

Local Spaces: Community Involvement and Participation

...the green space on our doorstep



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Our ambition is to strengthen the connections between people and nature. We want more people to enjoy the benefits of nature by giving them freedom to connect with it. Everyone should have fair access to a good-quality natural environment. We want to see every child in England given the opportunity to experience and learn about the natural environment. We want to help people take more responsibility for their environment, putting local communities in control and making it easier for people to take positive action.

DEFRA: The natural choice: securing the value of nature 2011

5.1 What are Local Spaces?

Local spaces are about people; the way that individuals and communities learn and explore their landscape and environment, the way that they engage with, participate in and enjoy the spaces in and around their community. The council undertakes and supports a range of activities which aim to help people and communities engage with the countryside.

5.1.1 Participation and Volunteering



Central Bedfordshire has an established commitment to supporting community volunteering in environment, access and green space management activities. Along with third sector

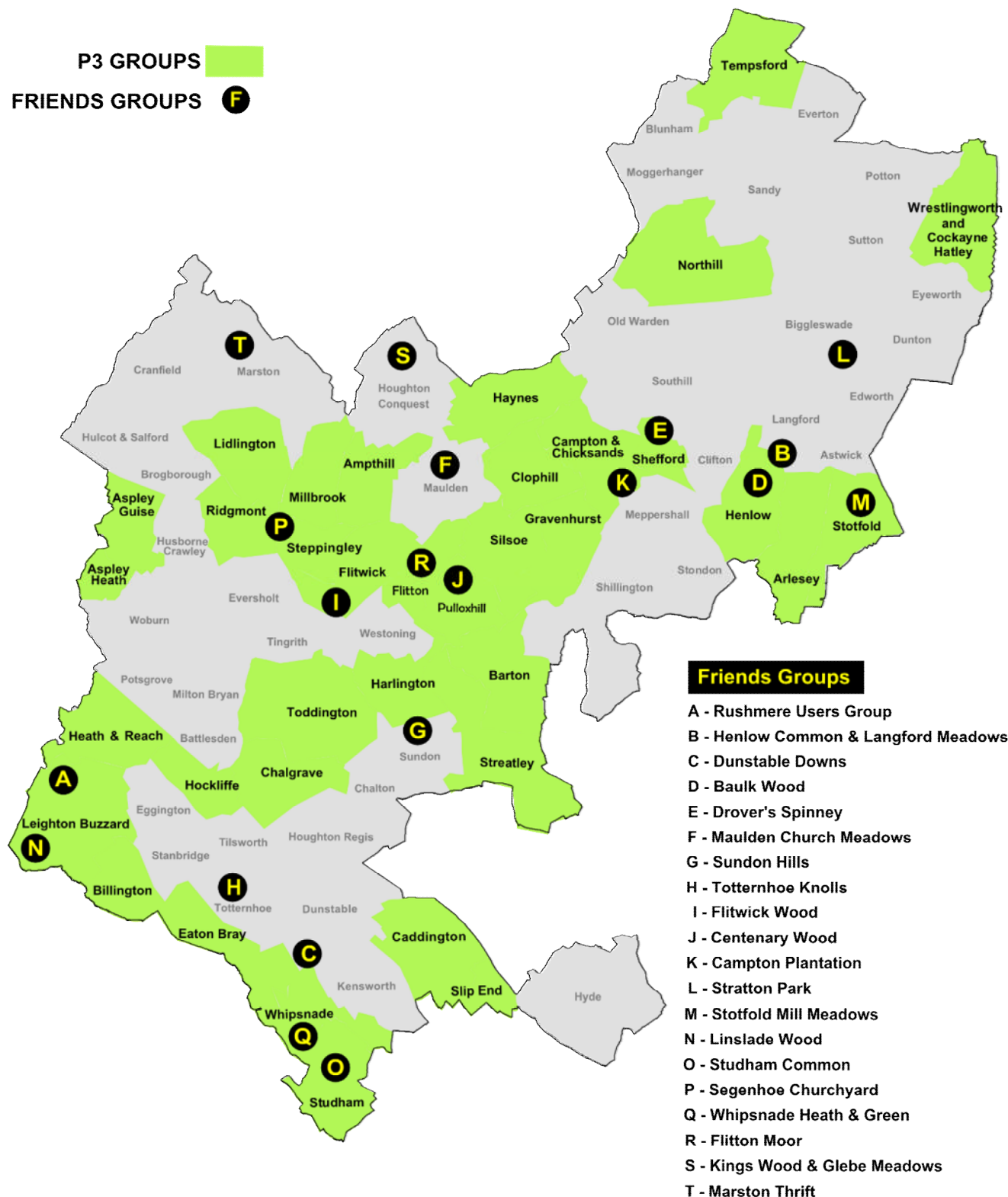
organisations that operate in the area, the council has developed its own P3 (People, Projects, Partnerships) initiative to involve volunteers in environmental and conservation tasks. The scheme was established in 1992 and has grown from strength to strength, operating 2 main strands of work:

- Parish or area based volunteering (P3 parishes) – Central Bedfordshire now has 39 P3 Groups supporting 400 volunteers
- Countryside site based ‘friends of’ schemes – Central Bedfordshire has 16 friends of groups with 3 more groups in development, equating to 300 volunteers

The council also supports a range of volunteers from other organisations including the Greensand Trust, the National Trust, Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity and Groundwork, who deliver additional maintenance work on the network.

The council contracts a number of Third Sector partners to assist in supporting P3 and friends of groups including the Greensand Trust and Beds Rural Communities Charity. The Community managed greenspaces are key to empowering local people. Stemming from a tangible local need, these spaces are created by local communities, for local communities, allowing local people to take control of their environment, get involved and become more active.

P3 AND FRIENDS GROUPS



5.1.2 Green Flag

Two 'Friends of' groups and one Trust, supported by the council received 'Green Flag Community Awards' (originally called Green Pennant) in 2012. The Award provides national recognition for the achievements of communities who work together to manage a site for the benefit of local people.

The Green Flag Community Award Winners were:

- Studham Common (2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012)
- Linslade Wood (2011, 2012)
- Stotfold Mill Nature Reserve (2012)

The council will continue to support Friends and P3 groups to achieve Green Flag Awards for council owned and managed sites and aspire to achieving Green Flag status on all our major sites.

CASE STUDY - STUDHAM COMMON



The Friends of Studham Common were founded in 1997 to help maintain and preserve the Common, for people and wildlife. Since the groups' foundation they have:

- Restored and maintained overgrown bridleways and footpaths
- Replanted over 500 metres of hedgerow
- Reclaimed over two hectares (4.9 acres) of grasslands and woodland glades
- Put up nesting boxes for birds, bats and dormice
- Offered monthly work parties offering volunteering opportunities for all including disadvantaged people and young people
- Created interpretive panels and leaflets to provide information to visitors

Community Engagement

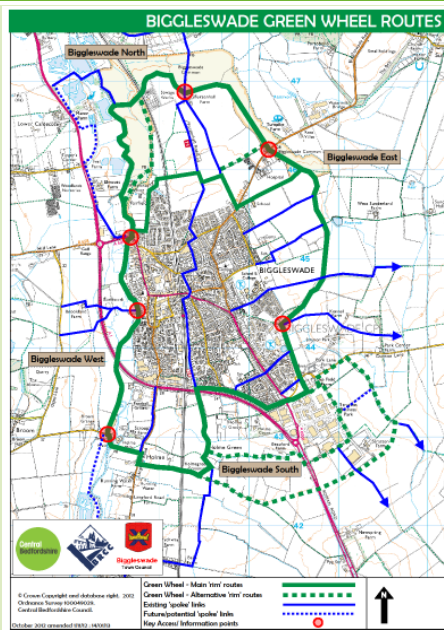
Being visible and listening to our communities has always been a strong driver for local authority delivery. Community engagement is particularly important for effective management and promotion of countryside access and to this end the council runs and supports an annual programme of events and activities including public walks and talks. These are seen as excellent opportunities to meet both users and non users of countryside facilities. Examples of events include:

- Eid Festival at Dunstable Downs (annually from 2006) with National Trust
- Guided walks as part of the Bedfordshire Ramblers Walking Festival (annual)
- Run Wild at Baulk Wood (annually from 2007) with BRCC
- Guided walks to mark launch of sculpture trail at Campton Wood (2011)
- Guided walks to mark launch of sculpture/ family trail at Rushmere Country Park (2012) with the Greensand Trust

5.1.3 Working with Town and Parish Council's

The council has established relationships with Town and Parish Council's and continues to strive to improve communication and partnerships. In line with the localism agenda, the council seeks to 'enable communities to do more themselves'. In the management of countryside access much of our traditional contact has been developed through the P3 Scheme. In recent years we have been developing more practical partnerships, assisting communities in green infrastructure planning, master planning and delivery of access and greenspace projects for communities. In 2012 the council consulted with Town and Parish Council's on the potential for them to participate further in the management of sites and rights of way in line with the localism agenda.

CASE STUDY – BIGGLESWADE GREEN WHEEL



The Council have been working in partnership with Biggleswade Town Council (BTC) and Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity (BRCC) to produce a Biggleswade Green Wheel Greenspace Masterplan. This is a long term vision for the linking of publically accessible green spaces and routes around the town encouraging walking and cycling use. This will establish a common vision and jointly agreed action plan for collective delivery.

5.1.4 Local Access Forum

The council has a statutory duty under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to establish and operate a Local Access Forum. Central Bedfordshire's forum was re-established as a joint forum with Luton Borough Council in 2009 following unitary review. The forum is administered, under contract, by Central Bedfordshire Council. It is a key vehicle for local consultation and provides a mechanism for the community to hold the council accountable for delivery of services.

5.1.5 Information and Promotion

Originally established in the late 1980's by Natural England's predecessor, the Countryside Commission, the Recreational Routes programme is still seen by local council's as critical to encouraging people to explore the natural environment. The council manages:

- 9 Promoted Circular Walks.
- 7 Horse Riding Routes that were developed jointly with the British Horse Society.

- The Greensand Ridge Walk and is involved with at least 8 other externally developed linear routes.
- 6 Circular Off-Road Cycle Routes
- 10 Accessibility routes, which provide enhanced information to facilitate access to the countryside for those with permanent and temporary limited mobility

The council is committed to providing high quality information and interpretation at countryside sites. Interpretation Boards are available at all Countryside sites owned and managed by the council and at many Open Access areas.

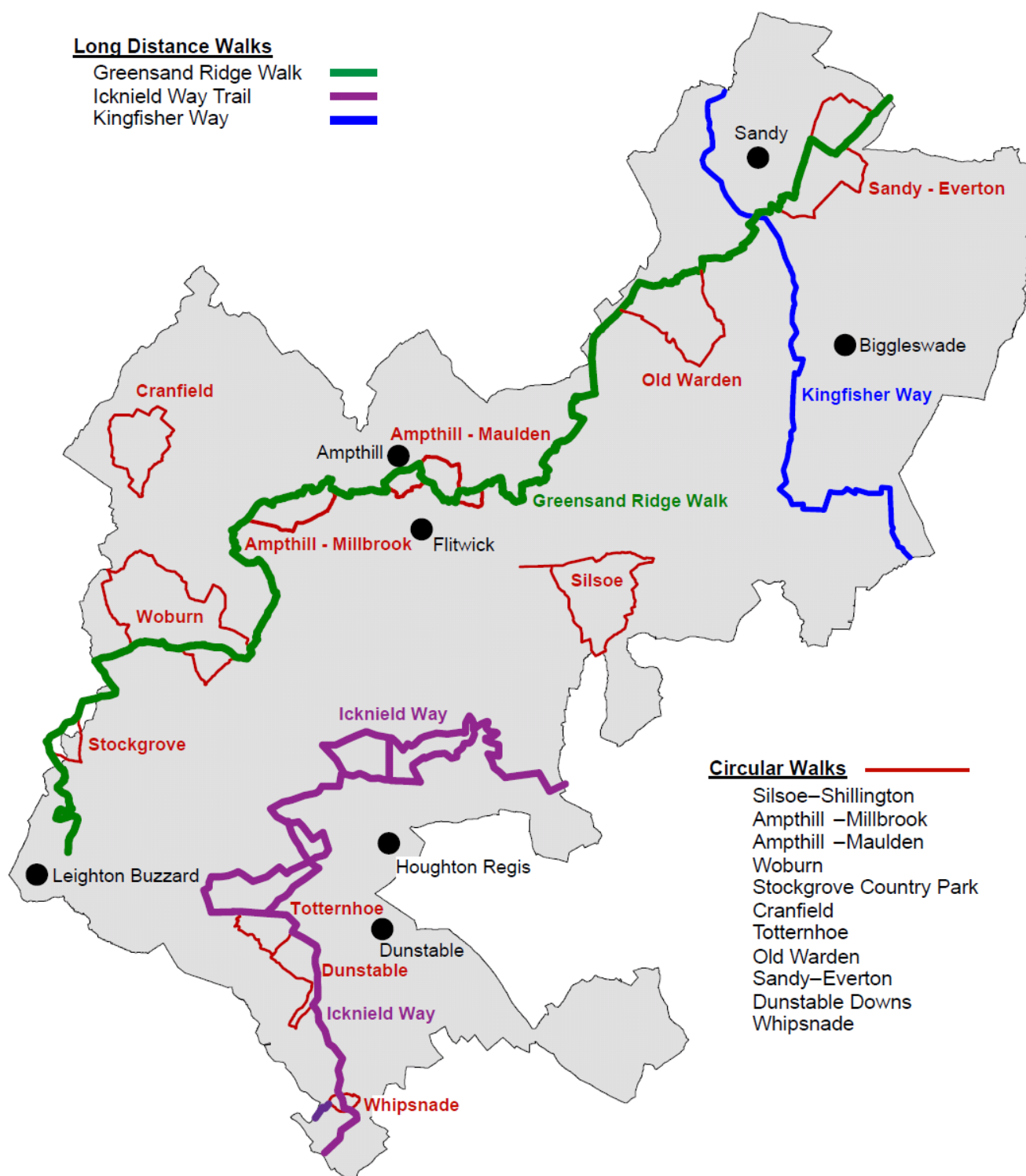
Information about sites and countryside activities is also available from the Central Bedfordshire Website www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk. The council also supports the 'Lets go' web site (www.letsgo.org.uk³⁰) jointly with Bedford Borough Council. This web site provides online access to walks and rides across the county.

We recognise that there is still demand from communities for leaflets. Leaflets are currently available to support promoted routes and the council will endeavour to continue this provision whilst there is the demand.

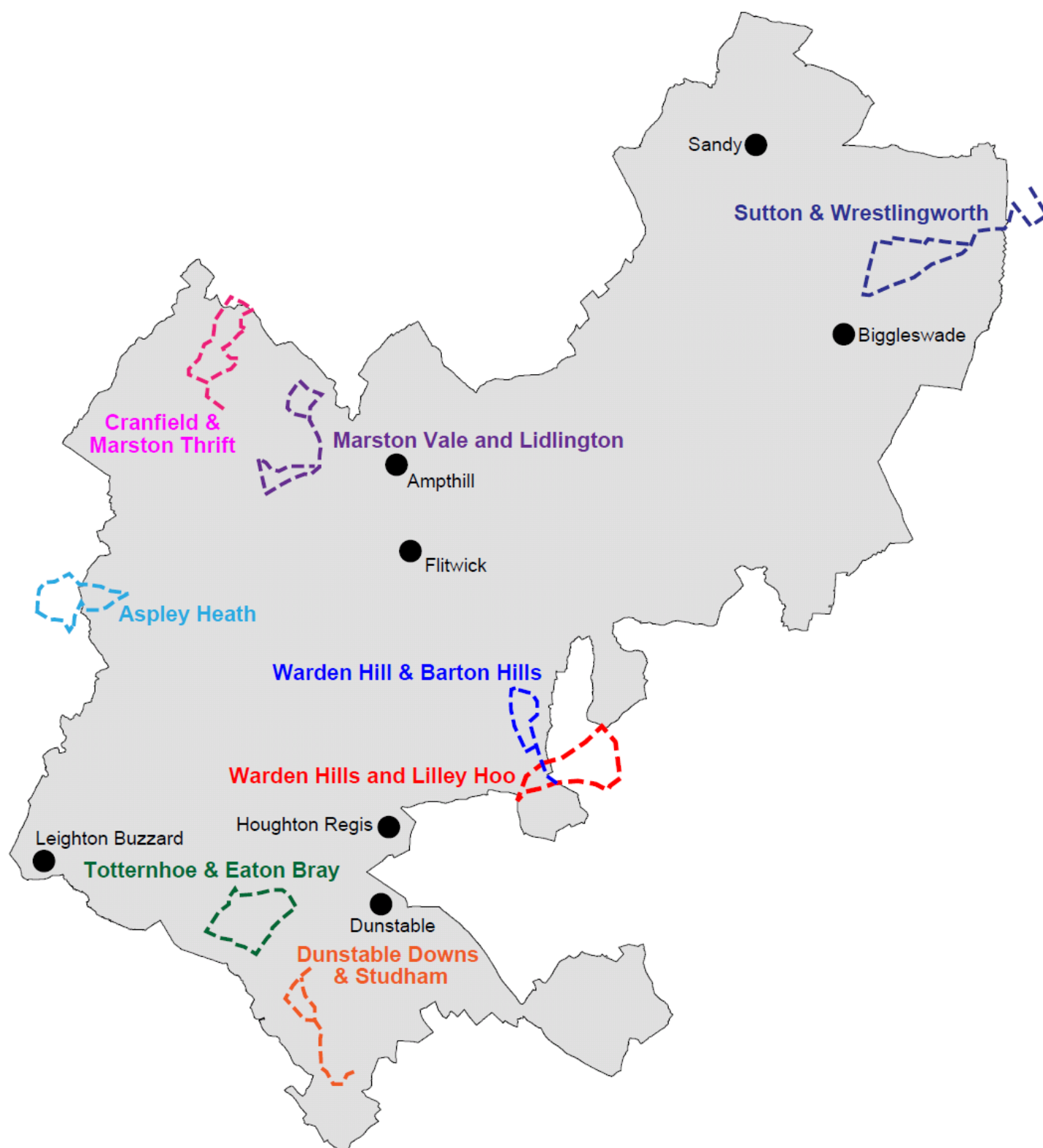
In addition to providing its own information, the council supports local communities through P3 to develop and promote their own leaflets and interpretation boards.

³⁰ www.letsgo.org.uk is an initiative developed by the Forest of Marston Vale and is managed by their volunteers, with financial support from Bedford and Central Bedfordshire Councils. The Web site hosts PDF information of over 300 Promoted Routes and Places to Visit.

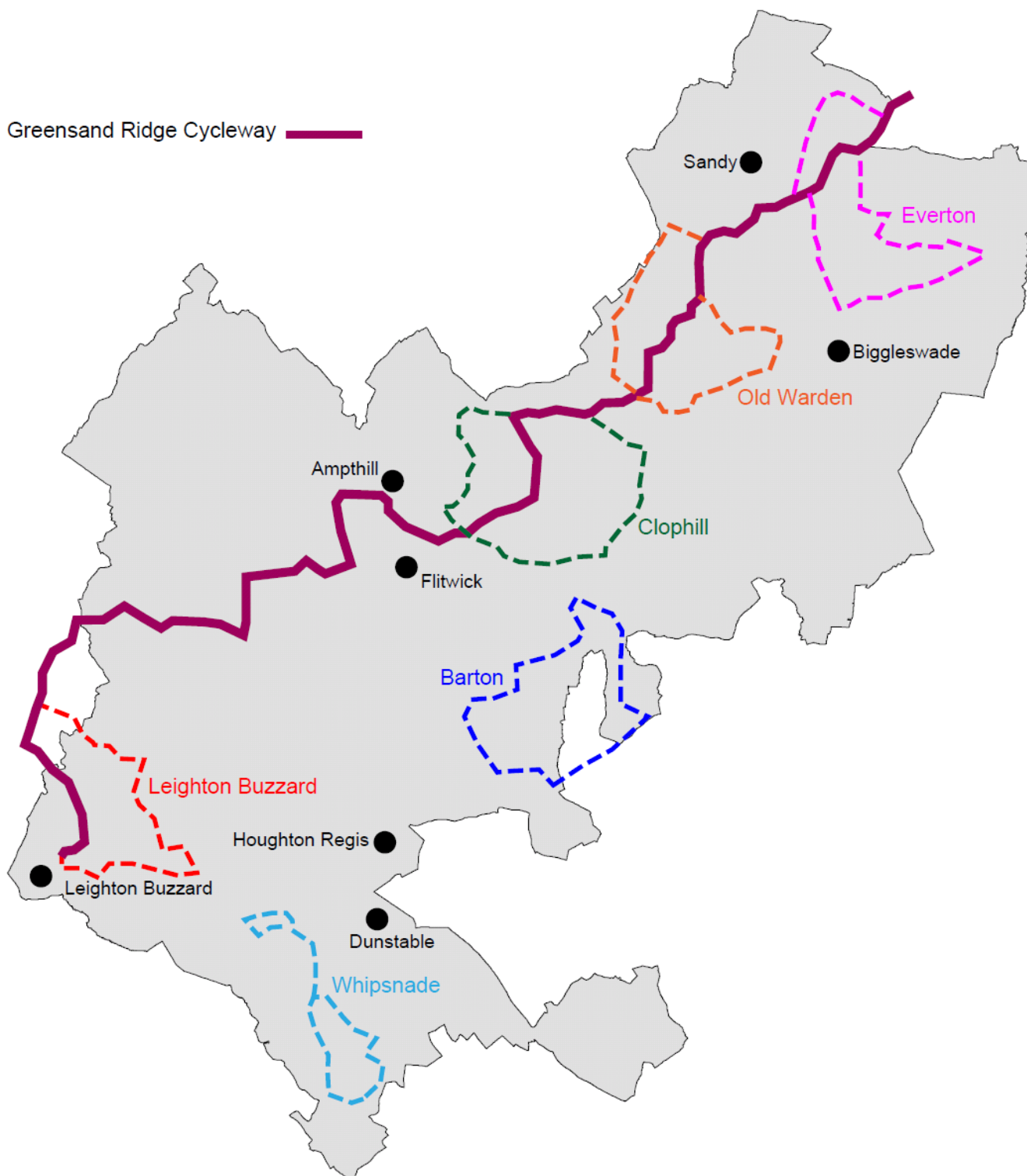
LONG DISTANCE WALKS AND CIRCULAR WALKS



HORSE RIDING ROUTES



GREENSAND RIDGE CYCLEWAY & CIRCULAR CYCLE ROUTES



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5.1.6 Walkers are Welcome



In 2012, the community of Sandy and its Town Council, applied for and were awarded the status of a '*Walkers are Welcome*³¹ Town. This scheme is different from most top-down accreditation schemes, in that it has emerged from, and is being promoted by, communities themselves. Initially developed in the north of England, Sandy is only the second community in the East of England and the first in Bedfordshire to receive the accreditation which evidences a communities commitment to making a walker's visit an enjoyable one. It helps to strengthen a town's reputation as a place for visitors to come to enjoy the outdoors, bringing useful benefits to the local economy.

The accredited towns have constituted themselves as the *Walkers are Welcome* Towns Network. This body (through its committee and its annual conference) develops and controls the *Walkers are Welcome* scheme and oversees use of the logo. In other words, the *Walkers are Welcome* idea and brand is collectively managed by the communities themselves who are participating – real grassroots democracy in action.

5.1.7 Management and Communication

The approach to the management of our Countryside sites is based upon a combination of ecological surveys, biodiversity planning and historic environment surveys, as well as user and non user public surveys and assessment of the intrinsic heritage and landscape qualities of each site. Understanding this is key to interpreting why a space looks the way it does and justifies the way it is managed.

Management of the Rights of Way network is primarily based on legislation with the council, Town and Parish Council's, landowners and the public all having roles to play. Understanding the variety of roles is critical to understanding both the council's approach to management and the effective input that can be made. The council works hard to clarify these roles through effective communication and the council's website has a number of guides for the public about undertaking legal events on the network.

5.2 How are Local Spaces Used?

Central Bedfordshire Council's 2011 resident's survey highlighted three key points regarding the significance of access for people to parks and countryside:

- Country parks, open spaces and rights of way are seen as important in making somewhere a good place to live. .
- The importance of parks and open spaces has increased substantially between 2008 and 2011 (42% in 2011 compared to 25% in 2008).
- Three-quarters of residents are satisfied with parks and open spaces in Central Bedfordshire. Younger people tend to be more positive about parks and open spaces than older people (80% under 35s versus 71% over 55s). There has been a significant change in satisfaction with parks since 2008 (67%). In 2008, The council³² was in the bottom quartile for satisfaction rates relating to its parks and open spaces compared to other Local Authorities, in 2011, the council was in the top quartile; a significant achievement.

The public's perceptions of parks and open spaces in Central Bedfordshire can account for 10% of the variation in public satisfaction with the council overall. This highlights the importance of the councils' work with greenspaces to local residents and provides evidence that greenspace is perceived to be of equal importance to education and other key services.

5.2.1 Volunteering

Volunteering and community engagement forms a central component in environmental management, with all third sector environmental groups as well as Central Bedfordshire Council, working with and supporting volunteers. Currently there is no council baseline assessment of the number of volunteer days spent on environmental activities. However the Local Strategic Partnership³³ Environment and Economy thematic group have established a Performance indicator³⁴ which monitors the increase in new volunteering enquiries. On average, there were 162 enquiries

³² 2008 survey related to Bedfordshire County Council; prior to Local Authority reorganisation

³³ Central Bedfordshire - Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) is called Central Bedfordshire Together. It's role is to provide the vision and strategic leadership to improve the quality of life for all people in Central Bedfordshire, as outlined in the Sustainable Community Strategy.

³⁴ Performance indicator - Number of people who are unemployed or economically inactive accessing information, advice and guidance on volunteering through the volunteer centres

each quarter during 2010/11, from people who were unemployed or economically inactive. These figures appear to be increasing along with national trends, and are being monitored every 6 months. Whilst this is a positive trend the council would also like to see an upward trend in the number of volunteer hours committed to environmental and conservation tasks and will therefore endeavour to ensure monitoring and recording mechanisms accurately assess volunteer contributions in support of the OAIP.

The make up of many volunteer groups is such that most volunteers are predominately white, male, middle-class and of retirement age. However it is recognised that volunteering can be both rewarding for people of any age and social background; with benefits to individual employability, skill levels and confidence. The challenge for the future will be to encourage volunteering from a wider variety of backgrounds.

Volunteers and users of the countryside also play a useful role in being the eyes and ears of their community, by working closely with the council, they improve the quality of the site, prevent fly tipping, littering and anti social activities and improve the perception of personal safety of Countryside.

5.2.2 Information and Promotion

The Rights of Way Survey 2010 identified that ‘the propensity for future use of rights of way network was high with 68% of respondents saying that they were very likely to use the facilities in the future and a further 16% would possibly do so’.

Users felt it was extremely important that the council continued to make available ‘information on the rights of way, to the public through as many sources as possible. Signs and notice boards were a popular source, but respondents also wished to obtain information from websites and from other council literature. That said word of mouth was the most frequently mentioned source for users interviewed on the pathways’.

These figures provide a strong mandate to the council’s need to maintain the rights of way and promoted routes networks, particularly where there are links to amenities, but also to continue to develop the range of publicity material and techniques used.

5.3 The Importance of Local Spaces

The DEFRA Third Sector Strategy (November 2008) includes the key objective “*To help facilitate collective action, community empowerment, informal learning and community solutions which protect the natural environment, and create sustainable and resilient communities – in urban and rural areas*”. The council’s programme of work relating to Local Spaces fully supports this work and is based on the understanding that the sustainability of countryside management and access is reliant on the support and involvement of the communities that use the facilities.

5.3.1 Local Spaces... as Community Spaces

The importance of outdoor access and green spaces in the development of community ownership, pride and social value has long been recognised. The 2011 Green Space report showed that effective management of parks, green spaces and rights of way meant that...

*“communities use their spaces more, having a better relationship with their local council and take some pride in the area where they live. They provide communities with a sense of place and belonging, opportunities for recreation, health and fitness whilst supporting social cohesion and inclusive society. Research has also shown that the opposite is true, where there are poorly managed spaces, vandalism and neglect; the communities use of spaces is fractured, there is an increase in anti social behaviour and they can be seen as a blight on communities.”*³⁵

The council will work cross departmentally and with key partners to manage spaces in a manner that reduces antisocial behaviour, considers community safety and increases community pride and ‘ownership’ of local greenspace.

5.3.2 Local Spaces... as Partnership Spaces

The Central Bedfordshire Local Strategic Partnership launched the Community Engagement Strategy in 2010. This strategy, sub titled ‘Communities doing more for themselves...’ seeks to develop new relationships with individuals and organisations, to help communities understand the tough choices and decisions ahead, and to manage their expectations about the service levels provided by the public sector in

³⁵ Green space – Understanding the contribution parks and greenspaces can make to improving peoples lives (2011)

the future, whilst enabling and facilitating communities. The strategy is based on five key principles, which are:

- Giving more people more opportunities to influence decisions
- Enabling Ward Councillors to be leaders in and for their communities
- Enhancing the role of Town and Parish Councils
- Building the capacity of local people to engage
- Ensuring a strategic and joined-up, coordinated partnership approach

Through the council's work in supporting P3 and 'Friends of groups', there is an established and mutually beneficial relationship with many Town and Parish Councils. The passing of the Localism Act has given this area of work a greater prominence and the view that the council should work more actively to engage with Local Councils to increase community participation.

5.3.3 Local Spaces... as Learning Spaces

The Natural Environment White Paper³⁶ includes the aspiration that 'we want to see every child in England given the chance to experience and learn about the natural environment'.

Through reviews in the National Curriculum and in The Government's White Paper, *'The Importance of Teaching'*, teachers are being encouraged to create more opportunities for different routes to learning, including learning outside the classroom.

Many of the Countryside Sites that the council manages are close to schools and communities. Sites have been used for a variety of well received educational and learning activities, in partnership with third sector organisations. However there are opportunities to take greater advantage of sites as an educational resource. Currently the council does not provide resource information to schools, youth groups (scouts etc) or parents but this is an area for future development.

5.3.4 Local Spaces... as Economic Spaces

The value that volunteers bring to the area has been recognised by the Local Strategic Partnership³⁷, through its newly developed Volunteering Strategy.³⁸ The

³⁶ The Natural Choice – Securing the Value of Nature (2011)

Volunteering Strategy aims to increase and improve volunteering through three priorities:

- **Priority 1: People are inspired to volunteer**
- **Priority 2: People have the opportunity to volunteer**
- **Priority 3: People have excellent volunteering experiences**

The council and its partners in Bedfordshire Together need to consider how to come together to effect the delivery of this strategy. The council's P3 and 'Friends of' programmes will be part of this, with the intention that people will have greater opportunities to volunteer and improved volunteer coordination.

Although it is possible to apply a system for applying an economic value to the use of volunteers - this should be done with care as there is a risk that this will reinforce an erroneous perception that encouraging the use of volunteers is a cost saving exercise. In this case an economic assessment is useful only to evidence the cost effectiveness of the council's approach to countryside management and to justify continued support and investment. There are a number of ways to cost the economic value of volunteering, for example TCV utilises a typical unskilled labour rate of £50 a day³⁹. When this figure is used against our P3 and 'Friends of' volunteering estimates (which are believed to be lower than the actual figure), the figure of 3360 volunteer days a year, yields a financial value of £165,000 per annum. The VIVA approach⁴⁰ considers both the financial value of volunteering and the cost of delivering volunteer services. Using this approach the net value of volunteering would be £185,573, based on an average hourly employment rate of £7.89 for Eastern region parks and countryside rangers⁴¹. This means that for every £1 spent by the council on volunteering an additional £3 is generated.

Many walkers and users of the public rights of way network, benefit the economy by using paths to access amenities. Nationally there are 527 million walking trips to the English countryside. Expenditure associated with these walking trips is in the region of £6.1 billion and the majority of walking trips (87%) are undertaken from the home

³⁷ Central Bedfordshire - Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) is called Central Bedfordshire Together. It's role is to provide the vision and strategic leadership to improve the quality of life for all people in Central Bedfordshire, as outlined in the Sustainable Community Strategy.

³⁸ LSP - Volunteer Strategy is expected to be published in Nov 2012.

³⁹ BTCV annual review 2007-2008

⁴⁰ Volunteer Investment and Value Audit published in 2011

⁴¹ Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2011

(i.e. leisure day trips).⁴² In a recent survey within Central Bedfordshire it was evident that shops, cafes and pubs were the key beneficiaries of income spent by walkers using the rights of way in Bedfordshire. 72% of users routinely visit these amenities and 59% of those who purchased goods spent between £1 and £10 per visit.⁴³ This is clearly a substantial investment into the local economy from users of the countryside.

5.4 Local Spaces: The Next 10 Years

Community Participation

The council will continue to support and extend the P3 and 'friends of' initiatives, investing in the training and skill development of volunteers.

The council, in conjunction with partners, will seek to widen the range of volunteers to more closely reflect the make up of the local population, increase the variety of activities volunteers can get involved in and ensure accurate recording of volunteer hours committed to activities supporting the OAIP.

Green Flag Awards

The council will continue to support Friends and P3 groups to achieve Green Flag Awards on council owned and managed sites.

Town and Parish Council involvement

Opportunities will be taken to extend work with Town and Parish Councils, keeping them informed of the councils work in their area and giving them opportunities to influence and get involved as well as exploring governance and management options.

The council will continue to work with partners to engage with Town and Parish Councils through activities like Neighbourhood Planning and Parish GI Planning.

⁴² The economic and social value of walking in England, Dr Mike Christie (Lecturer at the Institute of Rural Studies, University of Wales Aberystwyth) and Jon Matthews (Independent Research Consultant) September 2003

⁴³ Central Bedfordshire Council, Rights of Way Survey (2010) this survey interviewed 404 rights of way users at random along 12 rights of way, and in addition 1012 respondents were interviewed on the telephone.

The council will assist local council's in exploiting the potential of CIL funding to support greenspace and GI improvements.

Supporting the Rural Economy

When reviewing and developing our promoted route publicity material, opportunities will be sought to promote rural businesses; further benefits will be explored through the other chapters and in particular the leisure strategy.

The council will continue to support Sandy as a 'Walkers are Welcome' Town and seek to support communities and businesses wishing to gain this accreditation.

Promoted routes and information

Existing promoted routes will be managed and promoted with a focus on web-based information. Options will be explored to externally support the financial cost of printing. The council will look to republish a number of road based cycling routes and seek to develop a new off road cycle route in the Cranfield area. More accessibility routes will be developed to encourage access for people with limited mobility or those with pushchairs.

Opportunities to enhance the availability of information will be explored with the use of technologies. GPS mapping of routes and the use of QR codes will also be reviewed.

Technical information

The council's online information to support definitive map legal events will be enhanced with information provided on rights of way management processes. Opportunities to fund and resource the development of a 'Practical Guide to Rights of Way Management' will be investigated.

Countryside site management plans and statements will be published on the council's web site.

Environmental Education

The council will actively engage with schools to encourage the use of their nearest natural space. Funding will be sought to develop resource information that will inform schools, youth groups and parents.

5.5 Action Plan Summary for Local Spaces

The main Aims and Outcomes of the Action Plan for Local 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 7 – More people volunteering to support OAIP objectives

Outcome – More people will be aware and taking opportunities to volunteer on the environmental and other initiatives in their area which support the aspirations and objectives of the OAIP

Aim 8 – Increased Town and Parish Council involvement in countryside sites and rights of way management and development

Outcome – Town and Parish Councils have more opportunities to be involved in the management and development of local sites and the local rights of way network.

Aim 9 – The council will contribute to supporting the rural economy

Outcome – Local Businesses have more opportunities to benefit from the development of sites and Rights of Way.

Outcome - Visitor numbers to Central Bedfordshire countryside sites will increase

Outcome - Employment opportunities for the Local Area will be maximised

Aim 10 – More people have access to good quality information and are aware of countryside access close to them

Outcome – People will be able to access information about local sites and promoted routes

Outcome – There will be an increased level of awareness of facilities close to where people live.

Aim 11 – Support and Provide Environmental Education opportunities

Outcome – Parents and schools will have information on access to their local environment

5.6 Policies for Local Spaces

The policies for Local Spaces will support the delivery plan but also ensure that the council, its partners and the wider community deliver outdoor and countryside access in line with agreed principles.

OAIP - Policy Statement 10 – P3

The council will continue to support and extend the P3 and 'Friends of' approach, seeking to widen its investment in and the skills of volunteers working in the environmental sector.

OAIP - Policy Statement 11 – Community Involvement

The council will ensure that local and community involvement principles are written into area master plans and site management plan documents.

OAIP - Policy Statement 12 – Community Engagement and development

The council will ensure that development proposals provide or enhance opportunities for community engagement with outdoor access and the local countryside.