

Breathing Spaces: Sites and Greenspaces

...oases at the heart of your community



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High-quality, accessible green spaces are highly valued by the public. In addition to their intrinsic value, they provide considerable benefits to quality of life, health and wellbeing. People's needs have changed, and more provision of accessible green space and high-quality landscapes closer to where they live are needed to enable them to build more outdoor recreation into busy, modern lifestyles.

(DEFRA 2010)

4.1 What are Breathing Spaces?

Breathing spaces are areas of countryside and green spaces accessible to the public. There are over 2000 hectares (4938 acres) of greenspace in Central Bedfordshire managed or designated as country parks, woodlands, nature reserves, commons or village greens. Over half of these sites (1091 hectares, 2694 acres) are owned or managed by Central Bedfordshire Council.

The remaining green space is owned and managed by a wide range of public bodies, Trusts and Town and Parish Council's. This mosaic of accessible green space forms part of the rich and unique landscape of Central Bedfordshire and it is a key priority of the council to ensure the countryside is preserved and enhanced and that high quality access is maintained.

Within the scope of this plan we are only looking at the management and development of Central Bedfordshire Council owned sites, wider documents such as the Central Bedfordshire Green Infrastructure Plan and the Leisure Strategy will establish quality and quantity standards and put in context the opportunities that can be gained for nature conservation and habitat management from creating multi functional sites as well as networks and corridors of interlinked sites.

4.1.1 Countryside Sites in Council Ownership or Management

There are 58 sites owned or managed by the council including 'strategic' country parks such as Dunstable Downs and Rushmere Country Park; heritage sites such as Clophill Church, Segenhoe Church, Someries Castle and Swiss Garden, which is leased from the Shuttleworth Trust; large woodlands such as Marston Thrift and Linslade Wood; riverbanks; chalk grassland hills and community greenspaces.

Sites range in size and offer varying facilities for visitors but the vast majority of the sites are accessible to the public.

20 Largest Central Bedfordshire Council Owned / Leased / Managed Sites (hectares)

Aspley Woods	329.4	Smithcombe Hills	18.0
Rushmere Country Park	162 ²¹	Houghton Hall Park	17.2
Kings Wood (Heath and Reach)	124.9 ²²	Campton Wood	15.5
Marston Thrift	56.2	Flitwick Wood	14.4
Dunstable Downs	51.9	Cottage Bottom Field	14.1
Sundon Hills Country Park	46.2	Totternhoe Knolls	14.1
Kings Wood and Glebe Meadows	42.5	Centenary Wood	13.6
Linslade Wood	35.4	Tiddenfoot Waterside Park	13.2
Studham Common	24.6	Whipsnade Heath	11.6
Henlow Common and Langford Meadows	18.5	Baulk Wood	9.0

The council works very closely with communities and partners. A number of sites are managed by local Trusts and Friends groups through Service Level Agreements, Management Agreements and Lease Agreements. Rushmere Country Park, for example, is managed by the Greensand Trust. Dunstable Downs and a further 7 sites are managed by the National Trust.

²¹ Jointly owned and managed with the Greensand Trust

²² Part owned by Central Bedfordshire Council

Countryside Sites Categorisation

The council's countryside sites are currently being categorised into 4 'levels'. Following the methodology based on the council's Green Infrastructure Plan, categories are based on size, primary usage and location to the public. These levels will focus different levels of development within the action plan.

Levels are:

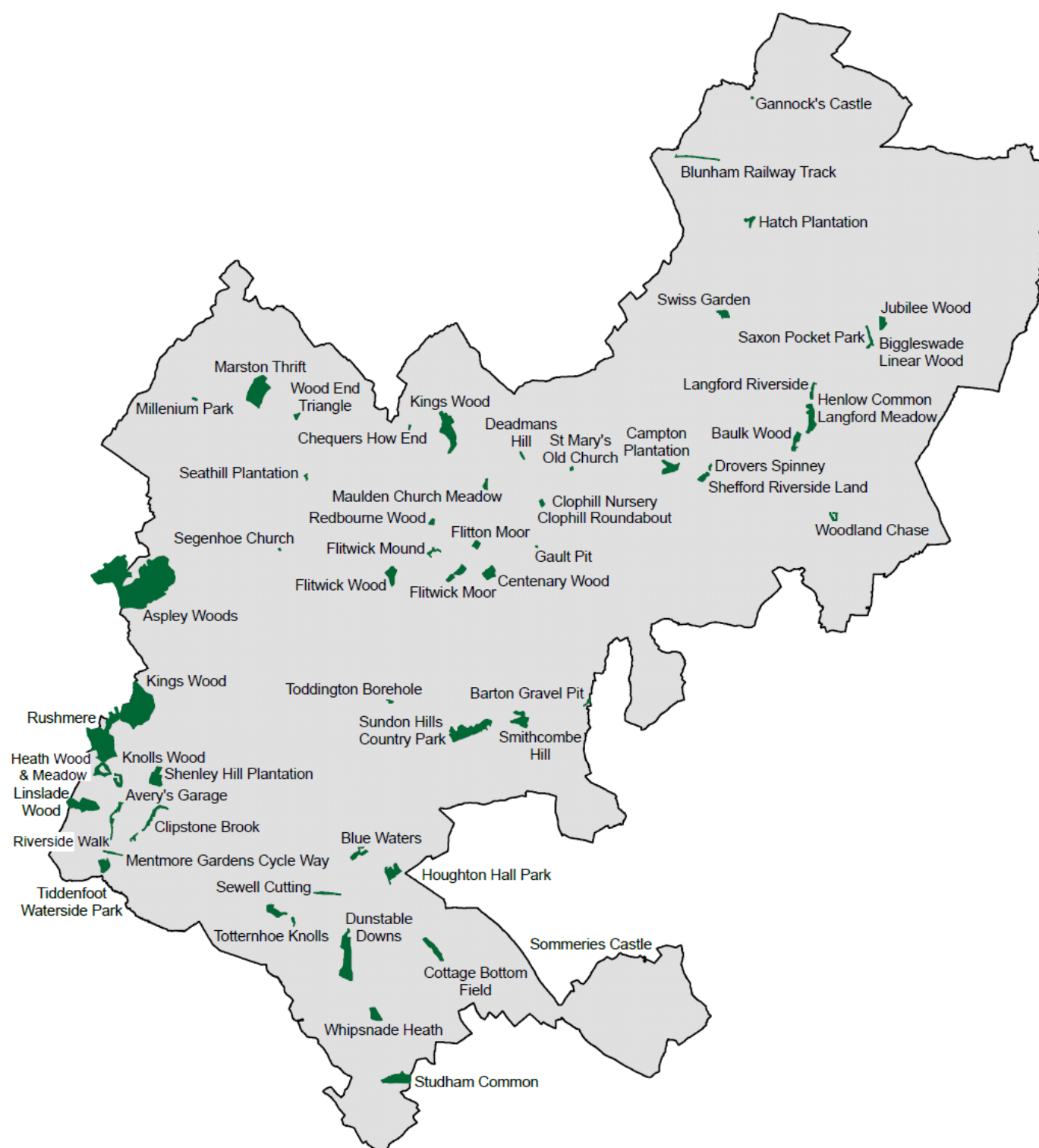
1. 'Strategic' - sites over 60ha with, or aspiring to have, 'Country Park' status possibly offering a range of facilities and attracting people from a wide catchment area
2. 'Middle' – sites over 20ha - Sites which attract people from outside the immediate neighbourhood and provide car parking and other facilities.
3. 'Neighbourhood' – sites over 2ha - Smaller facilities that tend to attract all their users from a single neighbourhood. Many users will walk to the site and they have limited facilities.
4. 'Other' - sites which may be small with little or no public access.

Categorisations may change and will be informed by the emerging Leisure Strategy which will set typologies for the range of open and green spaces in Central Bedfordshire. The categories will help to identify areas with a shortfall of greenspace against ANGST. Both ANGST and The Green Infrastructure Plan both currently show deficits in both local sites (less than 2ha) and Sub regional sites (more than 500ha).

Rushmere Country Park is an example of imaginative partnership working with the aim of delivering and managing new, strategic, countryside sites. The combined Rushmere Estate is governed by a partnership of The Greensand Trust and Central Bedfordshire Council. The partners have created a legal 50 year Joint Venture Agreement to combine, develop and conserve the total Estate (including the former Stockgrove Country Park) with the entire site operated and managed by the Greensand Trust, on a 'not - for - profit' basis in line with agreed objectives.

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.

COUNTRYSIDE SITES



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4.1.2 Open Access Areas

The Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000²³ provided public access to 14 Open Access areas in Central Bedfordshire, covering a combined area of 410 ha. The majority of sites are designated for their chalk downland and fall within the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Boundary (AONB). However, The Firs in Ampthill, falls outside the AONB, and is designated because of its important heathland habitat.



Furthermore, all land owned by the Forestry Commission has also been dedicated as Open Access Areas, including Maulden Wood and Chicksand Wood.

Central Bedfordshire Council is the relevant authority to enable and manage open access. The Act provides Central Bedfordshire Council with the authority to make bylaws, appoint wardens, erect and maintain notices and improve means of access.

4.1.3 Commons and Village Greens

Many of Central Bedfordshire's open spaces and countryside sites are formally registered (either wholly or in part) as common land or as village greens.

Central Bedfordshire Council is a registration authority under the Commons Registration Act 1965 and responsible for holding and maintaining a register of Common Land and a register of Town or Village Greens; statutory documents that provide a record of registered units of common land and village greens across the authority. Registers must be open for inspection by the public at all reasonable times.

There are 41 units of common land and 30 units of town or village greens in Central Bedfordshire. The majority of greens are owned and managed by the Town or Parish Council's, whereas, the majority of the Common Land units are in private ownership, which have rights of common registered in the statutory document. However, Central Bedfordshire Council owns, Dunstable Downs, Totternhoe Knolls, Henlow Common and Studham Common. The council also has ownership of part of Whipsnade Heath with a claim outstanding to the Land Registry for the remaining area. Whipsnade Green is owned by the Zoological Society of London and is included in a management scheme, for recreation, operated by Central Bedfordshire Council.

²³ Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/37/contents

Dunstable Downs, Totternhoe Knolls & Whipsnade heath are also designated in the Inclosure Award as Regulated Pasture²⁴ which enables them to be available for recreational purposes.

Biggleswade Common, at 118 ha, is the largest common in the area and accounts for over 25% (by area) of all common land in Central Bedfordshire. Biggleswade Common is in private ownership and management.

²⁴ Regulated Pasture is a form of common land that was often legally created, and rights enshrined, in an Inclosure Award.

COMMON LAND AND VILLAGE GREENS



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4.1.4 Other Accessible Greenspace

There are many countryside sites and green spaces that are owned and managed by other organisations, such as Charitable Trusts (e.g. The Marston Vale Trust, The Wildlife Trust, The Greensand Trust, The Shuttleworth Trust) and Town and Parish Council's. The largest of which are the Millennium Country Park – Marston Moretaine (The Marston Vale Trust), The Lodge Nature Reserve – Sandy (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) and Maulden Woods (Forestry Commission).

There are also privately owned sites and estates that allow access to their land whether this is on a permit or permanent basis.

4.1.5 Green Infrastructure

Green Infrastructure (GI) is the strategically planned and delivered network of high quality green spaces aiming to deliver a wide range of environmental and quality of life benefits for local communities. Council countryside sites are a key part of GI provision for the area but the network also includes green space in the wider sense and includes parks, open spaces, playing fields, woodlands, allotments and private gardens.

The council works to achieve appropriate access to GI in all new developments through the use of development strategy policies and the GI Design Guide²⁵; ensuring that landscape, biodiversity, historic environment and access aspirations are considered alongside plans for housing, transport, employment and economic growth. The Leisure Strategy provides further evidence for the need for new GI as a part of new development.

²⁵ <http://bedsandlutongreeninfrastructure.org/pdfs/MKSM-GI-by-Design-Guide.pdf>

4.1.6 Greenspace and Access Masterplanning

Greenspace masterplanning aims to produce a co-ordinated and integrated action plan to improve, enhance and manage targeted areas and networks and seek to make it more accessible to the general public.

These masterplans do, inevitably, include elements relating to GI, however, the primary purpose of these documents is to enhance the quality of public access and the greenspace experience. The masterplans will also seek to enhance landscape, the historic environment and biodiversity where possible.

The Masterplans may include land outside the ownership or control of the council to encourage 'inclusive' and common management, this can only be achieved with engagement with landowners and land managers and will be subject to a consultation process with all landowners.

4.1.7 The Historic Environment

Many of the council's' countryside sites contain a range of archaeological and historic landscape features (heritage assets) dating from the prehistoric to post-medieval periods and include earthworks, ruined structures and buried archaeological remains.

Ten sites are designated as Scheduled Monuments under the 1979 Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act. This means that they are nationally important archaeological monuments and are afforded the highest level of protection, any works affecting these monuments or their setting require Scheduled Monument Consent from English Heritage. Some of the ruined structures are also Listed Buildings. Some of the countryside sites are known to contain non-designated archaeological and historic landscape sites and features. Some of these may also be of national importance but have not yet been subject to the formal designation process.

These sites give the council an excellent opportunity to interpret the historic environment, to bring it alive for communities and visitors and to put them in context to the surrounding environment.

There is also a high probability that many of the sites contain archaeological sites or features that have not yet been identified.

The framework for managing historic environment features is the *Conservation Principles: Policies and Guidance* (English Heritage 2008)²⁶ which promotes the management of the historic environment.

CASE STUDY – SWISS GARDEN RESTORATION



The council has a long-term lease on the Swiss Garden at Shuttleworth in Old Warden. In 2012 the council and the Shuttleworth Trust were awarded a grant of £2.8 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund to conserve listed structures, restore the landscape, improve hydrology and develop improved visitor facilities.

In addition to the obvious significance and beauty of this valuable historic garden, this site is one of Central Bedfordshire's most significant tourist attractions and deserves to be restored to its former glory.

4.1.8 Biodiversity

Of the 58 countryside sites that Central Bedfordshire Council manage, 11 of these are Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and 14 carry the county level status of County Wildlife Site (CWS).

The Wildlife and Countryside Act (as amended by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act) requires a local authority to "take reasonable steps, consistent with the proper exercise of the authority's functions, to further the conservation and enhancement of the flora, fauna or geological or physiographical features by reason of which the site is of special scientific interest". The council works with a variety of partners to effectively manage and maintain biodiversity on greenspaces and follows established management principles when carrying out habitat management. It seeks additional ecological advice, where necessary, particularly when managing sites with high biodiversity value. It also looks to provide managed access, interpretation and education to increase understanding and awareness of nature.

²⁶ Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance: for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment, English Heritage 2008

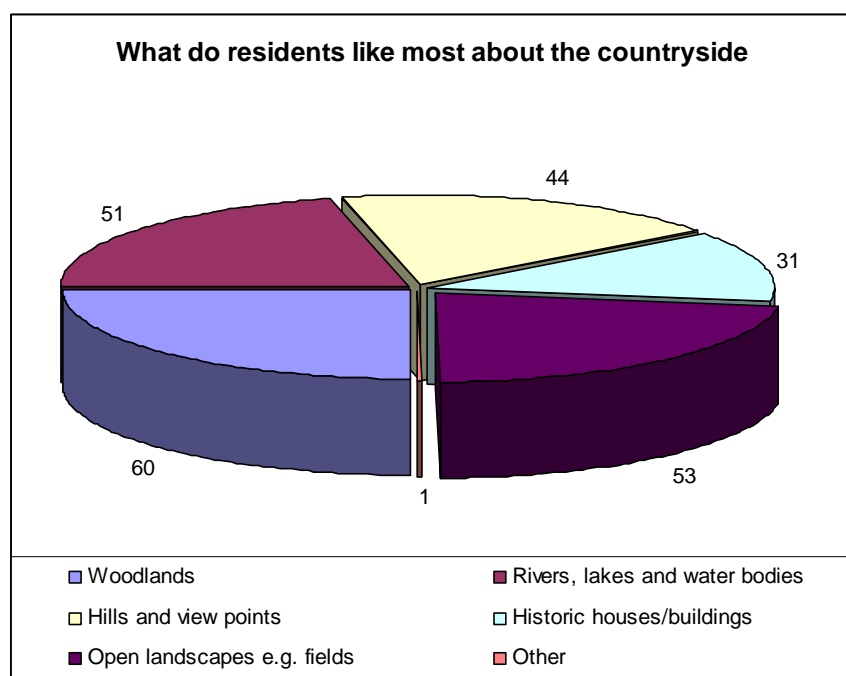
The council also provides advice to land owners and local groups regarding farm biological conservation activities and woodland management, with guidance and sign posting to relevant organisations, legislation and routes for funding these activities.

4.2 How are Breathing Spaces Used?

The local countryside is a vital and valued asset for Central Bedfordshire residents. Access to greenspace promotes individual well-being, provides social contact with others and enables families to spend quality time together. It provides health and quality of life 'free of charge' and is an environmentally sustainable resource offering local access to communities without recourse to a car.

Research was carried out with the Bedfordshire Consultation Group Panel ²⁷ to ask for opinions on the countryside and open spaces in Bedfordshire. 1103 Bedfordshire residents were surveyed and although this was a county wide survey, it remains relevant as 61% of responses were from Central Bedfordshire residents.

When asked how often people use the countryside 57% of respondents visited the countryside on a daily or weekly basis. From a list of features, respondents were asked to state which they liked most about the countryside, woodlands were marginally the most popular feature over river and lakes and open landscapes.



²⁷ Bedfordshire Consultation Group Panel Telephone Survey of Bedfordshire Residents, October 2007

Almost a third of all respondents tried to find out about new walks, rides or countryside sites, with almost 40% of these respondents finding out about them through word of mouth.

Respondents were given a list of all major Central Bedfordshire countryside sites and parks and asked how often they visited them. Dunstable Downs was the most visited site/park with 7% of all respondents visiting the Downs on a daily or weekly basis.

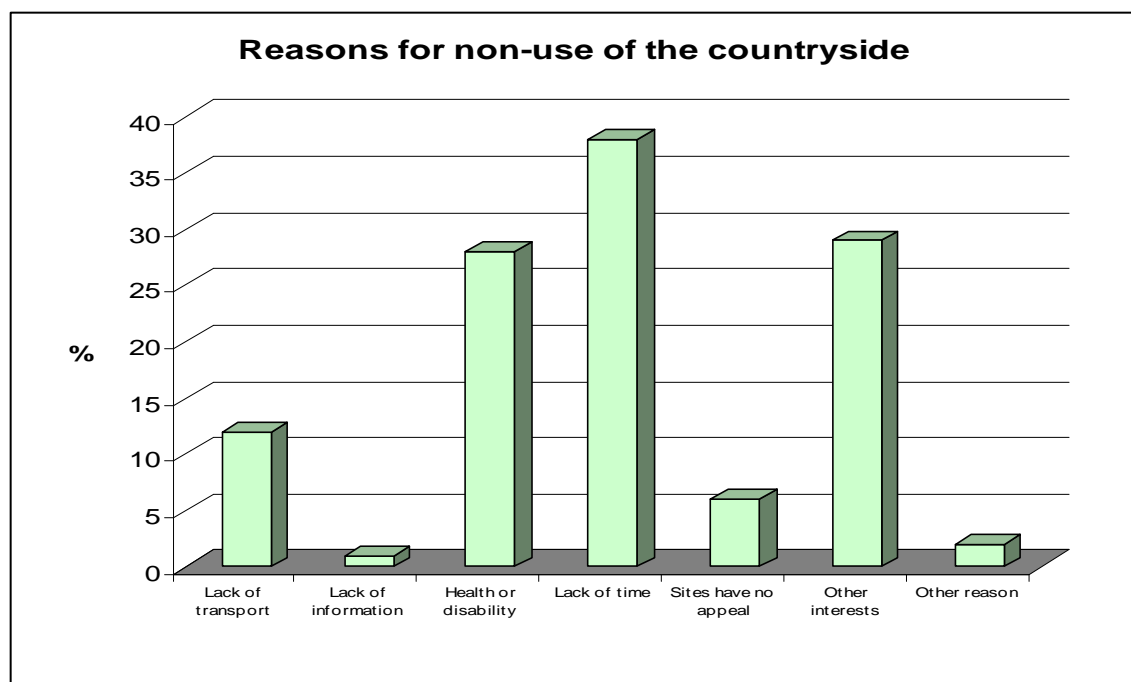
Site	Daily (%)	Weekly (%)	Monthly (%)	Few times per Year. (%)	Rarely (%)	Never (%)
Amphill Park	0	4	6	18	20	51
Marston Millennium Country Park	0	2	7	18	16	57
Rushmere Country Park *	1	3	8	12	11	65
Dunstable Downs *	1	6	12	25	30	26
Swiss Garden *	0	1	2	15	24	58
Sundon Hills Country Park *	0	1	2	6	11	80

* - CBC owned site

Respondents were also asked to highlight favourite countryside characteristics; 64% identified peace and tranquillity as being most important, whilst almost half (48%) liked being able to get closer to nature and wildlife.

The survey also tried to ascertain what aspects of local greenspace local people felt needed improvement and how they should be prioritised. The results are below:

Type of Improvement	High Priority	Medium Priority	Low Priority
Improving access and reducing the need access by car	70	21	8
Provide new open spaces and access routes	62	26	12
Increased signage, surfacing, play areas	51	35	15
Supporting self-service - i.e. leaflets, websites, etc	50	37	12
Increased maintenance	48	41	11
Increase staff on the ground - more rangers/wardens & guided walks	33	38	28



The 43% of respondents who were non users or did not regularly access the countryside (daily or weekly) were asked the main reasons for not visiting the countryside or *not* visiting the countryside *more often*. Over a third (35%) stated that lack of time was the main reason for not visiting the countryside, while just under a third (32%) stated that their health or a disability prevented them from visiting.

This Plan focuses on thematic linkages which may help to change the perception that accessing the countryside requires time and effort. Promoting the countryside as a venue for exercise or community activity may help to integrate countryside access into other activities that people prioritise. The survey also demonstrates a need to continue work to improve the accessibility of greenspace to people with mobility restrictions.

4.3 The Importance of Breathing Spaces

The research carried out with the Bedfordshire Consultation Group Panel in October 2007 asked for residents views on the importance of the countryside access and the countryside in general. When asked how important the countryside is to feelings about the area, the majority (90%) stated that it was very or fairly important. When asked how important the countryside is to their quality of life, the vast majority (97%) said that it was either very or fairly important.

4.3.1 Breathing Spaces... as Growing Spaces

The Central Bedfordshire Development Strategy is key to creating, protecting and improving greenspaces in areas of growth. Policies covering accessible open space, leisure and open space development and local green space, amongst others, seek to ensure new communities enjoy appropriate access to the countryside and greenspaces.

4.3.2 Breathing Spaces... as Green Spaces

The Sustainable Communities Strategy²⁸ includes the priority 'caring for a green and clean environment'. This Plan supports the priority by encouraging and improving access to new and existing green spaces within and close to the growth areas, (e.g. Rushmere Park), providing a range of walking and cycling opportunities (e.g. Circular walks and the Dunstable Downs Multi user path and Totternhoe Greenway), enabling active lifestyles and protecting and raising awareness of biodiversity, through visitor management and engagement (e.g. Promoted walks and educational visits around sites to raise awareness of site management and the sites biodiversity and heritage).

²⁸ Sustainable Community Strategy 2010-2031: A prospectus for Central Bedfordshire, Central Bedfordshire Together <http://www.centraltogether.org.uk/vision-priorities/sustainable-community-strategy/>

4.3.3 Breathing Spaces... as Tourist Spaces

The council's' Local Economic Assessment²⁹ recognises the importance of Central Bedfordshire's 'high quality...natural environment' and the continued importance of the rural economy, particularly through leisure and tourism based activities including 'leisure flows to surrounding population centres'. Tourism is identified as a major growth sector and Central Bedfordshire is acknowledged to be home to 'major attractions and a raft of historic towns and villages, country houses, local attractions and activities for people of all ages'. A number of the council's' green space sites are already acknowledged tourism destinations however others have the potential to be attractive to tourists with promotion and development. The assessment stresses that the 'natural environment' (Dunstable Downs being the example cited) attracts nearly 5 million day and staying trips to the area (2008 data) linked to visitor spend of over £249m and a total economic value of almost £300m.

Much of Central Bedfordshire has benefitted from the Greensand Ridge Local Development Strategy, which identified a range of issues affecting economic performance, and delivered significant amount of investment into the area, benefitting tourists and visitors, improving countryside access opportunities and attracting new visitors, as well as supporting key rural businesses. The legacy of the Strategy will continue to be important to the local area over coming years.

4.3.4 Breathing Spaces... as Learning Spaces

The Sustainable Communities Strategy highlights that well used green spaces can provide an education resource. We demonstrate this by promoting school visits to country parks, such as Dunstable Downs and Rushmere Country Park and the delivery of the Forest Schools programme on some of our wooded sites. Schools and local groups (e.g. cubs, scouts) are also encouraged to visit their local sites which can be reached on foot such as Campton Wood, Flitwick Wood and Baulk Wood.

The Youth Parliament is involved in the management of the council's sites, so that Children and Young People are involved in decisions and can help to ensure that access provision is designed to fit their needs.

Through our site management partners, training schemes in landscaping and environment management are being implemented on our green spaces. These develop young people's skills and work experience and provide a link to further volunteering and employment opportunities.

²⁹ Sustainable Communities Central Bedfordshire Local Economic Assessment 2011

4.3.5 Breathing Spaces... as Wildlife Spaces

The council works with partners to effectively manage and maintain biodiversity on green spaces and also looks to provide managed access, interpretation and education to increase understanding and awareness of nature.

4.3.6 Breathing Spaces... as Artistic Spaces

The Central Bedfordshire Public Art Framework highlights significant opportunities for art presented by leisure and open spaces. Artistic involvement with the design and development of parks, play and recreation spaces can help “develop a sense of ownership by local communities” and increase appeal to current non-users of green spaces. This has already been demonstrated through council projects at Campton Plantation and Rushmere Park where it is recognised that there is scope for an increased use of art within countryside sites.

CASE STUDY – CAMPTON WOOD SCULPTURE TRAIL



The popular Campton Wood sculpture trail now features 13 sculptures and carved benches, 3 iconic totem poles, interpretation and waymarking all celebrating local heritage and wildlife, including the wet woodland.

The project was designed to i attract a wider cross section of the community into the woodland and has proved very successful in attracting new local users.

Over £60k of external funding was secured to complete these works including funds from WREN Local Landscapes, the Environment Agency, Section 106 developer contributions and free tree work from Steve Dear Tree Services Ltd.

4.4 Breathing Spaces: The Next 10 Years

Produce Greenspace and Access Masterplans for Targeted Areas

The council, in partnership with other local stakeholders, will develop new area based countryside access and greenspace masterplans that will produce long term management proposals for the countryside features of the area. Over the period of the plan the council will work with communities and partners to review the need for and prepare access and greenspace master plans in areas of the Ouzel Valley, Ivel Valley, 'Chalk Arc' area (around North Luton and Dunstable), Flit, Greensand and Marston Vale areas. The order that these will be looked at will be determined by opportunity and risk assessment.

Provide Access to Small Green spaces

Many rural villages and communities do not have accessible natural green spaces at the 0 – 20ha criteria. The challenge is to ensure that opportunities are taken to develop smaller neighbourhood / pocket green spaces and ensure that existing green and open spaces sites maximise opportunities to create natural habitats, along side there primary use. The leisure strategy will aim to remedy this situation and will identify areas of greenspace and a summary of provision will be produced per Parish.

Create Large Green spaces

There are no existing 500ha+ sub regional sites in Central Bedfordshire. The south of the area can access the Ashridge Estate in Hertfordshire, but this site is already at capacity, out of catchment and difficult to drive to for much of the area. The council will seek opportunities to work in partnership with private landholders, create new sites and consolidate land around existing sites and council holdings to create sub regional sites. We will focus on opportunities which exist within the Forest of Marston Vale looking at interconnecting sites and improving access provision between Cranfield, Brogborough and Marston Moretaine and the areas around Leighton Buzzard where opportunities exist to link existing and proposed sites.

Improve Network of Green spaces

The council are working towards achieving a cohesive network of easily accessible, safe, attractive and welcoming parks, gardens and green spaces which meet the needs of everyone and which contribute to the economic, social and environmental well-being of people and places, now and for future generations.

4.5 Action Plan Summary for Breathing Spaces

The main Aims and Outcomes of the Action Plan for Breathing Spaces are detailed below. The specific projects relating to these aims are laid out in detail in the Action Plan which will be reviewed and updated every 5 years.

Aim 5 - Well Managed Countryside Spaces

Outcome - Countryside sites will be managed to a good state of repair, with visitors understanding the sites and their management and having regard to the intrinsic qualities of the landscape.

Outcome - Visitors will know the location of their nearest space and be aware of their travel choices.

Outcome – Existing Sites will be enhanced to complement the intrinsic qualities of the landscape, its history and biodiversity whilst meeting the demands of local communities and the growth agenda.

Aim 6 - Commons, Village Greens and Access Areas will be legally defined with people understanding their rights

Outcome - People understand where their nearest Common, Village Green or Access Area is and are confident of how to use it.

4.6 Policies for Breathing Spaces

OAIP - Policy Statement 6 – New Greenspace

The council will work with communities to explore the feasibility of new greenspaces and to deliver access and green space proposals.

OAIP - Policy Statement 7 – Green Infrastructure

The council will use Green Infrastructure plans and the Green Infrastructure priority network to identify and enhance existing green spaces and corridors, seeking to utilise Planning Obligations and Community Infrastructure Levy funding to deliver the Green Infrastructure improvements.

OAIP - Policy Statement 8 – Managing for the Historic Environment

The council will protect, conserve, enhance where appropriate and promote access, interpretation and enjoyment of heritage assets including archaeological and historic landscape sites and features.

The council will manage heritage assets in accordance with English Heritage's *Conservation Principles: Policies and Guidance* (2008).

OAIP - Policy Statement 9 - Public Art in the Countryside

The council will consider opportunities for the creation of public art on countryside sites and walking and cycling routes in line with the Central Bedfordshire Public Art Framework.