickly to set benchmarks and targets.*

Educational and Play Facilities:

Proposals for educational facilities and opportunities, and for play facilities/trails were welcomed by both stakeholders and public respondents. All had relatively high scores in the public response and further comments reinforced the high level of support for using the site for learning and raising awareness (for people of all ages).

Engaging with People:

Practical volunteering, helping with events, fundraising, voluntary wardening and helping with school groups were all activities the majority of stakeholders and the public agreed were ways people could be involved with the site. The volume of suggestions and the range of ideas demonstrated that there is a significant opportunity to engage with and involve people in the site and its management.

Reinforcing this, 33% of respondents to the public questionnaire suggested that they would like to be involved in the site in the future.

Recommendation:

- 14. Mechanisms should be created to keep those who have expressed an interest informed, and to engage a wide cross-section of users and residents in the management and enhancement of the site.*

Appendix A: Consultation Opportunities

1. Drop-in session (afternoon/evening) to launch consultation, held at Leighton Linlade Town Council Offices (16/2/11)

2. Guided tour of site for local and other organisations (16/2/11 am)

3. Central Bedfordshire Together “Let’s Talk Together” Roadshows (February – March 2011) – staffed displays were present at:

- Leighton Linlade
- Leighton Rural
- Houghton Regis & Dunstable

4. Press coverage:

- Article in Leighton Buzzard Observer (Feb 11)
- Parish Newsletters

5. Libraries and Council Offices – displays and questionnaires were present at the following libraries and council offices during March 2011:

- Leighton Buzzard Library
- Dunstable Library
- Houghton Regis Library
- Leighton Linlade Town Council Offices
- Dunstable Town Council Offices
- Houghton Regis Town Council Offices

6. Web-based consultation:

The Greensand Trust dedicated a web-page to the consultation with a direct link from its front page to the consultation documents and questionnaires. Number of hits: 395

Central Bedfordshire Council’s website actually hosted the consultation documents, to enable easier operation and analysis.

7. Stakeholder Group consultation:

Specific presentations and discussions were held with the following:

- Beds & Luton GI Consortium – presentation and guided walk with 16 people from 13 partner organisations (15/2/11)
- Central Bedfordshire Youth Parliament – presentation and discussion with 23 Youth Members of Parliament
- Rushmere Parishes Group
- Greensand Trust Youth Rangers
- Greensand Trust Volunteers – drop in session held at Stockgrove Country Park (18/3/11)