March 2008

FRAMEWORK FOR THE

the Forest of Marston Vale

Bedford River Valley Park

This document has been prepared by EDAW plc on behalf of:

The Marston Vale Trust

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Caroline Flint (Minister of State for Housing): *"The Department for Communities and Local Government is delighted to have been able to contribute Growth Area Funding towards the realisation of this major project for Bedford and the surrounding Growth Area. In its vision and ambitious scale the Bedford River Valley Park is just the sort of inspirational project that is so important in creating thriving, sustainable and vibrant communities."*

Cllr Bob King Community Services Portfolio Holder for Bedfordshire County Council and Trustee of the Marston Vale Trust: *"The creative use of worked-out clay and gravel pits presents a great opportunity for the environmental and economic regeneration of the Marston Vale. The Bedford River Valley Park adds to the great achievements in the rest of the Forest of Marston Vale, delivering enormous public benefit in line with the County's commitment to high quality sustainable growth and exemplary greenspace."*

Mayor of Bedford Frank Branston: *"It has been a vision to create the Bedford River Valley Park for many years and I am very pleased to see such an imaginative project take this major step towards realisation. The River Valley Park will transform the eastern approach to Bedford and provide an exceptional asset for the recreation and enjoyment of the people of Bedford, making it an even better place to live and work."*

Jessica Barton, Year 2, Willington Lower School: *"This is going to be brilliant – the Park will be massive with loads to do and lots of interesting places to explore – and I'll be able to cycle everywhere from the village and have picnics near the river and I can also feed the ducks – it'll be great for wild animals and all the baby rabbits"*

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Executive Summary

The Bedford River Valley Park (BRVP) is a proposed 868 hectares (2145 acres) regional park to the east of Bedford, largely situated in the floodplain of the River Great Ouse. The initiative is supported by national, regional and local policies which promote the creation of green infrastructure and nature conservation. The concept of creating the BRVP has been around for over 10 years. It is endorsed by a broad coalition of organisations, including Bedfordshire County Council and Bedford Borough Council (which both own sections of the proposed park). The BRVP is being promoted through Local Plan Policy NE23 which is the cornerstone of this document.

The establishment of the park has recently been given a boost through the purchase of the private Grange Estate (121 hectares or 300 acres) at the eastern end of the park by the Marston Vale Trust using funds provided by the Department for Communities and Local Government. The planning of the BRVP is being spearheaded by the Marston Vale Trust, which has previously prepared, for the purposes of stimulating debate and for public consultation, a draft masterplan for the whole site. Over 48,000 households in and around Bedford were directly asked about their aspirations for the BRVP as a part of an extensive consultation exercise, which found that the vast majority (85%) of respondents were 'very supportive' of the concept. This Framework document now supersedes the draft masterplan and aims to build consensus, set objectives and steer the development of the park for the next decade and beyond.

This Framework document reviews the policy context, analyses the existing condition of the designated area, reports on the results of consultations and identifies key design constraints and opportunities. Informed by this, it makes broad prescriptions for what BRVP could and should be, and establishes 'key principles' to guide all future work.

The Framework provides a vision of how the Bedford River Valley Park will look as it is created over the next decade or so. Around 240 ha is proposed for conversion to 'floodplain forest' (a mosaic of woodlands, wetlands and grasslands), within which networks of access routes will provide for quiet recreation. The proposed 2.3 km Bedford Rowing Lake is identified as a major potential asset and the existing, well-used NCN Route 51 cycleway is identified as a key asset to which additional access routes within BRVP will connect. The BRVP will provide a major new area of multi-functional greenspace on the urban fringe of Bedford to serve the recreational needs of an expanding population.

The River Great Ouse near Willington

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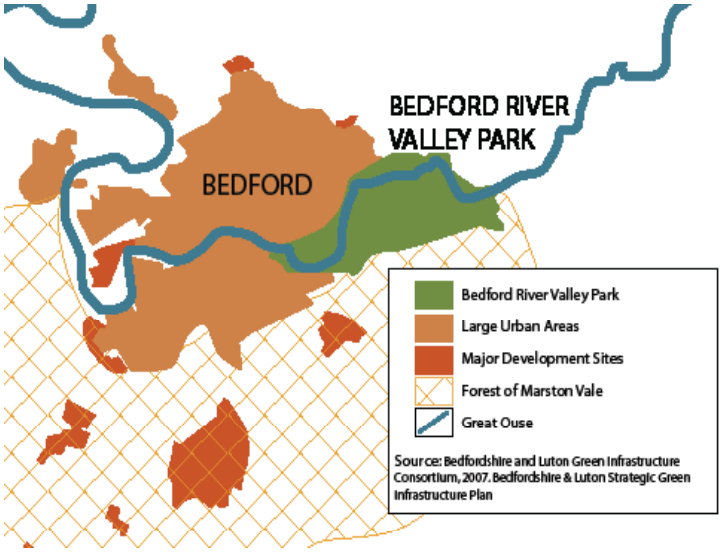
INTRODUCTION

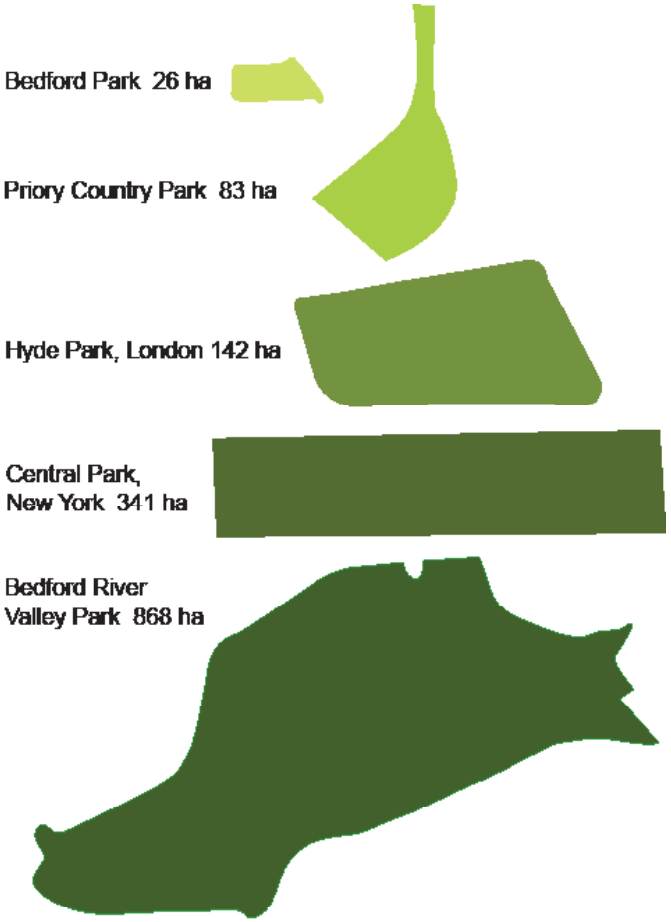
1.1 General Introduction

The Bedford River Valley Park (BRVP) is a major new green space being promoted by a coalition of landowners, businesses, local people and the statutory bodies that represent and serve them. The park will cover 868 hectares (2,145 acres) largely in the floodplain of the River Great Ouse to the east of Bedford, linking the existing Priory Country Park in the town to the wider countryside around the village of Willington. The area covered by the BRVP is substantial and of a scale normally associated with regional parks. The BRVP will provide new opportunities for recreation, improvements to biodiversity, flood alleviation, renewable energy production and employment. Funding from the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) has enabled the Marston Vale Trust to purchase part of the site (the Grange Estate) and to develop this Framework document. The Marston Vale Trust is the independent environmental charity creating the 61 square mile (158 square kilometre) Forest of Marston Vale [1], one of England's 12 Community Forests, within which the BRVP project falls.

There is a long-standing aspiration to create the BRVP as set out in Policy NE23 of the Bedford Borough Local Plan [2] which states:

'When development opportunities arise, within the area defined on the Proposals Map, the Borough Council will seek the creation of the Bedford River Valley Park as an area where opportunities exist for landscape enhancement, nature conservation, recreation and increased public access whilst protecting sites of acknowledged archaeological importance'.





1.2 Scope of the Document

The aim of this document is to develop a shared vision for the Bedford River Valley Park which will become the basis for a coherent framework for the delivery of its various components over the next decade or so. The intention is that this Framework document will guide the detailed planning and design of the Park by the many individuals and organisations that will be involved in its delivery. This Framework is not intended to be overly prescriptive, and all maps and descriptions are provided as guidance only. The Framework is based on a thorough analysis of existing conditions, constraints and opportunities as well as the results of an extensive public and stakeholder consultation process. The scope and scale of the Park is so great that there will be many opportunities that have not been anticipated by this brief document.

Given the rapid pace of change in the Bedford area and the size and complexity of the project, the Framework should continue to evolve and occasional review may be required. The BRVP already includes many thriving and important businesses, homes and facilities and several new initiatives are already underway. The aim of this document is to help coordinate these activities and to shape future projects so that they may complement one another and take account of policy, existing constraints and emerging opportunities.

This document provides the agreed framework for creating the Bedford River Valley Park, with an endorsed set of principles and concepts to guide all future work.

1.3 Objectives

Communities require the grey infrastructure that provides essential services like transportation, sewerage, water and power. They also require green infrastructure - a network of multifunctional greenspace - to provide the many social, environmental and economic benefits expected of modern sustainable communities.

Bedford is growing: The Milton Keynes and South Midlands (MKSM) Sub Regional Strategy [3] has allocated an additional 19,500 dwellings to the Bedford/ Kempston and the northern Marston Vale area for the period up to 2021. The Bedfordshire and Luton Green Infrastructure Plan observes that 'taking into account the needs of communities in growth areas within the wider MKSM Sub-Region, there is a strong case for the provision of accessible greenspace of sub-regional significance within Bedfordshire and Luton.' Planned at national, regional and local level, multi-functional greenspace (such as the BRVP) needs to be located close to where people will be living and working and will help to:

- Restore ecosystems and the healthy soil, water, air and food that they provide which are essential for life
- Safeguard and enhance biodiversity
- Promote social cohesion, health, well-being and contact with nature
- Improve local image and distinctiveness
- Promote sustainable economic growth and investment
- Create places where people want to live and stay
- Support education and training
- Safeguard and enhance historic assets
- Address existing deficiencies and ensure a net gain in greenspace provision to accommodate urban growth

2

BACKGROUND

2.1 Policy Framework

East of England Plan

The East of England Plan (Regional Spatial Strategy) will guide planning and development across the region to the year 2021. It encompasses economic development, housing, the environment, transport, renewable energy, waste management, sport, culture and recreation. It is the first Regional Spatial Strategy to be developed under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 [4].

Local planning authorities must have regard to the policies contained in the East of England Plan when drawing up Local Development Frameworks as the Plan forms part of the Development Plan, particularly:

Policy ENV1: Green Infrastructure

This policy identifies the Forest of Marston Vale as being one of 15 areas of regional significance set for the retention, provision and enhancement of green infrastructure. It is specifically grouped in the category containing sites of landscape, ecological and recreational importance.

"Areas and networks of green infrastructure will be identified, protected, created, extended, enhanced, managed and maintained throughout the region to ensure that an improved and healthy environment is available for the benefit of present and future communities. This will be particularly important in those areas identified to accommodate the largest amounts of growth in the region, whether or not officially recognised as such in the Sustainable Communities Plan. Local development documents will:

- define a multiple hierarchy of green infrastructure, in terms of location, function, size and levels of use, at every spatial scale and across all areas of the region based on analysis of existing natural, historic, cultural and landscape assets, including the identification of new assets required to deliver green infrastructure;
- identify and require the retention and provision of substantial connected networks of green space, in urban, urban fringe and adjacent countryside areas to serve the new communities in the sub-region by 2021; and
- ensure that policies have regard to the economic and social as well as environmental benefits of green infrastructure assets."

Other relevant policies

- Policy ENV4 states that where soil and land have been degraded, opportunities for restoration to beneficial after-uses, including ....woodland, amenity and habitat creation schemes, should be maximised.
- Policy ENV5 urges local planning authorities, through their plans, policies, programmes and proposals to increase woodland cover through protection and better management of existing woodland and promoting new planting where appropriate.
- Policy ENV5 also identifies that new woodland creation should be targeted at, amongst other things, Community Forests where the aim is to increase woodland cover to 30% by 2031 and schemes to create new wet woodland (which is a priority in this region).

Milton Keynes & South Midlands Sub-Regional Strategy

The Milton Keynes & South Midlands Sub-regional Strategy (SRS) is the first of its kind and covers the growth area of Milton Keynes, Northamptonshire, and parts of Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire [3].

The strategy sets out the scale of development until 2021 – highlighting the need for planned, sustainable communities with adequate infrastructure for vital services such as transportation, health and education.

The strategy promotes the creation of sustainable communities - well-designed places where people want to live, with jobs, facilities, services, and strong communities - and acknowledges the role of green infrastructure in helping to achieve this.

Bedford Local Plan

The Bedford Borough Local Plan [5] contains policies which relate specifically to the BRVP, including Policy NE23 (reproduced in full in the General Introduction on page 9) and Policy NE21 which states: 'The Borough Council will provide continuing support to the Forest of Marston Vale. When considering development proposals (within the area defined on the proposals map) it will expect proposals to incorporate the aims of the project and in appropriate circumstances seek contributions towards its implementation'.

Policy LR4 supports the creation of a rowing course on land west of Willington. A number of other policies in the Bedford Borough Local Plan indirectly support the BRVP. These include Policy NE3 (protection of wildlife sites), Policy NE4 (tree planting and protection), Policy NE6 (woodland protection and planting), Policy NE7 (wildlife corridors), Policy NE9 (conservation management agreements), Policy NE10 (development to promote nature conservation), Policy NE12 (adequate and appropriate landscaping), Policy NE13 (protection of retained landscape), Policy NE16 (flood risk), Policy NE20 (developer contributions to landscape and environmental improvements), and Policy NE24 (protection of water resources).

The protection, enhancement and preservation of ancient monuments and archaeology are covered by policies BE23, BE24 and BE25 in the Local Plan.

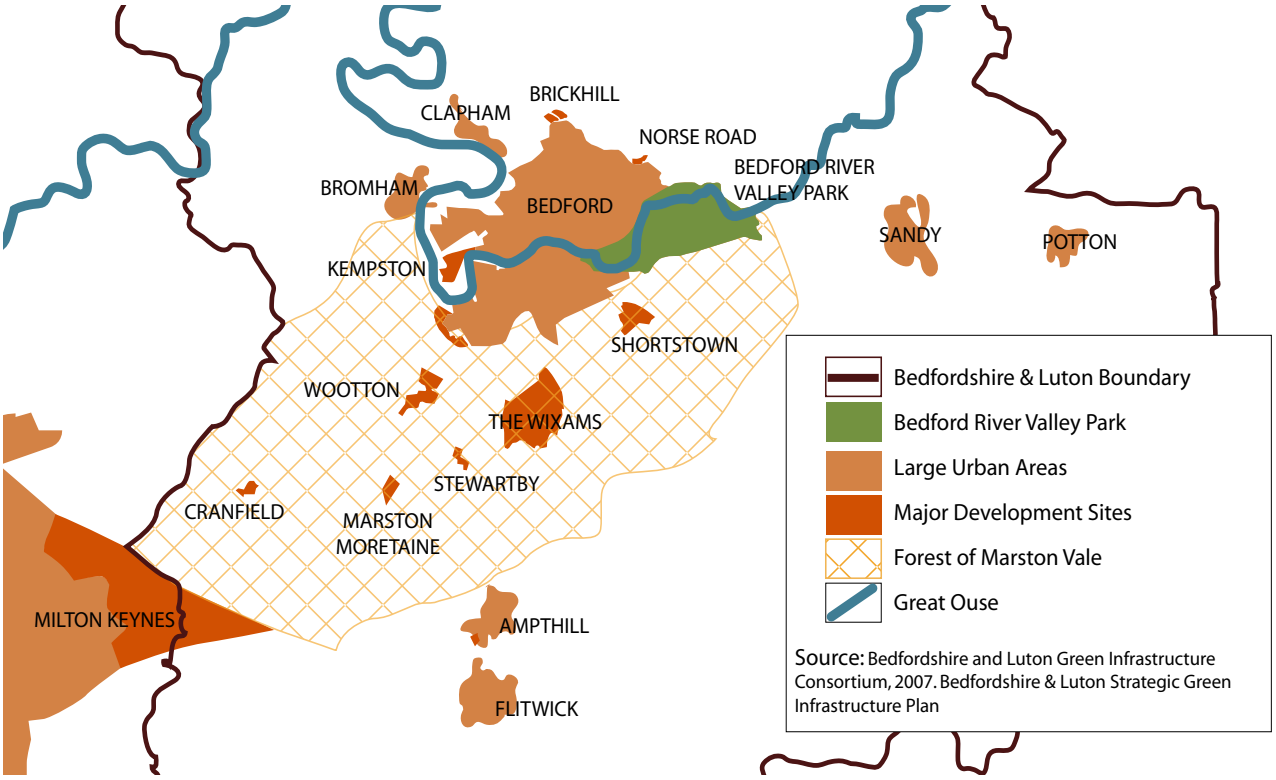
Greenspace Strategy for Bedford Borough

This document (available as a consultation draft at the time of writing) promotes the BRVP and recognises the importance of the Bedford Green Wheel, which will link the BRVP with other green infrastructure in the Bedford area.

Regional Woodland Strategy for the East of England

The East of England Regional Assembly has recognised the benefits brought to the Region by trees and woodland through the adoption of the Regional Woodland Strategy (as prepared by the Forestry Commission in 2003). The BRVP will deliver on many of the initiatives described in the Regional Woodland Strategy, including improved access, environmental enhancement, community engagement, sustainable development and the protection of natural resources and biodiversity.

2.2 Growth Agenda



The East of England Plan

The East of England Regional Assembly (EERA) has prepared a new Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) for the East of England called the East of England Plan. It will update the existing RSS (RPG 6 - East Anglia and RPG 9 - South East) where these cover the East of England in guiding planning and transport policy up to 2021. A draft East of England Plan was produced in 2004 [4], and the final version awaits adoption (expected by mid 2008) following the Panel Report of June 2006 [6]. Policy SS13 of the draft plan indicates that an additional 478,000 dwellings for 648,000 people are to be provided in the East of England region by 2021. The Panel Report indicated that the overall housing figures were insufficient and should be revised upwards to a recommended higher figure of 505,500. Housing targets for Bedford Borough are set to increase from 830 to 1,300 per annum. In 2003 EERA adopted a Regional Environmental Strategy [7] which articulates the importance of conserving and enhancing the environment. This becomes of increasing significance in light of the projected growth in population. Many of the actions set out in the Regional Environmental Strategy are addressed through the policies of the East of England Plan, most notably in Policies ENV1 (Environmental Infrastructure), ENV3 (Biodiversity and Earth Heritage) and ENV5 (Woodlands). Policy ENV5 is particularly relevant to the BRVP and the key elements are set out over the page:

'In their plans, policies, programmes and proposals local planning authorities and other agencies should seek to achieve an increase in woodland cover both by protecting and achieving better management of existing woodland and promoting new planting... Woodlands of acknowledged national or regional importance should be identified in local development documents with a strong presumption against development that would result in their loss or deterioration....The nature conservation value of all woodlands is recognised and conversion of any woodland to other land uses should be resisted unless there are overriding public and ecological benefits. Woodland unavoidably lost to development should be replaced with new woodland of at least equivalent area and composition, preferably in the same landscape unit. New woodland creation should be targeted specifically at:

- schemes for the restoration of derelict or contaminated land and sites formerly used for mineral-extraction or industry;
- green infrastructure projects associated with areas planned for significant growth;
- the Forest of Marston Vale Community Forest, with the aim of increasing woodland cover to 30% by 2031;
- planting schemes along transport corridors; and
- schemes to expand and link areas of native woodland and create new wet woodland (which is a priority in this region), to meet regional and local BAP targets.'

The concept of the BRVP is also supported by a number of policies in the East of England Plan that deal with cultural facilities, sites and activities. Most relevant are Policies C5 and ENV6 that encourage the improvement of opportunities for recreational activities which rely on natural resources. Local development documents are instructed to include policies which seek to maximise the development of regional and country parks, woodlands and community forests, trails, bridleways, cycleways and waterways that may attract visitors and meet local needs.

Polcy ENV6 requires planning authorities and other agencies to identify, protect, conserve and (where appropriate) enhance the historic environment, including 'the wide variety of archaeological monuments, sites and buried deposits which include many scheduled ancient monuments and other nationally important archaeological assets'.

Milton Keynes & South Midlands Sub Regional Strategy

The Milton Keynes & South Midlands Sub Regional Strategy (MKSM SRS) [3] published in March 2005 contained proposals that signalled a period of rapid growth in housing and employment-related development, and associated infrastructure for Bedfordshire & Luton. It sets the agenda for growth in the BRVP area. The Sub-Regional Strategy recognises the need to ensure that development contributes to an improved environment, by protecting and enhancing environmental assets and providing related green infrastructure to meet the needs of existing and expanding communities. Bedford/ Kempston and the northern Marston Vale form one of six key locations for growth in the sub-region. The MKSM SRS allocates 19,500 dwellings to the area for the period up to 2021, and makes a provisional assumption for growth to 2031 for a further 10,000 dwellings. A key priority for the area is environmental regeneration in the Marston Vale and the creation of green infrastructure, notably through the Forest of

Marston Vale. The figure at the beginning of this section (2.2) shows the County of Bedfordshire, Forest of Marston Vale and the BRVP in the context of major development sites.

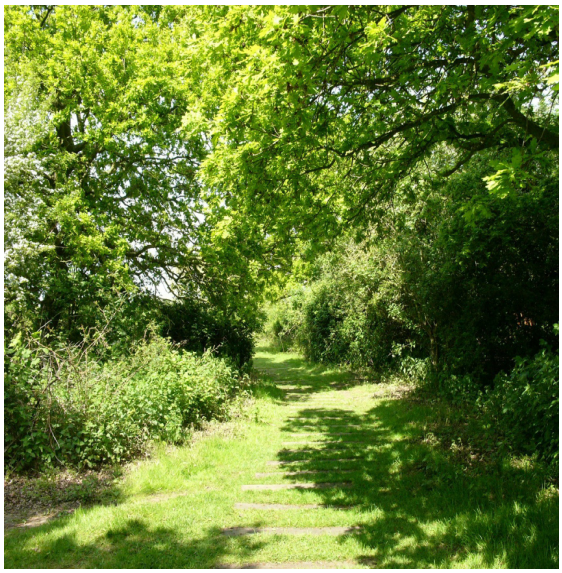
'Green Infrastructure and the Bedfordshire and Luton Strategic Green Infrastructure Plan

Green infrastructure (GI) [8] has been defined as: 'A network of multifunctional greenspaces and inter-connecting links which is designed, developed and managed to meet the environmental, social and recreational needs of existing and new communities'. It has statutory support through the MKSM SRS and the evolving East of England Plan, and is one of the key elements in the preparation of Development Plan Documents for the new growth area.

The Bedfordshire and Luton Green Infrastructure Consortium has produced a GI Plan with the aim of identifying the existing green infrastructure network and opportunities for adding to and improving it [9]. In Bedfordshire this reflects the guidance given in 'A Green Infrastructure Guide for Milton Keynes & the South Midlands' which was released in 2005 [10].

The GI Plan responds to the Sub-Regional Strategy by setting out proposals, backed up by supporting baseline data and analysis, for establishing a strategic green infrastructure framework for Bedfordshire & Luton for the period to 2021. It is based on the principle of ensuring a net gain in green infrastructure provision to meet growth needs and address existing strategic deficiencies. The Consortium sees the production of this Strategic Green Infrastructure Plan for Bedfordshire & Luton as an important first step in the process of proactively planning the future development and delivery of green infrastructure, necessary to build sustainable communities throughout the county.

The BRVP area has been highlighted by the GI plan appearing as a 'green wedge' linking Bedford to the wider countryside and is a significant addition to the network. The GI plan notes BRVP as being able to provide the only area of green infrastructure of sub-regional importance in Bedfordshire.



2.3 Initiatives

Recent Developments

In 2006 the Marston Vale Trust secured a grant from the Department for Communities and Local Government to purchase the 121 hectare (300 acres) Grange Estate [12] at the heart of the BRVP.

Part of the Grange Estate

Planning permission for a 108 metre wide and 2,300 metre long rowing lake within the BRVP was granted to the Rowing Lake Company Limited in July 2006. The idea of having a rowing lake to the east of Bedford has been around for many years and stems from Bedford having a strong tradition of rowing activity and concerns regarding congestion from increasing use of the River Great Ouse. The granting of planning permission has moved this long-standing aspiration significantly closer to becoming a reality. Its implementation will almost certainly require a combination of public and private finance which is currently being sought by the Rowing Lake Company and its partners.

Sustainable Development and Response to Climate Change

Current thinking considers parks as multifunctional 'green infrastructure' [8] which provide essential 'ecosystem services' [14], where people work with the grain of nature to maintain soils and vegetation, clean water and air, wildlife habitats and space to relax and play. The provision of accessible natural open space for people is an indispensable component of any strategy for sustainable development. This philosophy has come to the fore since the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002. The UK Government's response to this was published in 2005 [15] and this was followed shortly afterwards by regional guidance (Securing the Regions' Futures) [16]. The Government has identified climate change and energy security as priority areas for immediate action [17]. The 2006 Stern Review [18] has reinforced this view. Climatologists are predicting that global temperatures could increase by up to 5.8 degrees Centigrade over the next century [19]. For the UK this could lead to wetter winters and summer drought and the number of flood events affecting the Great Ouse catchment may increase. People will seek relief from the summer heat in waterside parks and woods. Land will be required for the storage of floodwaters and production of green energy from renewable sources such as short rotation coppice.

Forest of Marston Vale

The BRVP area forms part of the Forest of Marston Vale, an area of Bedfordshire identified by Government as a national priority for environmental regeneration. The challenge is to use trees and woodlands to transform 158

square kilometres (61 square miles) between Bedford and Milton Keynes, repairing a landscape scarred by decades of clay extraction, brickmaking and landfill by working with local communities, government and businesses to increase woodland cover from 3% to 30% by 2031. The Marston Vale Trust is the independent charitable trust dedicated to creating the Forest of Marston Vale. Delivery of the Forest is guided by the 'Forest Plan', [20] a non-statutory strategic framework prepared through extensive consultation and endorsed by a wide range of stakeholders, including local communities, Government agencies, Bedfordshire County Council and Bedford Borough Council and Mid Beds District Council. The 'Forest Plan' highlights the BRVP area as an important transition zone between urban Bedford and the wider countryside and a key 'gateway' into the Forest of Marston Vale requiring significant woodland planting. The BRVP area has long been identified in the 'Forest Plan' as having huge potential both as a recreational area and for creating a valuable landscape mosaic of water, wetlands, grassland and woodlands.

Outdoor Access Improvement Plan

The Bedfordshire County Council Outdoor Access Improvement Plan (2006 -2011) identifies rivers and waterside sites in general as being particularly attractive for a wide range of public access and activity. The area of the BRVP is identified as a priority area for access improvements and the BRVP has the potential to deliver against all seven Programme Themes identified in the Plan.

Bedford to Milton Keynes Waterway

Both the Planning Committee of Milton Keynes Partnership and the Development Control Committee of Milton Keynes Council have given Outline Planning Permission for the first stage of the Bedford to Milton Keynes Waterway [13]. The waterway will stretch from the Grand Union Canal at Campbell Park and run for over 6 kilometres to the M1 near the Bedfordshire boundary. Eventually the waterway will link with the River Great Ouse at Bedford making a navigable route from the Grand Union Canal at Milton Keynes to the Wash.

Great Ouse Vision

The Great Ouse Vision is a catchment-wide joint initiative of the Environment Agency and Natural England. It aims to restore and enhance river and floodplain habitat to benefit biodiversity. To date the project has focussed on the lower reaches of the River Great Ouse in the Fens, however the BRVP presents an opportunity to extend the project to include wetland restoration that lies within easy reach of the citizens of Bedford. In the future it is intended that the BRVP could become a model for the progressive restoration of mineral sites and agricultural land elsewhere in the upper catchment.

Fisheries Strategy

In February 2006 the Environment Agency launched its Fisheries Strategy [21]. The strategy aims to achieve three main objectives by 2011, namely:

(i) improved fish stocks and a better environment for wildlife and people;

(ii) more chances for more people to fish and fisheries performing better; and

(iii) sustainable fisheries boosting the local economy.

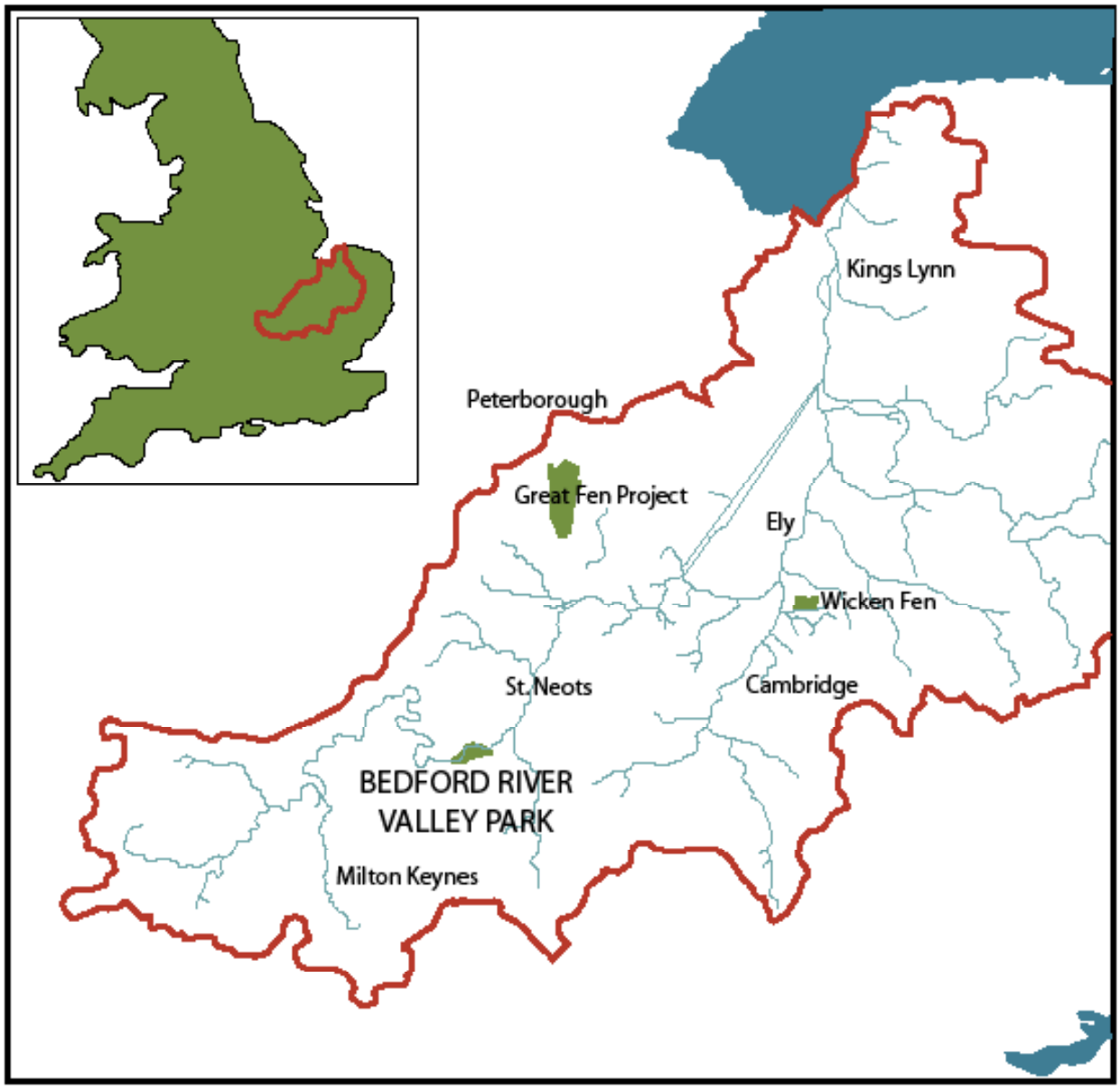
The BRVP offers a significant opportunity to meet the Environment Agency Fisheries Strategy and wider biodiversity objectives in the context of the developing Natural England and Environment Agency Great Ouse Vision.

Restoring Biodiversity

The 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in Rio de Janeiro defined biodiversity as: 'the variability among living organisms from all sources, including, amongst others, terrestrial, marine, and other aquatic ecosystems, and the ecological complexes of which they are part: this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems'. The term is now most often used in the context of rapid and global biodiversity loss as a result of human activity. In the UK we have lost over 100 species during the last century, and many more species and habitats are in danger of disappearing, especially at the local level. The BRVP can address the problem of biodiversity loss at the local level by exploiting the opportunities that exist for wetland and terrestrial habitat restoration in the quarried landscape. The aim is to maximize the ecological functioning of the BRVP area, the river corridor and catchment beyond, in line with the expectations of the Great Ouse Vision.

Quality

Through CABE Space [22], the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment promotes high quality open space, including initiatives like the Green Flag Award [23] which is a national annual award run by the Civic Trust as a means of recognising and rewarding the best green spaces in the country. CABE Space has advised the Marston Vale Trust in the preparation of the BRVP Framework.



Bedford River Valley Park in the context of the River Great Ouse Catchment

3

ANALYSIS

3.1 Existing Condition

Topography

The BRVP site occupies a level floodplain and undulating adjacent terrace with gentle and moderate slopes to a maximum of 7°. The site does not contain any steep gradients. The Anglian Water sewage treatment works are located on slightly higher ground, between the A421 and Priory Country Park, which makes that facility more visible from some areas. Levels vary between 17m and 23.5m above sea level

Geology

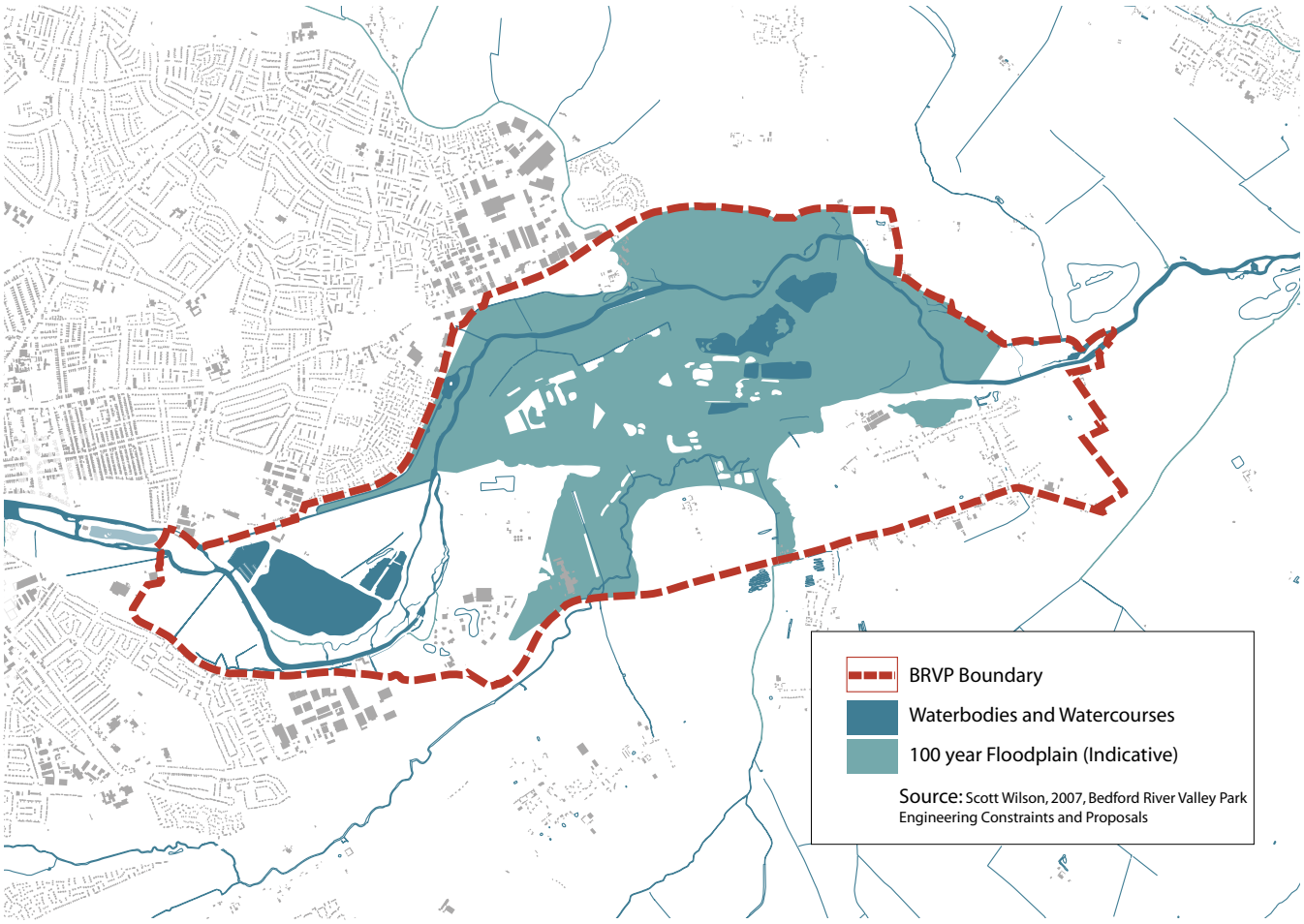
The BRVP area is underlain by drift deposits of alluvium and valley gravel associated with the River Great Ouse (British Geological Survey, Sheet 203, Bedford – 1:63,360). The superficial deposits are underlain by the Oxford Clay of Jurassic Age. The depth of the alluvial deposits, which overlay the Oxford Clay, varies throughout the site. It is these alluvial deposits within the BRVP and the wider Great Ouse Valley that have led to the local development of the minerals extraction and processing industry.

Climate

Bedford has a temperate climate with warm summers and mild winters. According to the Meteorological Office, which receives data from a station in Bedford, the average maximum summer temperatures are 21.5 degrees Centigrade in July and August. Moderate rainfall occurs year round (average annual precipitation based on monthly averages between 1971 and 2000 was 584.4mm). Snow is uncommon and rarely settles. Temperatures tend not to fall below freezing for extended periods. The prevailing south-westerly winds are year round and tend to be stronger in the winter months.

Climate Change

For the UK, it is predicted that climate change will mean warmer temperatures, wetter winters and drier summers, less snow, and higher sea levels, leading to flooding of coastal areas. The frequency of extreme weather episodes may increase. There may also be a greater threat of flooding following rainstorms and the number of flood events affecting the BRVP may increase. Vegetation may become increasingly stressed and the fauna of the area will change, with an increase in the numbers of species normally associated with warmer, more southerly climes.



Floodplain and Surface Waters

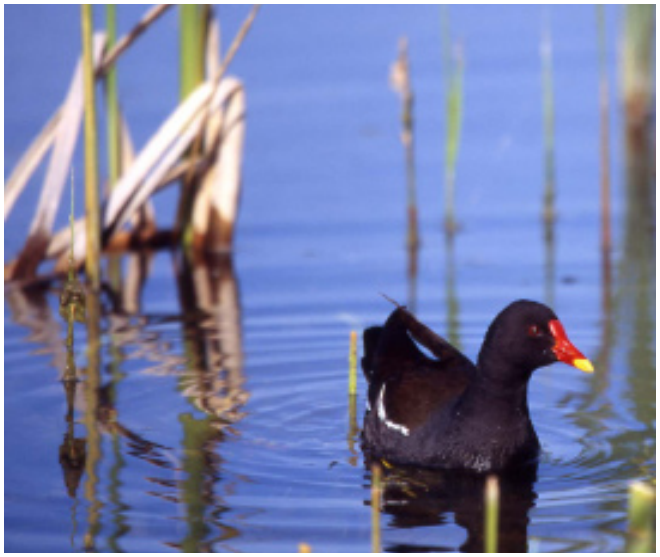


Photo courtesy of Barrie Mason

Hydrology

The River Great Ouse and its tributaries dominate the hydrology of the BRVP site. The Great Ouse enters the BRVP at the western boundary and curves around the south of the Priory Country Park before heading north and east, leaving the BRVP to the north east of the village of Willington. The Elstow Brook flows in a north-easterly direction through the site. It enters the Park at the southern boundary near to Cardington Cross and joins the Great Ouse to the north of Willington. A southern tributary of the Great Ouse, the Wilstead Brook, joins the Elstow Brook close to Willington. To the north, the Renhold Brook flows through approximately 500m of the BRVP area before joining the Great Ouse to the south east of Castle Dairy Farm. The Gadsey Brook is an approximately 1km northern diversion of the Great Ouse running along the north eastern boundary of the site.

Sand and gravel extraction has been undertaken in the area for 20 years and this has resulted in a number of lakes to the north of the area, and at the Priory Country Park to the west. Lakes are supplied by surface flows, groundwater emerging from springs and seepages or, where excavations are sufficiently deep they may indicate the depth of the local water table. Drying out appears to occur due to seasonal fluctuations or groundwater extraction. Historical information provided by the minerals companies indicates that the radius of influence of dewatering is limited (negligible within 200m and only about 1m within a 30m radius). The mineral operator has also undertaken long term monitoring of groundwater levels. Groundwater levels have ranged between approximately 18.5m and 23m above sea level over two decades. None of the monitoring boreholes have ever been recorded as being dry, despite the fact that some are located in the vicinity of past or current temporary dewatering areas.

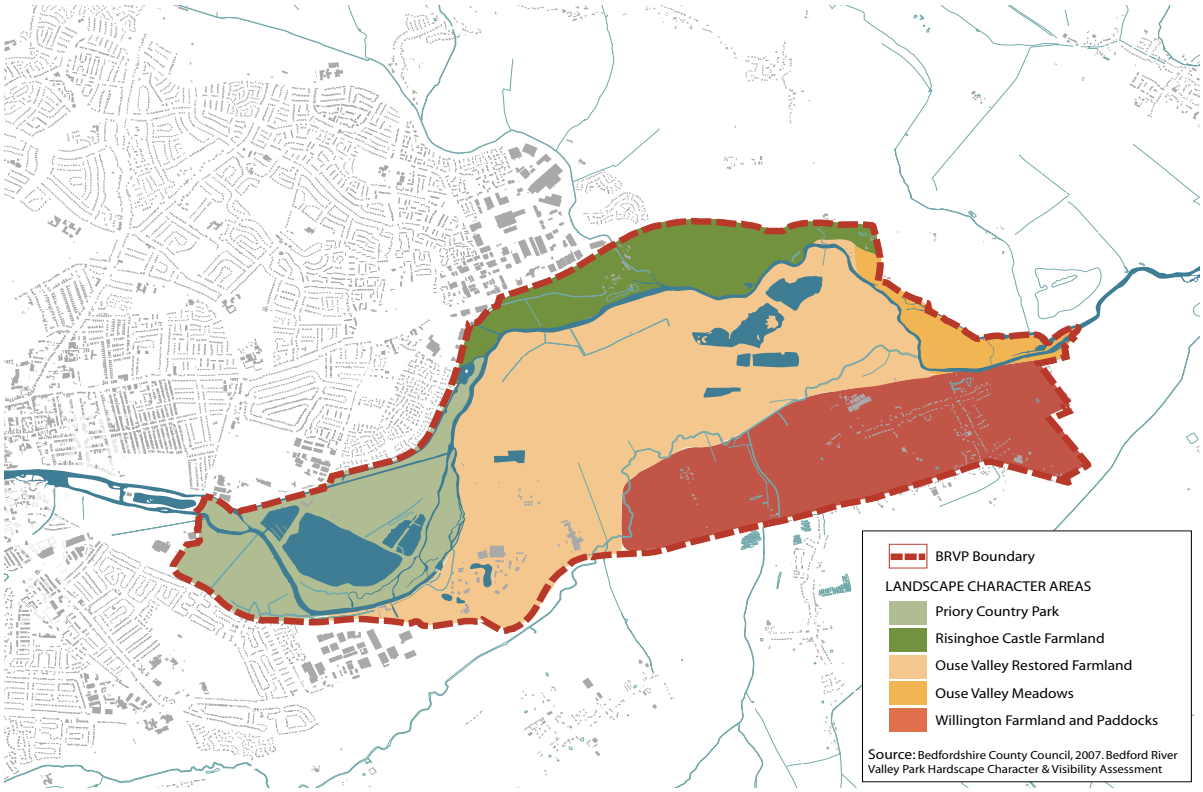
The River Great Ouse floodplain is at the highest risk of flooding in winter following extended periods of rainfall in the upper catchment. However flooding can also occur due to short high intensity local storms (which may occur in summer). This is particularly a problem in areas underlain by clay soils or in urban areas where the local drainage system is overwhelmed. The proposed BRVP has the potential to increase the capacity of the floodplain and provide additional storage for floodwater, thereby reducing flood risk downstream. Water resources information on the site is available from the Upper Ouse and Bedford Ouse Catchment Abstraction Management Strategy [24]. The area falls within the Environment Agency's Water Resource Management Unit 4 - Bedford Ouse (WRMU 4). Oxford Clay is the dominant underlying formation in WRMU 4, and as clays are impermeable, high amounts of precipitation runoff are created. Within WRMU 4 runoff provides a substantial percentage of the flow received by the River Great Ouse. Abstraction in WRMU 4 is mainly by public water suppliers, using the gravel aquifers in the Ouse Valley or direct from the river to refill reservoir storage. There is also some abstraction for industrial and commercial activities (e.g. mineral operations) as well as power generation. There are 18 active water abstraction licences within the vicinity of the BRVP. The preferred Environment Agency option for future management of WRMU 4 is to maintain the current resource availability status of 'No Water Available'. The Environment Agency has indicated that proposals for non consumptive abstractions with a net environmental benefit

will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

It is important that the data for organic loadings, nutrient levels, suspended solids and other contaminants such as heavy metals contained within the water source are reviewed as these can act as a constraint to wetland restoration. The presence of chemical pollutants and pathogens might pose a threat to people and animals using the BRVP, particularly where an activity requires close contact with water. Such water quality issues are of particular importance when considering that in dry weather a significant proportion of the base flow of the River Great Ouse is provided by the consented discharge of treated wastewater from Anglian Water's Bedford Sewage Treatment Works, which lies within the BRVP. However the outlook is positive: The River Great Ouse and the Elstow Brook have been given water quality ratings of B (good) and A (very good) respectively by the Environment Agency.

Landscape

The site is located on the eastern fringe of Bedford occupying a flat, shallow valley, largely within the River Great Ouse floodplain. The landscape character of the area has been assessed in a recent Bedfordshire County Council study [25] which has identified five landscape character units. The first, to the west, is 'Priory Country Park'. The second at the centre of the site associated with the river valley is the Ouse Valley Restored Farmland, which includes restored gravel pits, plantations and pasture. To the south around the village of Willington is an area named as the 'Willington Farmland and Paddocks'. To the north of the Great Ouse are meadows which have been named as the 'Risinghoe Castle farmland with Parkland'. Finally at the extreme east of the site are the Ouse Valley Meadows, pastures that have yet to be exploited for gravel extraction. The study notes that the BRVP site marks the transition between the urban fringe and open countryside and is comprised of a mix of



agricultural land, mineral workings and restored mineral workings. A range of habitats including arable fields, grassland, riverside, open water and woodland habitats also occur. However the site does have some scenery which is industrial and urban including gravel extraction works, an abattoir, sewage works and the A421 Bedford Bypass which bisects the site running south west to north east. Existing vegetation on the site is largely shaped by the presence of linear or boundary features such as the two principal watercourses, the River Great Ouse and Elstow Brook, as well as tracks. There are a number of plantations associated with mineral workings or restoration schemes. The River Great Ouse flows west to east and its well-vegetated and wooded banks create a strong visual barrier. The Elstow Brook flows through the open arable fields and pasture of the southeastern part of the site. It is characterised by bankside vegetation and sections of meanders typical of its lowland valley setting. The National Cycle Network Route 51 follows the alignment of the former Bedford to Sandy railway from west to east across most of the site. The route is most noticeable to the east of the Lafarge mineral processing site where it is well vegetated with a mix of mature woodland edge planting including linear belts of poplar, and younger plantation associated with the restoration of former mineral working areas.

With the exception of existing features of value identified by the Bedfordshire County Council study, much of the BRVP landscape is of low to moderate condition and sensitivity and suitable for the large scale enhancements being proposed.

Landscape Designations

The site does not lie within any designated areas of landscape quality but is largely within the boundary of the Forest of Marston Vale [1] and therefore subject to the existing Government target of increasing woodland cover to 30% by 2031. The area is also on land allocated within the Bedford Borough Local Plan [5] for the Bedford River Valley Park.

Zone of Visual Influence

The flat topography of the area means that the BRVP is visually discrete. Limited views across the site are possible from the most elevated section of the A421 Bedford bypass and the bridge for NCN Route 51. In a few locations there are key long-range views to the Cardington airship sheds and the Greensand Ridge [25].

Ecology

The County Biodiversity Action Plan identifies the BRVP as an area that presents good opportunities to create floodplain habitats. The site supports a range of arable, grassland, riparian, open water and woodland habitats. The various wetland habitats are considered to have the highest ecological value, including marshy grassland, ponds and the River Great Ouse and its tributaries with their associated bankside vegetation. The Elstow Brook and floodplain grassland are considered to be of 'county value' - although the Elstow Brook has not been designated as County Wildlife Site (CWS). The Elstow Brook is visited by otter (a European protected species), kingfisher (a Schedule 1 listed bird) and contains a number of mature trees along its banks, which have the potential to support roosting bats (protected under European legislation). Water vole, a declining UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) priority species, is expected to occur along the Elstow Brook. Fenlake Meadows Local Nature Reserve (LNR) to the west of the BRVP, is a County Wildlife Site, which contains grazed floodplain grassland and marshy grassland. An area of floodplain grassland in the southern part of the BRVP forms part of the Cople Pits CWS, and an area of marshy grassland also occurs to the east of the site within the Willington Moat CWS. Floodplain grazing marsh is a UK BAP priority habitat and this is reflected in the designation of the LNR and these three County Wildlife Sites. Areas of marshy grassland

within the Park area contain ponds, which have been reported to contain great crested newt (a European protected species). Badgers regularly cross the site with an active main sett, outlier setts and latrines in the locality. The River Great Ouse is designated as a CWS.

Two fish, the spined loach *Cobitis taeina* and bullhead *Cottus gobio* occur in the Great Ouse. They are both bottom-dwelling species, are threatened in Europe and are listed under Annex II of the EC Habitats Directive (Conservation [Natural Habitats, &c.] Regulations 1994). The spined loach is also protected under Schedule 5 of the UK Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended), and is a Local Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) species in Bedfordshire and Luton.

Contamination

Part of the Grange Estate to the east of the BRVP has been filled with construction waste following mineral extraction. Analyses [26] of seven inert landfill samples led to the discovery of a notable level of 2860mg/kg of Total Petroleum Hydrocarbons (TPH) in one sample and a range of arsenic values of 15.8 – 26.5mg/kg in all samples. There is increasing concern over building waste which, although once considered inert, can include products (e.g. tanalised timber) which have been reclassified as hazardous. There are other similar areas within the BRVP which require similar investigation. Contamination on the Grange and elsewhere in the BRVP may need to be addressed as detailed project plans are drawn up.

Bullhead

Land Uses

Land use categories within the BRVP include:

- Urban/Industrial. Includes the village of Willington, the Lafarge Quarry, the sewage works and the Priory Business Park. Built up areas cover approximately 15% of the existing BRVP area.
- Woodland. Includes areas along the Bedford to Willington section of the cyclepath; an area surrounding the gravel pits to the north east; both sides of the Elstow Brook and the plantation at the Priory Country Park. Woodland covers approximately 6% of the existing BRVP area.
- Open Water. Restored ponds and lagoons form areas of distinctive open character within the site. Many of the ponds are associated with young plantation woodland and establishing marginal and emergent aquatic vegetation. The mature flooded gravel pits at Priory Country Park dominate the site towards the western boundary, covering around 100ha. Water covers approximately 7% of the existing BRVP area.
- Unmanaged/Out of use. Includes those parts of the former Willington Quarry not in agricultural production and land to the north of Elstow Brook not in agricultural production or comprising grassland with regenerating scrub.

- Arable/Pasture. Restored mineral sites have

been returned to grassland. There are active arable farms within the BRVP area. Open areas, including arable land, pasture and unmanaged land covers approximately 71% of the existing BRVP area.

Archaeology and Built Heritage

Despite the loss of some areas of possible archaeological and historical significance through past activities, a number of protected sites still occur including Scheduled Ancient Monuments (SAMs). There are also listed buildings (over 20 in Willington Village including a 16th Century stables and stone dovecote owned by the National Trust) and a protected hedge. The archaeological significance of the BRVP area was considered in a recent Bedfordshire County Council report [27]. The site can be seen as a microcosm of the historic environment of Bedfordshire, with remains and excavated sites dating from all major periods. The river valley has been inhabited since at least the Neolithic/Bronze Age, as demonstrated by funerary and ritual features. Other assets include ring ditches, a cursus monument, linear enclosures, pit alignments, isolated burials and recently discovered round barrows. The group of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments is one of the most important in the region. Archaeological remains of the later prehistoric and Roman periods indicate that the ritual landscape of the previous Neolithic and Bronze Age periods was gradually replaced by a settled, agricultural landscape.

Archaeological investigations have revealed that the area close to the River Great Ouse was once largely covered by water or marshland, with higher islands or peninsulas of gravel between watercourses being used for settlement. A rising water table during the onset of the Roman period could account for the abandonment of low lying settlements and a gradual shift to the higher gravel terraces in the south. A Roman villa set within a rectangular field system was investigated ahead of gravel extraction in the 1950s. The settlement had its origins in the early Roman period and developed into a substantial stone built villa with bathhouse.

The site also contains traces of the Iron Age/ Romano-British agricultural landscape including settlement enclosures, field boundaries and trackways. Known medieval remains in the area are less extensive, but it is likely that the area was part of the common field system during this period. Occasional remains of ridge and furrow are present in the area, although modern deep ploughing has largely destroyed these features. The principal post-medieval features in the vicinity of the proposal area relate to historical mineral extraction and sites associated with the Bedford brick industry. Other significant features include the former track bed of the Bedford to Sandy railway line, constructed in 1862, which crosses the site, and a number of grade II listed farm buildings.

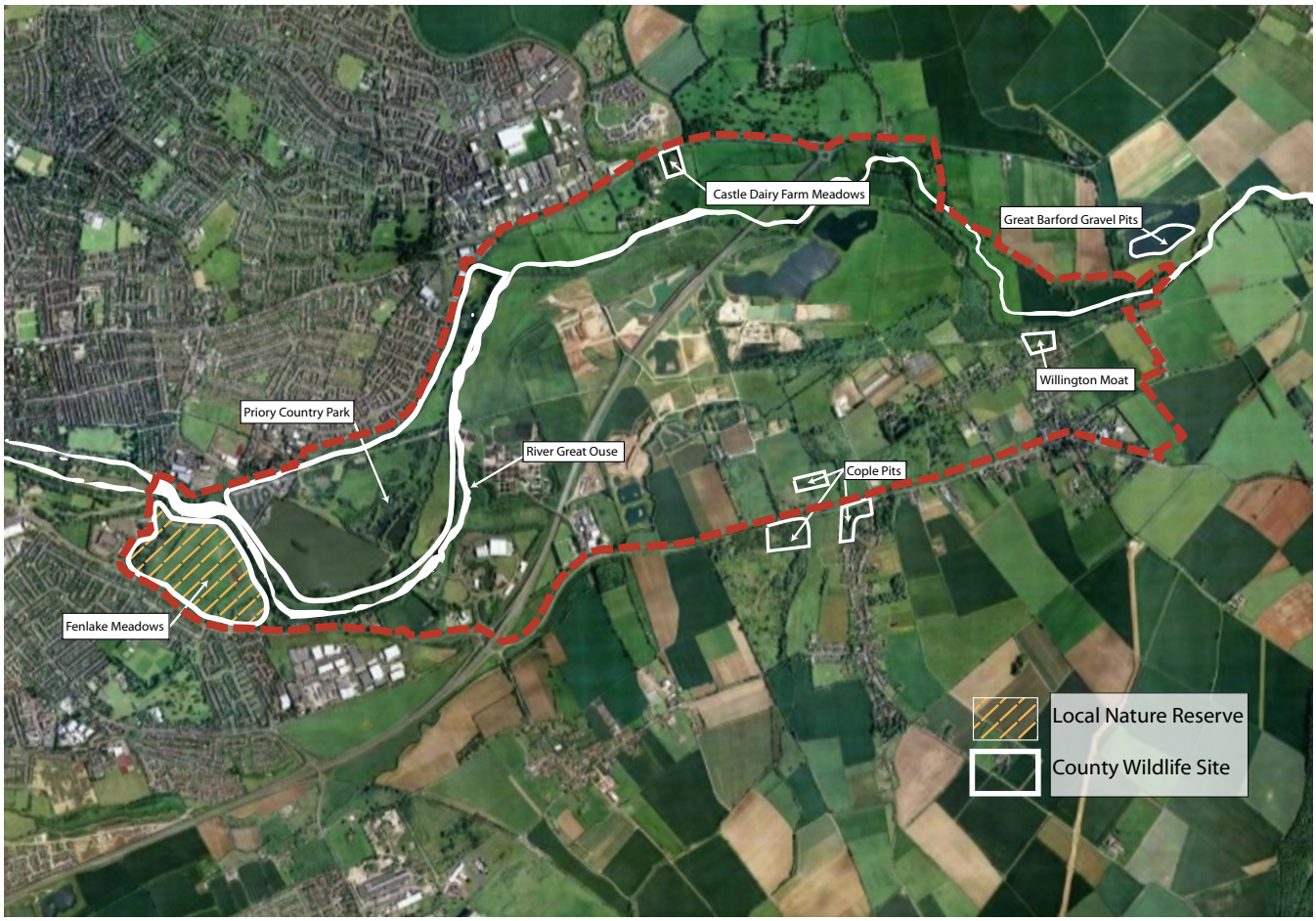
The river was made navigable in the 17th Century which would have led to an increase in trade and traffic on the watercourse. It fell into disuse after the coming of the railway but was restored for use by pleasure craft in the 1970s.

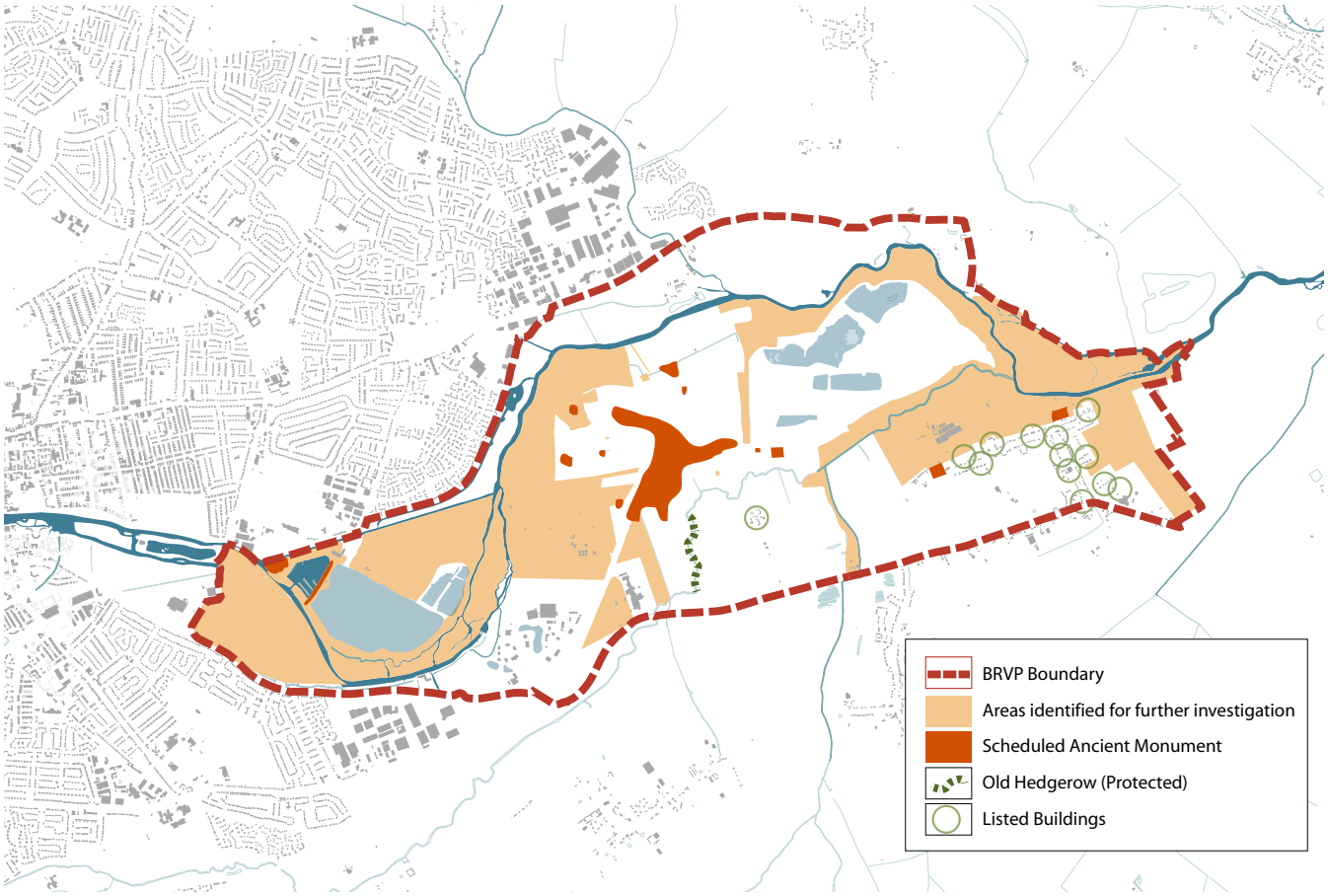
Historic Land Use

The earliest accurate maps of Bedford date back to the 17th Century but do not show the BRVP area in sufficient detail for the purposes of discerning detailed land use. Historic land use has been assessed using a series of 18th and 19th Century maps of the four parishes that comprise the site. Combined, these maps suggest a probable pattern of land use of the area around that time. The historic maps referred to were:

- Cardington and Eastcotts 1794

Nature conservation sites in the BRVP





Archaeology and Heritage

- Cople and Willington 1779
- Goldington 1843
- Renhold 1781

In the Cople and Willington map it is possible to identify arable land, pasture (probably wet grassland) and osier beds within the Great Ouse River Channel. During the period for which maps are available, arable farming was the dominant land use throughout the area, with areas of pasture generally restricted to the north of the River Great Ouse and around the farms and homesteads at Willington Village. Land adjacent to Elstow Brook was generally unclassified on historic maps, suggesting that it was likely to be unmanaged marshy grassland experiencing frequent innundation. The historic course of the River Great Ouse was extremely similar to its current position. A slight diversion has occurred to the south of Castle Dairy Farm to the north of the site, and a few of the islands within the channel are no longer apparent.

Willington and Elstow Brook 1794 (Courtesy of Bedfordshire County Council) - mainly arable with some pasture

Access, Recreation & Sport

Existing Access

The site is crossed or bounded by a number of public rights of way, including river, roads, bridleways and footpaths. These include:

- The River Great Ouse (Bedford to St Neots and beyond) which is a Strategic Waterway in Bedfordshire [9].
- A421 Bedford Bypass (Bedford to the A1 and St Neots) diagonally bisects the BRVP and forms an intrusive barrier to east-west movement
- A603 (Bedford to Sandy) forms the southern boundary;
- The private haul road serving the Lafarge Quarry and providing emergency access to the Castle Mill Weir for the Environment Agency;
- The Country Way forming part of National Cycle Route 51: Oxford to Cambridge which is a Strategic Cycleway in Bedfordshire [9] ;
- Cople Bridleway No. 6
- Willington Bridleway No.1;
- Cople Footpath No. 16 (currently unusable).

Current Use

The BRVP area already has two existing hubs of activity:

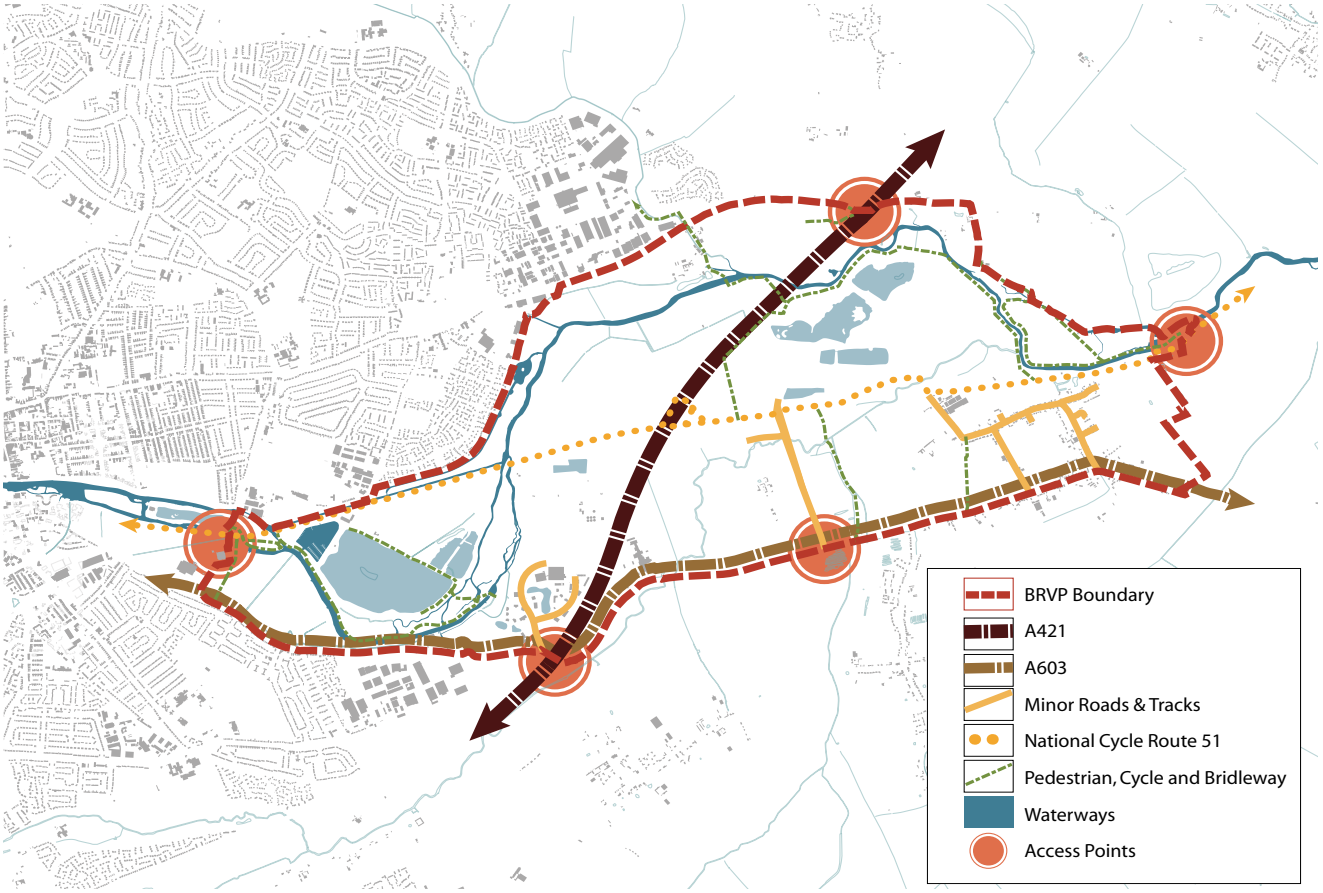
1) To the west is Bedford Borough Council's 83ha Priory Country Park, an established ' Green Flag' award winning site with a host of attractions and activities on offer. These include walks through open country and by lake and river, angling, cycle hire, wildlife observation and a small visitor centre with educational facilities. Additionally, there is a marina with 200 moorings, a sailing lake, hotel and restaurant, with ample car parking;

2) To the east is the privately owned log-cabin Danish Camp Visitor Centre which is set by a Scheduled Ancient Monument by the River Great Ouse at Willington. This has good car parking and is adjacent to the cyclepath (NCR 51). Activities and events include; supper evenings, Viking re-enactments, live music, BBQs and boat rides. Cycles are also available for hire.

Since its creation in 2003, National Cycle Network Route 51 has become a key sustainable route linking greenspace throughout the Marston Vale to Bedford. This popular route has become widely used for both recreation and commuting.

Other parts of the BRVP area are currently used for recreation and sport. For example large stretches of the River Great Ouse and lakes are used for angling. The bridleway which chiefly follows the river also receives some use. Other activities include cycling, jogging, dog walking and bird watching, with most activity associated with and adjacent to the National Cycle Route 51 and Priory Country Park.

Existing Access



3.2 Results of Consultations

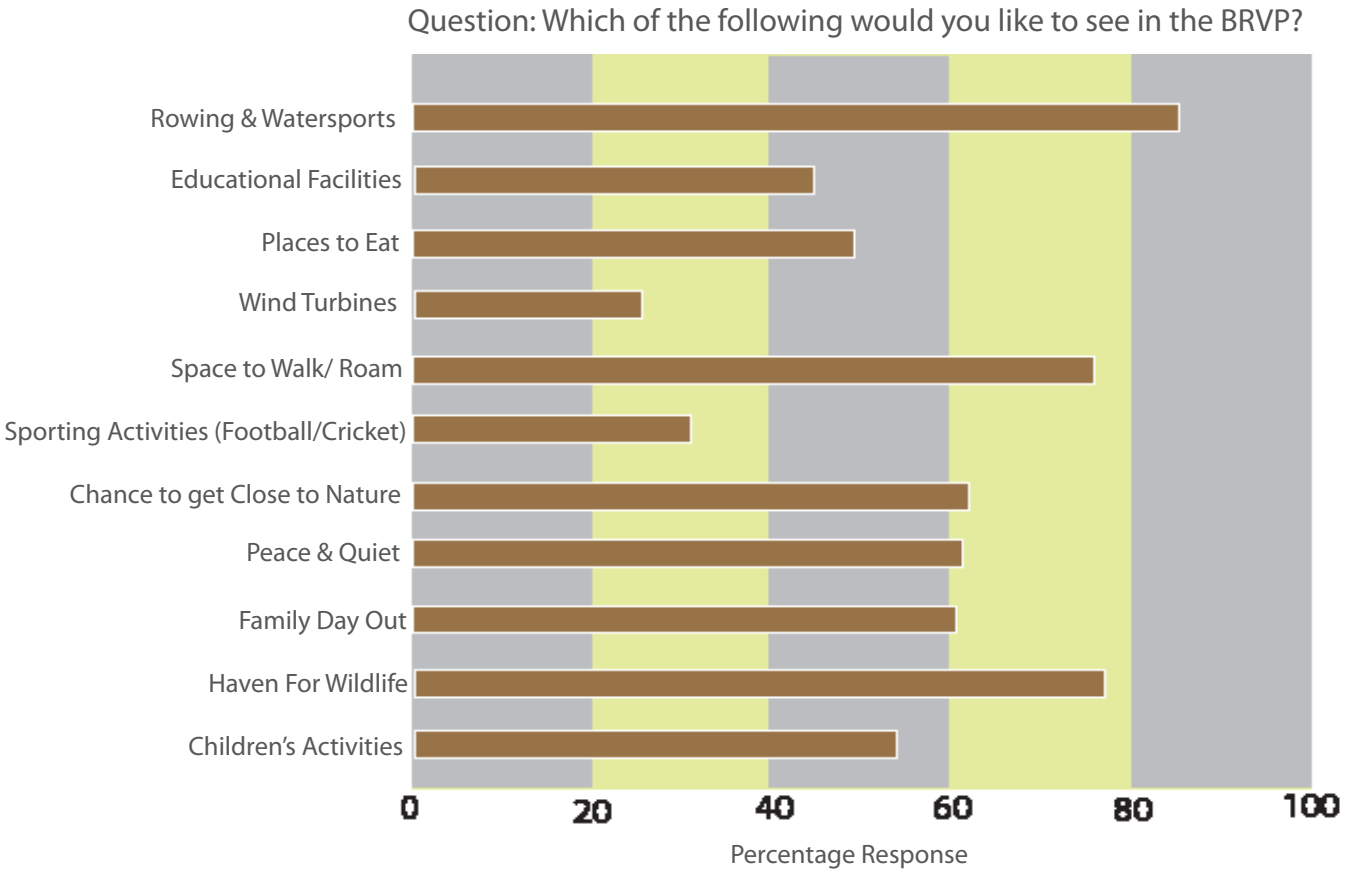
Consultation Process

During the course of summer 2006 and spring 2007, the Marston Vale Trust canvassed many people and organisations about the Bedford River Valley Park and the draft masterplan which had been prepared for that purpose. The consultation process was extensive, including the use of printed materials, a dedicated website, a local media campaign and personal contact through attending a series of public events. In June 2006, over 48,000 homes in the area between Bedford and Sandy were sent information explaining the idea of the BRVP and seeking their views and opinions via a freepost questionnaire. Exhibition materials were displayed at 14 different public events during 2006 where additional feedback and comments were recorded from members of local communities and the wider public. This initial feedback was used to inform the production of a draft masterplan in early 2007 which was used to seek more structured and detailed comments from both the public and a wide range of organisations and interest groups.

Feedback from the Public

In all over 2,100 comments were received and encouragingly, the vast majority (85%) were 'very supportive' of the BRVP concept - with nobody saying they were 'strongly opposed'. Further details of the consultation events are available at the Marston Vale Trust website [11].

As expected of a consultation on such a large and complex project, there was a wide spectrum of opinion. There was great interest in walking, riding, watching wildlife and finding somewhere to enjoy peace and tranquillity. Combined (see graphic), these activities formed the single most popular desire that people told us about.



Consultees used chalk boards to tell us what they would like

Another very important theme was water sports and other water-based activities, particularly rowing and canoeing. Some people expressed concerns which were broad-ranging but centred around noise and disturbance (including motor sport), security, and over-development.

Access and rights of way were also addressed by several respondents, with concerns expressed over vehicular access, car parking and 'access for all'. Some observers noted that more attention should have been given to the rowing lake, as its inclusion or exclusion was central to the design and character of the park. At the start of the consultation process, the rowing lake did not yet have planning permission. The rowing lake now has permission, and with the consultation indicating that a large majority of respondents are in favour, its future creation will now be assumed for site planning purposes.

Feedback from Organisations

Many comments referred to the illustrative masterplan for the park which some felt implied a level of detail of design that required further explanation. Many made the point expressed by Bedfordshire County Council that '..much additional work is needed to complete a deliverable and phased master plan', which while entirely correct, shows that the document had not been sufficiently clear about the aims and limitations of the plans used in the consultation.

This new document has been labelled as a 'framework' in order to make it clear that detailed design work is yet to be undertaken. Feedback from specific organisations may be summarised as follows:

The Environment Agency (EA) have stated that the project brings considerable opportunities but that all constraints need to be considered, especially the condition of the land. They have indicated that an assessment of landfills will be required, and that zoning of uses to match landfill conditions may limit the cost of engineering works. The EA have acknowledged that the site could help with flood management but that these benefits would need to be quantified. The BRVP will require a flood risk assessment and hydraulic modelling. The Agency has also asked for clarification on funding, maintenance and operating schemes. The EA points out that Bedford Sewage Treatment Works discharges into the river, and may cause issues with water contact sports.

Overall, Natural England were of the opinion that the BRVP is an exciting proposal which will benefit both people and wildlife. They advised that continuing consultation with the County Ecologist and Wildlife Trust will be required, especially to ensure the protection of County Wildlife Sites. Natural England also welcomed the use of Short Rotation Coppice (SRC) as a renewable local fuel source, but query whether it could be considered to be a 'valuable wildlife habitat'.

The Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity (BRCC) questioned the value of a rowing lake for wintering wildfowl and expressed concerns that a rowing lake could prevent badgers from accessing a feeding area. They stated that it was, 'Overall, a good plan but lacking in detail.' BRCC also questioned the value of SRC and the potential market for coppiced material. In terms of detailed design, they would like to see more ponds, river braiding, and extensive reedbeds. They would also like to know how the manage-

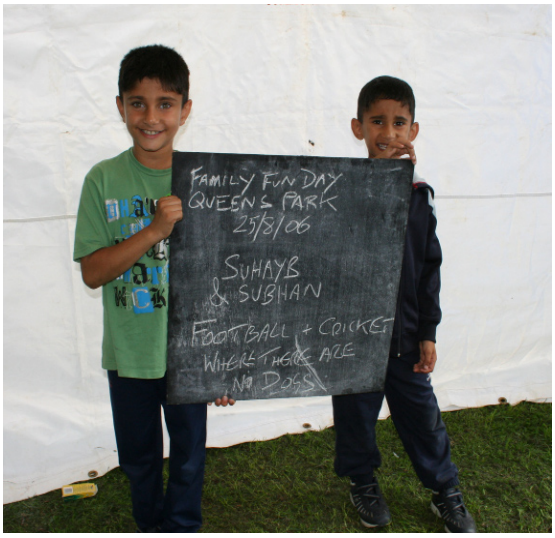
ment of Priory Country Park, and existing restoration plans, will be incorporated into the BRVP.

Bedford Borough Council (BBC) are supportive of the concept and principle of the BRVP. They would have preferred the public consultation to have canvassed opinions on the park both with and without a rowing lake. BBC would like to see more details for the BRVP, particularly access arrangements for people with limited mobility and details of possible developments within the park. They have pointed out the possibility of conflicts with current planning strategy for the area. They have also questioned the viability of SRC on the grounds of economies of scale, its value in comparison to potential wildlife habitat and its value as a public amenity.

Bedfordshire County Council made several submissions from the departments of Heritage and Environment and Minerals and Waste as well as from the County Archaeologist and the County Ecologist. They gave broad support for the project but were concerned about the lack of detail. It was noted that there could be conflicts with existing approved mineral restoration plans. They advised that more information will be required on existing wildlife, soils, topography, hydrology, historic environment, conflicts of usage, access, green infrastructure, employment creation, minerals, and activities. They also questioned how the conflicts would be reconciled and whether the rowing lake should be shown.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds acknowledged the potential for delivering high quality green infrastructure and supported the board aims of improving flood management, enhancing biodiversity and creating new wildlife habitats, however they pointed out that the area is already of local importance for wildlife and should not be treated as a 'blank canvas'. They also advised on the need for further ecological baseline studies.

The Framework now takes account of the comments received together with further comments from the Borough and County Councils received during the re-drafting of the document.



3.3 Constraints and Opportunities

The section that follows considers constraints and opportunities with respect to the four considerations listed in Policy NE23 of the Bedford Borough Local Plan, namely: Landscape Enhancement, Nature Conservation, Recreation & Access and Archaeology.

Landscape Enhancement

Constraints

The Bedfordshire County Council report on Landscape Character & Visibility Assessment [25] has highlighted the importance of avoiding mass planting that would screen existing views of the Greensand Ridge and Cardington airship sheds.

The report also emphasises the importance of conserving existing historic pastures and field boundaries, for example at the Risinghoe Castle farmlands to the north of the Great Ouse.

The NCN Route 51 follows the historic route of the East West rail link which cuts across the alignment of the proposed rowing lake. If the full 2.3km of the rowing lake is built, NCN Route 51 will be diverted to the North of the lake. There is local and regional Government support for the concept of a new rail link from Bedford to Cambridge, although there are currently no firm plans for its construction. Consultants for the East West Rail Consortium are investigating a route that avoids cutting across the proposed rowing lake by running on a new alignment between the A421 and the proposed lake.

Opportunities

Despite past restoration the site remains less than ideal in nature and the creation of the BRVP provides an opportunity for wide scale landscape enhancement and ecological restoration. The creation of habitats in a coordinated way across the whole site represents a major opportunity to create a more naturalistic interconnected landscape than that which currently occurs. This could result in many new atttractive views within the site and the screening of some of the less attractive remaining features, like the A421.

A key landscape opportunity is that a significant part of the BRVP falls within the area designated as the Forest of Marston Vale. This has been identified as a national priority area for environmentally-led regeneration with a Government target of increasing tree cover to 30% by 2031. This vision for major landscape enhancement using trees and woodlands has been politically and publicly endorsed.

Nature Conservation

Constraints

There are existing habitats of value, including watercourses, wetlands, grasslands and tree groups, some within County Wildlife Sites, that need to be protected throughout the process of park establishment. Consideration must also be given to species of conservation concern, including those that enjoy legal protection like otter, great crested newt and nesting birds . Measures will need to be adopted to ensure that harm to protected species is avoided during works and detailed designs for the park should take account of the needs of senstive sites and particular species, with the possibility of creating quiet zones and buffer areas.

Opportunities

Detailed multi-functional environmental design of the BRVP should be informed by ecology, with an emphasis on the characteristics and potential of the river and its floodplain. The BRVP landscape has been subjected to gravel extraction, which requires restoration, which can be directed to maximise the ecological benefits. The long history of alteration of the landscape means that habitats may be created that have been completely removed or, possibly, may have not previously existed. However restoration should be informed by what is known about the past, what opportunities there are to anticipate and improve the future and what is locally appropriate. During the development of the BRVP the focus will be on floodplain restoration. The provision of facilities like the rowing lake is fully complementary to and compatible with floodplain restoration.

The focus on floodplain enhancement at the BRVP can be hugely beneficial for fish populations. Fish species require a range of habitats during the various stages of their lifecycle. In particular they often require quiet, shallow backwaters as a refuge for spawning and maturation of fry. Research undertaken on the River Great Ouse has highlighted the important role of bays and off-channel water bodies on the recruitment of fishes through increased habitat diversity [28]. Adjacent disused gravel pits have also been shown to serve as surrogates for the natural floodplain features from which the regulated River Great Ouse is virtually isolated [29]. The creation of fish spawning backwaters will help spined loach and bullhead. These habitats will also be beneficial to a range of other fish species as well as other fauna including waterbirds, dragonflies, otter and water vole.

Another exciting possibility raised by the creation of the BRVP is the reintroduction of the burbot *Lota lota*. The burbot is a freshwater species of the cod family, and was driven to extinction in the mid twentieth century. It remains the only fish known to have gone extinct in Great Britain in recent centuries. It is a UK Biodiversity Action Plan species, and research is currently underway on possible reintroduction of fisheries.

The construction of the rowing lake would require that the Elstow Brook be re-aligned and broadened. This would create a replacement brook approximately 1.65km in length. The brook channel would be designed to mimic a natural stream, incorporating meanders, pools and riffles. The creation of occasional steep banks will provide nesting opportunities for kingfisher and sand martin, while gentler sections may harbour water voles. As new bankside planting of trees and aquatic vegetation matures, the new brook will become a valuable wildlife corridor. The retention of 900 metres of ox-bow lakes would provide habitat for a range of fauna, and

would have the potential to support European protected species such as great crested newt.

Floodplain forest is an overarching term used to describe wet woodlands and associated habitats (e.g. reedbeds, marsh, wet grassland) in the river floodplain, which are subject to frequent or even occasional inundation. In Britain they are often dominated by alder *Alnus glutinosa* and willow species *Salix spp.*. The EU Habitats Directive refers to this habitat type as residual alluvial forest (including National Vegetation Classification types W5, W6 and W7). In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the establishment and restoration of floodplain forests for their ecological value and possible use in flood control. The proposed BRVP presents a nationally important opportunity to restore floodplain forest over a considerable area of floodplain that is being worked for sand and gravel.

The English Nature Research Report on wet woodland [30] provides extensive background information and guidance on the restoration of floodplain forest. Floodplain forests grow in a range of situations from islands in river channels to low-lying wetlands alongside the channels. In the UK they typically occur in areas of low relief on base-rich, eutrophic soils that are subject to periodic inundation and/or permanently or seasonally high water table levels.

Clearance of riverine woodland has eliminated most true floodplain forests in the United Kingdom and many surviving areas are fragmentary and often of recent origin. Wet woodland is now a Priority Habitat under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. Floodplain forest of the NVC type W6 is the most suitable habitat for the floodplain of the Great Ouse. W6 woodland is characterised by alder and nettle and typically comprises fast-growing pioneer species in the canopy including willows and hairy birch in addition to alder.

The BRVP will offer an unprecedented local ecological educational resource at all levels. It should be an exemplar of sustainable design and could host varying displays and events dealing with environmental issues such as climate change, floodplain restoration and biodiversity. As potentially the largest floodplain forest restoration scheme in the UK, the BRVP project would benefit from rigorous monitoring and data analysis. Involvement from the scientific community, such as a local university, would allow more complex monitoring to be undertaken.

The geology of the area has given rise to its value for minerals and is a key factor in determining the character of the landscape. The BRVP is an opportunity to educate the public on prehistoric environments, climate change and the importance of geological diversity (geodiversity) by providing information and displays and opportunities for indoor and outdoor activities, particularly where people gather or where the underlying geology is exposed.

Access

Constraints

The site has a number of major barriers to movement, both internally and externally. The most notable barriers are the watercourses, the A421, and (in the future) the rowing lake.

A key future access point to the BRVP is expected to be via the existing quarry haul road and priority junction with the A603 Cambridge Road about 1.5km east of the interchange with the A421. This access operates well, however if the rowing lake is built the road would have to be diverted (overhead structures are not acceptable under Olympic rowing standards). Similarly National Cycle Route 51 would also need to be diverted before the rowing lake is built.

Cople Bridleway No. 6 and Willington Bridleway No.1 cross the proposed alignment of the rowing lake and diversions of these routes will be required. In addition there are a number of informal routes for pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians which will also need to be replaced or re-routed.

Cople Footpath No.16 crosses the proposed alignment of the rowing lake, however this route is currently unusable and is likely to be replaced by alternatives in the future.

The Environment Agency requires emergency access to the Castle Mill Weir via the existing quarry haul road and this must be maintained. Similar access arrangements will need to be maintained for utility companies.

Opportunities

There are opportunities to improve both internal access and links with adjacent communities. For example, there is an existing bridge which carries the NCR 51 over the A421. However, in order to better connect the eastern and western parts of the BRVP, both for people and wildlife, it would be desirable to provide a much wider and. potentially, vegetated crossing.

In January 2007 Bedfordshire County Council produced an Access Statement for the BRVP site [31]. The document emphasises that not only will people experience a range of environments within the park itself, but that the BRVP should also act as a green gateway to the Ouse Valley corridor, the Greensand Ridge, villages and communities outside Bedford.

National Cycle Route 51 passes through the BRVP

Priority should continue to be given to the enhancement of National Cycle Route 51 (Bedford to Sandy) – which the Bedfordshire and Luton Strategic Green Infrastructure Plan [9] additionally classifies as a strategic cycleway. Another priority access routes is the cycleway north towards Renhold, which together with a section of NCR 51, will form part of the 'Bedford Green Wheel' a strategic green infrastructure project being promoted by Bedford Borough Council. Once completed, the Bedford Green Wheel will facilitate non-motorised access to BRVP from all of Bedford.

Within the Grange Estate (to the north-east of the BRVP) the creation of a new 3 kilometre riverside multi-user route along the south bank of the River Great Ouse will involve constructing a new bridge over the Elstow Brook just north

of Willington (work on this by the Marston Vale Trust has started and the route will open in April 2008).

Recreation and Sport

Constraints

During the public consultation, concerns were raised regarding the potential negative affects of creating facilities for noisy activities (e.g. motor sports) close to residential areas.

Facilities for sport require the necessary infrastructure, including adequate access, parking, power and drainage, which can have an impact on a wide area. The siting of such facilities requires careful consideration.

Issues of water quality and availability will require careful investigation, as both are potentially significant factors in determining the feasibility of a range of water-based recreation and sporting activities that might be accommodated within the BRVP.

Opportunities

The large size of the BRVP means that it may be possible to accommodate noisy activities without causing disturbance to people in nearby residential areas. Hard wearing open spaces, close to access points, car parks and facilities could be available for sports, picnicking, barbeques, adventure play and large-scale festivals and events. There are existing areas of disturbance, for example along the A421 corridor which bisects the BRVP, which might be suitable locations for noisy activities.

Extensive areas of woodland and wetland areas could be created where people can enjoy quiet contemplation, walking or wildlife watching. There is ample space for intermediate zones where angling and cycling can be encouraged.

The BRVP could become a state of the art fishing venue to improve access and opportunity for local people in the urban area of Bedford and its environs. An angling centre could be developed to provide facilities for coaching and local angling clubs.

Inland beaches are very popular in continental Europe. The Keynes Country Park, part of the Cotswold's Water Park near Swindon, features a children's beach which in 2004 became the first UK inland beach to achieve an international Blue Flag award. An inland beach (or beaches) would act to relieve pressure on the more sensitive wetland habitats, while offering a host of recreational benefits associated with swimming and beach sports like volleyball and football or simply building sandcastles.

The main purpose of the rowing lake will be to provide a training facility of international standard to attract athletes from the local vicinity, elsewhere in the UK and abroad to what is intended be the most user friendly water in the UK due to its topography, orientation and shallow depth. As well as providing a first class facility for rowing, it could also be used for other activities such as dragon boat racing, canoeing and angling.

There are existing canoe slalom facilities associated with Priory Country Park within the BRVP area and very active local canoeing

clubs. There is potential for BRVP to host a 'Centre of Excellence' for canoeing by building on these existing assets and further enhancing opportunities for canoeing. For example, the rowing lake could be interconnected to other water bodies, creating the possibility of an interesting route for canoeists to follow - a 'canoe trail'

Infrastructure created to service the rowing lake could also support ancillary facilities including fields for cricket, football, rugby and all weather pitches for 5-a-side football and tennis. Trails could be established through woodland for mountain bikes.

Greens and multi-use playing fields are popular outdoor venues for a huge range of events. Well managed festivals and other events can have a very positive effect on a locale, boosting image and creating employment. There are opportunities to create a multi-use field close to access points into the Park. The two existing main activity hubs (i.e. Priory Country Park and Danish Camp) could be supplemented by a third hub located centrally and associated with Octagon Farm and the proposed rowing lake, should this be built.

The Bedford Rowing Lake

At the time that the draft Master Plan for the BRVP was published for consultation (early 2007), designs for the River Valley Park were put forward with and without a rowing lake. The Rowing Lake was granted planning permission in 2006 and the public consultation that followed the publication of the Draft Master Plan showed strong support for the proposed rowing lake as a venue for a range of water sports. As a result of this support, this document shows the rowing lake in the River Valley Park. Projects proposed for the Park will be designed to be compatible with the ultimate delivery of a 2.3km rowing lake for training athletes to Olympic standard.

Delivery of the Rowing Lake is unique amongst the projects proposed for the Park by virtue of its sheer size, its likely cost and the need for a number of land owners to support its construction. An option that is being investigated by the land owners concerned, with the assistance of Renaissance Bedford, is whether appropriate development on land identified as Octagon Farm Fields could help to fund construction of the lake and return a profit to land owners. The land owners are proposing to put a scheme forward for consideration by Bedford Borough Council through the Allocations and Designations Development Plan Document, as a site for possible enabling development for the Rowing Lake. This matter is clearly outside the scope of this Framework document and is outlined here for the sake of completeness only.

Archaeology and Built Heritage

Constraints

Despite past disturbance for minerals extraction, a number of important features including Scheduled Ancient Monuments, other nationally important remains and listed buildings remain and care must be taken to ensure that these, and where appropriate their settings, are protected from damage from ground modelling or inappropriate landscaping works. Tree roots can damage archaeological remains so tree planting will be avoided on sensitive and important sites. As the BRVP has already been subject to extensive archaeological investigations ahead of development, there will be little requirement for further investigation or opportunities for new discoveries in the future.

Willington Dovecote

Opportunities

Archaeological remains could provide a focus for interpreting the historic environment of the Great Ouse Valley around Bedford. Information boards and other interpretation material could be provided with additional space made available for reconstruction of ancient dwellings or ritual features which could be used to attract a wider range of visitors. The phased development of the BRVP will allow new discoveries to be recorded and in some cases preserved as key features. The establishment of the BRVP represents an opportunity to increase our knowledge of buried archaeological features of the area, and to develop public interest in the history of the Ouse Valley landscape and its past inhabitants.

3.4 Minerals Activities

The naturally occurring sand and gravel deposits in the area and the resulting extraction of these minerals have been instrumental in providing the opportunity to create the BRVP. Minerals activities will continue to have a key role in the area and the establishment and development of the BRVP will be closely associated with the mineral restoration process, as directed by the minerals planning authority. This restoration work, which has already been completed in some areas, is expected to continue until at least 2016. Aggregates have already been extracted from an area to the north of Octagon Farm and Elstow Brook and restoration has been substantially completed with the creation of a number of small lakes.

Lafarge, the mineral operator within the BRVP, has prepared a restoration plan for an area to the west of the A421 Bedford bypass, (bounded by the Great Ouse to the north and the Anglian Water sewage treatment works to the south). The implementation of this scheme, which will include lakes and reedbeds is expected in 2008.

An area to the west of Octagon Farm will be worked and restored during the period 2008-2010. It is expected that some of the excavations will contribute towards the creation of the Bedford Rowing Lake.

Restoration works in the vicinity of the Lafarge works compound on the Grange Estate, which includes a number of settling lagoons, some plant and stockpiled materials are not expected to be underway until December 2016. This area will be used to service a new quarry at Dairy Farm, to the east of the Great Ouse, which will be worked until December 2014, after which time it too will be restored.

The Grange Estate has already been restored to grassland, woodland and lakes, however the new owner the Marston Vale Trust, is considering the possibility of further enhancements in line with the aspirations outlined in this document. Some of these enhancments may be associated with the creation of the Bedford Rowing Lake.

Given the further availability of sand and gravel deposits along the Great Ouse Valley, both within the BRVP area and outside it, it is possible that there may be further minerals extraction in the future. The Bedfordshire Mineral Development Framework identifies potential sand and gravel reserves which may be extracted and which could also be processed through the existing plant site in the BRVP.

This Framework for creating the BRVP will inform the restoration requirements for any such future activities, not only within the currently designated boundary of the BRVP but also for surrounding areas along the Great Ouse Valley.

4

THE PROPOSAL

4.1 Key Principles

The future development of the BRVP will respond to the constraints and opportunities identified in Chapter 3 and will be guided by the following key principles:

Place Making

The BRVP will be the largest contiguous area of publicly accessible greenspace in Bedfordshire and will link right into the heart of Bedford. This ambitious and imaginative project will play a key role in transforming the image and profile of the area, reflecting the history of the area, to create an attractive, high quality natural setting and location that supports wider regeneration objectives. Individual landmark projects within BRVP, such as the proposed 2.3 km Bedford Rowing Lake, will deliver regionally important facilities and transform the image and setting of Bedford.

Creating Floodplain Forest

The BRVP will be one of England's largest interconnected complexes of woodland, marsh, pools and channels, reconnecting the River Great Ouse with its floodplain and linking together existing habitats. As it matures, this floodplain forest will become a woodland and wetland wildlife habitat of national importance, providing a wonderful, diverse, ever-changing, well-wooded setting for people to enjoy and learn about nature.

Multi-functionality

The BRVP will be truly multi-functional and must meet all the aspirations of the original local planning policy (NE23) namely, landscape enhancements, recreational opportunities, nature conservation improvements and improved access whilst respecting archaeology and the built heritage, so becoming an exemplary green infrastructure asset.

Accessibility

BRVP will be for people of all abilities and backgrounds to enjoy. Physical access into and across the park will be developed to a high standard. Building on the existing excellent east-west National Cycle Route 51 spine, further links and routes for cyclists, pedestrians and horse riders will be created. Special efforts will be made to link with communities to the north and south, with BRVP being part of an upgraded access loop around Bedford for cyclists and pedestrians (the Bedford Green Wheel). People of all ages will be encouraged to walk and cycle to the park. So called 'intellectual access' will be improved through a wide range of educational materials, information and opportunities.

Photo courtesy of Natural England

Promoting Sport & Recreation

The BRVP will provide opportunities for people to pursue a wide range of sporting and recreational activities, and could become host to a Centre of Excellence for sport. The construction of an Olympic-length Rowing Lake would provide a major facility for Bedford (a traditional rowing town), and allow for the development of other

strong local sports such as canoeing, kayaking and triathlon. The relatively large size and careful zoning of the proposed park will allow the solitary and quiet to coexist with the sometimes noisy and gregarious.

Environmental Sustainability

Exemplary standards of environmental sustainability will be achieved throughout the BRVP. Projects will be undertaken to reduce the production of atmospheric carbon through renewable energy schemes, for example growing energy crops (e.g. densely planted, high-yielding varieties of willow or poplar supplying wood chip boilers or a local electricity plant) or harnessing the power of flowing water and wind. Woodland and wetland habitats could be used to improve the quality of treated effluent from the local sewage works, cleaning it far beyond the current required standards. The floodplain forest will absorb atmospheric carbon as it grows and as sediments are trapped. Materials used within BRVP will be high quality, sustainable and from appropriate local sources wherever possible.

Financial Sustainability

BRVP will be delivered by a wide range of partners, from local authorities and delivery organisations such as the Marston Vale Trust, to sport and recreation clubs, local people and special interest groups. To ensure that projects are financially sustainable, they will only be embarked on if there is funding identified for both the delivery and the ongoing maintenance costs. Capital and revenue costs of individual projects will be provided by a mixture of public and private sources which could include direct and indirect contributions from occupants and beneficiaries of the BRVP.

Enhancing Existing Value

The BRVP will seek to conserve and, where possible, enhance existing features of landscape, archaeological, heritage and ecological value. These include Priory Country Park and the adjacent Fenlake Meadows, the River Great Ouse and the meadows to the north, the village of Willington with its important buildings (including the Church and Dovecote), and some of the more recently created water bodies on the Grange Estate, which are already valuable habitats for birds and other wildlife.

A Functional Floodplain

The floodplain forest of the BRVP will be used to help improve water quality in the River Great Ouse by filtering and absorbing discharges, surface and groundwater and river flows. The park will be designed to store and channel floodwaters to help reduce flood risk locally and downstream, part of bringing the floodplain back into more active use for water management.

Involving People & Partnerships

People are central to the success of BRVP. The active engagement of people in designing, creating and enjoying the park will be key to its sustained success. The creation of the BRVP will be achieved through working in partnership, bringing together a whole range of people, businesses, government and non-government organisations. Effective partnerships will achieve more for the BRVP than the constituent organisations acting alone.

4.2 Description of Bedford River Valley Park

The future development of the BRVP will include a wide range of different components in different locations across the 868ha area that has been designated. The following descriptions relate to the proposals shown in the Framework Plan [see pages 54 and 55] and provide fuller details on the role, function and nature of the key components shown. For ease of reference, they are described from west to east, moving out from Bedford, and grouped together where appropriate.

Priory Country Park & Fenlake Meadows

Priory Country Park marks the western end of the BRVP and is within walking distance of the centre of Bedford. The existing country park will serve as the main gateway from Bedford into the BRVP and represents one of the main future 'activity hubs' within BRVP. There is car parking, a small visitor centre, toilets, a café, an adjacent marina and facilities for angling, sailing, windsurfing and paddle sports, including an artificial kayak slalom course. School visits are hosted by the Wildlife Trust - Priory Country Park could become the base for environmental education across the BRVP. This part of the BRVP also has quieter areas where people can follow nature trails or enjoy angling. Priory Country Park has been awarded Green Flag Status by the Civic Trust recognising the excellent work of Bedford Borough Council in making the park a clean and well-maintained place that welcomes visitors and involves the local community. The creation of the BRVP provides Priory Country Park with the opportunity to significantly develop and update its existing facilities in response to its new key role as the gateway into the much larger BRVP area. It will continue to be an important asset within BRVP, providing a range of largely informal recreation opportunities for large numbers of local people and visitors.

Fenlake Meadows, across the river from Priory Country Park, is an area of wet grassland and marsh. It was declared a Local Nature Reserve in 1992 and will continue to be managed for nature conservation and for quiet enjoyment.

Priory Business Park & Bedford Sewage Treatment Works

To the east of Priory Country Park, across the river, is Priory Business Park, a modern development with high quality office, workshop and storage space, including the Bedford i-LAB, opened in 2005 to attract high-tech businesses. The facility is well connected to the highway network and has an adjacent hotel. It is expected that cooperation between the business park and BRVP will develop in the years to come to the benefit of both. The creation of the BRVP will provide an enhanced setting for Priory Business Park, helping to support its continued success as a site providing local employment.

To the north of Priory Business Park is the main Bedford Sewage Treatment Works operated by Anglian Water, which serves the growing population of Bedford and the Marston Vale. It is expected that the creation of BRVP will provide new wetland habitats that can be supported by steady discharges of effluent (i.e. treated waste water) from the works. This will have the beneficial effect of further improving water quality as well as sustaining and nourishing these new habitats. The supply of treated waste water from the works could also be used to boost the growth of short-rotation coppice or other energy crops that could be used as renewable fuel in a regional bio-fuel power plant or for space heating. Other beneficial interactions between the sewage treatment works and the BRVP will be sought.

Floodplain Forest

At the heart of the new BRVP an extensive and nationally significant area of floodplain forest will be created, covering around 240 hectares (or 2.4 square kilometres). This will stretch across the park from an area to the north of the sewage

treatment works in the west to existing farmland at Dairy Farm north of Willington. The continuing process of mineral extraction and restoration will be used to create a low-lying landscape of interconnected forested wetlands with lakes, pools, marsh, reeds and naturalised channels, crossed by paths and boardwalks. The floodplain forest will be well-wooded, comprised of up to 50% trees and scrub, and will provide the 'ecological heartland' of the BRVP. Careful design of the floodplain forest will allow for increased storage of flood waters to help reduce and manage flood risk along the River Great Ouse. The focus within most of this area will be on passive, quiet recreation, providing places for people to have contact with nature and relax in a natural and relatively 'wild' setting. As well as routes for walkers, cyclists and riders there will be opportunities within the floodplain forest for providing routes for other users, such as a 'canoe trail'. The National Cycle Route 51 will serve as the main access corridor for walkers and cyclists through the floodplain forest, with new main routes created along sections of the river and linking north into Bedford. These will form key parts of a planned cycleway loop around the town. Some areas of the floodplain forest will be made inaccessible to the general public, so as to provide undisturbed areas exclusively for the benefit of wildlife. Every minerals restoration project within the park will deliver part of the whole, with attention given to maximising connectivity with past and future projects within the floodplain forest zone.

There is the possibility (subject to the planning process) of creating further recreational facilities within the area of floodplain forest proposed to the north of the rowing lake and west of Octagon Farm. Parts of this area are adjacent to the A421 Bedford by-pass and well away from residential areas which may make them suitable locations for noisy activities. Also in this area, further away from the A421 on the southern fringes of the main floodplain forest zone, there is the possibility of establishing an inland beach and swimming lake together with opportunities to explore providing camping facilities within the BRVP.

Meadows

To the north of the BRVP centred on Castle Mill Lock and Weir, largely between the Goldington Road and the River Great Ouse, are existing meadows, crossed by the Renhold Brook. The A421 Bedford by-pass crosses these meadows on a viaduct and causeway. On part of this area, to the south of the lock, is an area of meadow used as a small private airfield, which is due to remain. It is expected that the open, rural and relatively tranquil character of this area will remain largely unchanged in the future, apart from the restoration of species-rich grassland, the replanting of hedges and boundary trees and improvements to the ecological value of small watercourses. The focus will be on conserving and enhancing the existing landscape and ecological value of these meadows. Improvements in access will allow more people to easily enter the BRVP on foot, bicycle or horse from the north, crossing the river to join the National Cycle Route 51 and other routes to the south.

Bedford Rowing Lake

The proposed Bedford Rowing Lake, which was granted planning permission in 2006, marks the southern boundary of the floodplain forest. It will form an important and major component of the BRVP. The proposed rowing lake will be about 2.3km long and more than 100m wide (with a total area of between 25 and 30 hectares) to allow the

necessary space and meet requirements for training to Olympic standards but could be delivered in phases. It will be of a natural design, having varied edges with substantial marginal vegetation and backwater connections with the floodplain forest to the north, maximising its ecological value and softening its impact on the landscape. The construction of the Bedford Rowing Lake will necessitate the diversion of the Elstow Brook. This will provide an opportunity to increase the brook's capacity and length, restore natural features and link these with the floodplain forest and the River Great Ouse. The Bedford Rowing Lake and associated essential development is supported by policy LR4 and, when built, will constitute a new activity hub within the BRVP, providing a focus for sport and more active recreation.

Willington Fields & Woods

The thriving village of Willington at the East end of the BRVP, will make a substantial contribution to the character of BRVP. The village includes important listed buildings as well as a pub, a shop and the Danish Camp visitor centre which is the hub and access point to the Park from the East.

Willington Village is surrounded by its own green belt of existing fields and will remain largely unchanged. The sizeable areas of predominantly rough grassland with scattered trees/scrub and farmland that lie to the west and east of Willington (labelled 'Willington Fields' on the Framework Plan) help define the extent of this rural village and provide local landscape and wildlife interest. The focus here will be on conserving and enhancing the value of these areas. Some of these areas to the west of Willington are potentially contaminated, having been previously worked for mineral and back-filled many years ago, and will require further investigation to inform any future work. There is an existing modest activity hub at the Danish Camp Visitor Centre on the banks of the River Great Ouse, which will continue to provide an appropriate, contrasting alternative to larger facilities elsewhere. Existing woodland adjacent to the National Cycle Route 51 to the south of the proposed Bedford Rowing Lake (labelled 'Willington Woods' on the Framework Plan) will create a distinct woodland block at the north of the village. This woodland will accommodate part of a new 3km route along the river, linking in to the well-used existing cycleway (National Cycle Route 51).

Octagon Farm Fields

The land between Octagon Farm and the A603 includes the current haul road serving the Lafarge minerals processing plant at the heart of BRVP. This access road and the surrounding fields provide the access for the proposed rowing lake and the setting for the associated facilities, and this area forms an important and highly visible part of BRVP. Much of this area is in arable cultivation, some having been worked for mineral and restored to agriculture, which distinguishes it from surrounding fields nearer Willington. The Octagon Farm Fields area lies predominantly outside of the floodplain according to Environment Agency data, and includes an area of land being promoted by land owners for consideration by Bedford Borough Council for development that could help to fund construction of the Rowing Lake. The Octagon Farm House itself, with its octagonal design, is a listed building and should be acknowledged as a feature to be conserved within BRVP.

The focus across Octagon Farm Fields will be on enhancing the landscape of this highly visible part of BRVP, with plentiful opportunities for targeted tree planting. The construction of the Rowing Lake and associated facilities in accordance with the existing planning permission would create an additional activity hub within this area to complement the others within BRVP and provide a focus for more formal sporting and recreational activities within the Park.

4.3 The Way Forward

The BRVP will transform Bedford. It will cost millions of pounds, take decades to complete and will bring together a range of people, businesses, government and non-government organisations working in partnership. The launch of the BRVP Framework marks the beginning of a long, but fruitful process that will bring lasting benefits to Bedford and its hinterland. The Framework will be updated as required and detailed design work will be undertaken as specific projects are brought forward by various partners or consortia. Projects will be taken through the formal planning process, where required, allowing for full consideration of impacts and further public consultation.

Key components of the park, including Priory Country Park, Willington Village and the River Great Ouse are already in place. Gravel extraction continues, with ever more sophisticated restoration plans being agreed. The recent granting of planning permission for the Bedford Rowing Lake and the purchase of the Grange Estate by the Marston Vale Trust have given new impetus to this grand and exciting project

So what happens next? The challenge is for the partners to find ways to deliver an accessible regional park where Bedford people and visitors of all ages, abilities, backgrounds and origins are welcomed into a safe and enjoyable environment. The Park will be a place where natural resources are valued and restored, where wildlife and culture can flourish, where our heritage is respected and where people can exercise, compete, play, relax, learn, work, be inspired and reflect in a rich variety of settings.

The BRVP already has exciting and valuable areas and work on delivering more of this vision is in hand:

Restoration plans for mineral extraction already favour habitat creation. With County and Borough gravel extraction sites coming forward, restoration can also provide landscapes suitable for subsequent development of recreational and sports facilities. Current and future restoration plans will be reviewed in the light of this Framework

The Marston Vale Trust is exploring opportunities for involving private sector partners in the creation of the BRVP.

The Environment Agency is prioritising the BRVP in its efforts to fund ecological restoration and flood management works within the Great Ouse floodplain.

£600,000 worth of access improvements are already underway with the construction of a new bridge over the Elstow Brook - improvements that will enable walkers, horse riders and cyclists to access a new riverside track from early in 2008.

The Marston Vale Trust is investigating the possibility of planting short rotation coppice on its own land, to provide a sustainable energy crop.

Projects involving waste water cleaning and renewable energy may be undertaken on a commercial basis and could involve partners working closely with utility companies such as Anglian Water.

The opportunities for the BRVP are limited only by our imaginations and a range of new and inspiring projects are already exciting discussion – these include the proposed rowing lake, watersport facilities, an inland bathing beach, mountain bike trails, a canoe trail, fish backwaters, top class fishing facilities, festivals, outdoor classrooms, heritage preservation and interpretation, motor cross facilities and the largest floodplain forest in the region.

The BRVP will be promoted as a designation in the Bedford Borough Allocations and Designations DPD through submission of this Framework in the LDF process. Designation will further strengthen the informal partnership that has already started to make this shared framework a reality.

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