

# **Assessment of Needs**

## Consultation and Standards

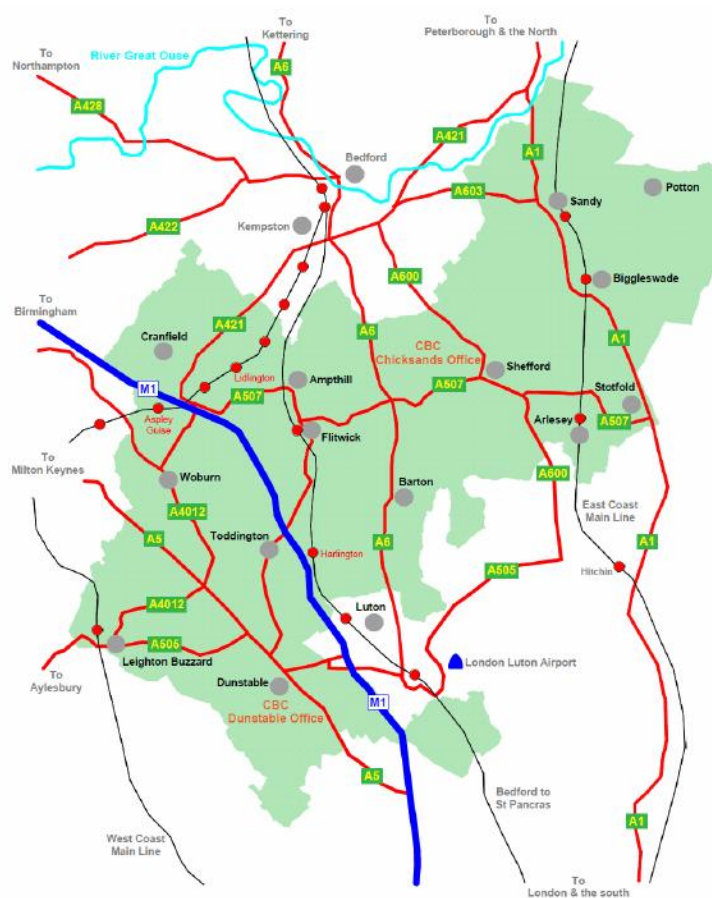


## 2 Assessment of Needs

### Consultation and Standards

#### 2.1 About Central Bedfordshire

Central Bedfordshire is a varied area comprising a mixture of rural countryside, attractive villages, and small to medium sized towns. It is well connected, being traversed by the M1, A1, A5 and A6 as well as the East Coast Mainline, West Coast Mainline and the Midland Mainline. London Luton Airport is also in close proximity.



Covering 716 square kilometres, Central Bedfordshire currently has a population of approximately 254,400 and is the 17th largest unitary authority in England<sup>10</sup>. Central Bedfordshire is one of the least densely populated areas and is classified as predominantly rural with just over half the population living in rural areas.

<sup>10</sup> 17<sup>th</sup> Largest authority based on population size, 2011 Census

Much of rural Central Bedfordshire is of high landscape, biodiversity and historic environment value with extensive tracts of high-grade agricultural land and each year over 1.5 million people visit Bedfordshire's countryside and heritage sites. The area includes a surprisingly diverse range of landscapes including river valleys (Ouse, Ouzel, Hit, Ivel and Flit), the Marston Vale, the Greensand Ridge and the Chiltern Hills. The area also includes three National Nature Reserves at Barton Hills, Knocking Hoe and Kingswood at Heath and Reach. To the South it includes part of the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which offers a stunning backdrop to the large urban centres of Luton, Dunstable and Houghton Regis and to the north one of 12 national Community Forests, the 'Forest of Marston Vale'. A number of the countryside sites are Scheduled Ancient Monuments such as Five Knolls, Dunstable and Totternhoe Knolls. In addition some land outside of the main towns and villages is designated as Green Belt.

People can enjoy Outdoor Access in Central Bedfordshire through:

- The public rights of way network and 'open country' (land where the public have a 'right to roam').
- Publicly accessible spaces, such as country parks, most nature reserves, local green spaces and commons.

The authority works in partnership with many organisations to support and encourage a holistic approach to access to the countryside. The council manages the public rights of way network and much other land to which there is legal public access.

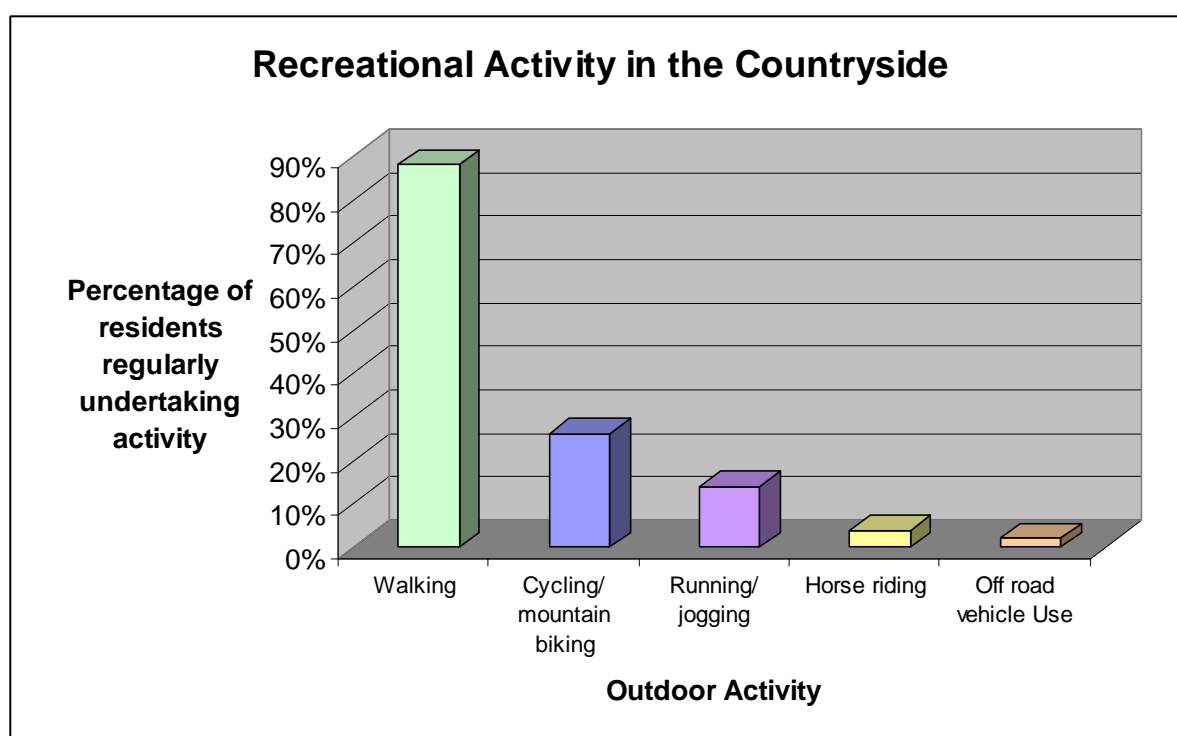
## 2.2 How do People Use the Countryside?

Our understanding of how Central Bedfordshire countryside is used stems from a range of surveys and research studies undertaken since 2003. Older survey information has been reinforced and augmented with more recent, smaller scale studies which validate the use of original statistics referenced in this document.

### Local Residents Survey (2003)

In 2003 a local resident's survey was conducted for Bedfordshire (ADAS 2003). Its aim was to understand and prioritise the needs, views and issues facing the residents of Bedfordshire with regard to rights of way and access to the countryside.

Of the total population of Bedfordshire<sup>11</sup> 96% of people accessed the countryside. The table below shows the types of recreational outdoor activity these residents regularly undertake in the countryside.



Of those residents who undertook the various activities within the countryside, 63% indicated that they used footpaths, bridleways, cycle paths or other tracks rather than pavements or roads always or often, whilst a further 26% sometimes used them. Only 10% rarely or never used them. In addition, 83% of the residents visit country parks at some time with 20% visiting once or twice a month or more often.

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<sup>11</sup> ADAS consulting Ltd – Local Residents Survey (2003)

Residents were more likely to walk in the countryside than they were to visit country parks. The likelihood of visiting a country park was however substantially higher than the likelihood of a resident horse riding, cycling, running or taking part in off road vehicle use.

These figures are in line with national figures reported by Natural England in their 2010 study to understand how and why people engage with the natural environment<sup>12</sup>. This survey additionally identified that 66% of visits to the countryside (including parks) were to places within two miles (3.2km) of the starting point and 81% within 5 miles (8km), highlighting the importance of accessible green space close to home.

The majority of countryside visits were undertaken on foot, by people living locally within rural or urban fringe areas, with the main reasons for visiting being exercising dogs, personal health and exercise, relaxing and unwinding, enjoying fresh air, pleasant weather and scenery, peace and quiet and enjoying wildlife. 94% of those surveyed agreed that having green space close to where they live is important to them and is an important part of their life.

### **Leisure Strategy Telephone Survey<sup>13</sup>**

A telephone survey of Central Bedfordshire residents was undertaken by the council to support the development of the Leisure Strategy. The survey showed that 17% of respondents visit country parks at least once per week and a further 23% visit these sites at least once per month. 36% of respondents to the telephone survey never visit country parks. The research indicates that while the proportion of residents who do actually visit country parks is higher than all other types of open space (with the exception of large recreational areas), visits are made less frequently than to some more local facilities.

A comparison between this research and the survey carried out by ADAS suggests that while the frequency of visits for those using country parks has increased since 2003, a higher percentage of residents now do not visit country parks at all. This may indicate a need to increase access and improve information about Country Parks.

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<sup>12</sup> Natural England – Monitor of engagement with the natural environment – first year results (2010)

<sup>13</sup> Telephone survey carried out by Public Perspectives on behalf of CBC in preparation for Leisure Strategy, 2012

## 2.3 What Do People Value?

### Bedfordshire Voice Panel

When surveyed, 97% of the Bedfordshire Voice panel<sup>14</sup> stated that they regard their local countryside as important to their quality of life and their feelings about Bedfordshire as a place.

When asked to give an indication of the relative importance of green infrastructure to their own lives and to those of local communities, in the context of growth and development, those questioned attached weighting as follows:

Issue	High Priority%	Medium Priority%	Low Priority%
Provision of new ways of getting into the countryside	70	21	8
Provision of new Green Infrastructure – country parks, paths and greens	62	26	12
More improvement and development e.g. signage, surfaces for push/wheel chairs and children's play areas	51	35	15
Supporting self service use e.g. maps and leaflets, website guidance, information promoting places and walks	50	37	12
Provision of more maintenance e.g. grass cutting, repairs to gates and seats	48	41	11

Access to the countryside for recreation was identified as the most important activity for Bedfordshire residents; when asked about their participation and engagement in a variety of activities it was the activity that they wanted most protected.

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<sup>14</sup> Bedfordshire Voice Panel – Access to the countryside survey (2007)

The 2011 survey of residents undertaken by Central Bedfordshire Council<sup>15</sup> reinforced this finding with 42% of residents stating that country parks, open spaces and rights of way are important in making a place a good place to live. It was deemed a higher priority than many other activities and equal to crime and antisocial behaviour.

### **User Surveys**

To understand the specific needs of countryside users within Central Bedfordshire, the council undertakes surveys of Countryside Site Users<sup>16</sup>. These identified improvements which would encourage more people to use greenspaces and the countryside, and included:

- Improved management of dog fouling and control
- Improved information, both generic and audience targeted
- Appropriate signage and way marking
- Public transport provision at an affordable cost
- Signed and secure car parking facilities
- Organised walks/events; picnicking facilities
- Accessibility for buggies and wheelchairs
- Increased volunteering opportunities

The OAIP and specific Site Management Plans will seek to undertake these improvements where appropriate.

### **Accessible Natural Greenspace Standard (ANGSt)**

The ANGSt model was developed in the early 1990s as a tool to improve the access to, the naturalness of and the connectivity with greenspaces. Natural England reviewed the standard in 2008 and provided further guidance explaining how the standard should be applied in the report “Nature Nearby”, which was published in March 2010. ANGSt enables planners and greenspace managers to identify deficiencies in greenspace provision at various size thresholds, and to use this evidence to identify opportunities to improve provision through the land use planning system.

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<sup>15</sup> Central Bedfordshire Council – What residents think about the Council – October 2011

<sup>16</sup> Countryside Site User Surveys (2005 onwards)

ANGSt recommends that everyone, wherever they live, should have an accessible natural greenspace of at least 2 Hectares (Ha) (4.9 acres) in size, no more than 300m from home, and at least one accessible 20Ha site within 1.2 miles (2km) of home. In 2011 Natural England produced an ANGSt assessment of the Bedfordshire which showed that at the 20Ha / 1.2 mile (2km) level, Central Bedfordshire is well provided for, with 89.6% of households meeting the standard. However, there is quite a low percentage (26.5%) of households living close to local greenspaces at the 2Ha / 300m level. Overall only 4.7% of households met all the ANGSt criteria.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Analysis of accessible natural greenspace provision for Bedfordshire, Natural England 2011