

Appendix 3

Flitton and Greenfield Parish Council Outdoor Strategy 2014

Executive Summary

Everyone should be able to enjoy the outdoors whether playing football at the recreation grounds, wandering through the Moors or digging their allotment. The outdoors offers moments of tranquillity and helps melt away the stresses of modern life, improving our overall living standards.

Set within the rural environment, the Parish of Flitton and Greenfield provides many outdoor opportunities. Some are used more frequently than others and as well as collating different sources of relevant information, this strategy will provide innovative ways in which to get people involved in their greenspaces. The Outdoor Strategy aims to identify key aspects of the council's work and suggest ways in which they could be linked together to create an essential environmental support system for the parish.

A Vision Statement has been created to give focus to the information included in this strategy – Through linking together the various aspects of the Parish Council's work and responsibilities, the Outdoor Strategy will,

'Provide the local community with increased access and enjoyment of their green spaces for a sustainable future.'

The current Central Bedfordshire Council Outdoor Access Improvement Plan 2013-2031 (OAIP) includes five central objectives that can also apply to the Flitton and Greenfield Outdoor Strategy:

1. Providing Access
2. Involving local communities
3. Raising public confidence and understanding
4. Providing improved biodiversity and heritage management
5. Increasing use and enjoyment

By assigning these objectives as the main priorities for the Outdoor Strategy, this work can sit within the wider policy literature, allowing for a more detailed assessment.

Context

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 provides much of the background for The Outdoor Strategy. It stipulated the development of Rights of Way Improvement Plans in order to create 'opportunities for exercise and other forms of open-air recreation and enjoyment of the authority's area'. Advisory bodies known as Local Access Forums (LAF) were established to improve public access to open land through establishing relationships with other sectors with an interest in providing opportunities to enjoy the outdoors, such as health, tourism, land management and biodiversity (Plan of Engagement between Natural England, Defra and the Local Access Forums, 2013).

The Outdoor Strategy lies within The Outdoor Access Improvement Plan (CBC, 2013-2031) but can also be linked into national initiatives, for example, the NHS 'Livewell' scheme and the 'More People Walking' strategy for Central Bedfordshire. These strategies tend to focus on one area of community involvement however; the ambition of this strategy is to help the local community to make the most of improved access to the outdoor environment through embedding its value at all levels of decision-making.

The Outdoor Access Improvement Plan focuses on outdoor and countryside access in Central Bedfordshire. Although not primarily concerned with access, the Flitton and Greenfield Outdoor Strategy acknowledges how essential it is for the strategy's success and provides suggestions on improving access where possible. The Leisure Strategy (CBC, 2013), in particular the Recreation and Open Space Strategy, provides useful information on planning for future provision of open space in the outdoor environment.

The Flitton and Greenfield Parish Plan was created in 2008 after thorough community consultation. Some of the concerns have been addressed successfully for example provision of locking points for bicycles and increased dog bins. However, some aspects of the Leisure and Tourism and Environment Policy Statements have not been developed within the proposed timescales. This Outdoor Strategy picks up on some of the actions that could provide the greatest benefits with their implementation from improved signage on walking routes to the development of a local fitness trail.

Several organisations have been important in developing the Outdoor Strategy and their guidelines often support government policies on the natural environment. Sustrans, Natural England and The Conservation Volunteers all recognise the importance of getting local communities involved in the outdoors.

Contents

Each priority is linked to the Parish Council's current outdoor responsibilities. Recommendations will be outlined although an assessment of each action would need to be undertaken in the future. The location of these outdoor responsibilities and potential improvement projects is shown on the site map (see Appendix 1a and b). Ideas from projects around the United Kingdom that have helped to achieve successful outdoor objectives will be used to offer suggestions that could be adapted for Flitton and Greenfield.

The flow diagrams link the OAIP priorities to the benefits of their implementation and how this could be achieved in Flitton and Greenfield.

Providing Access



Fig. 1

The provision of access to the outdoors is a central theme in this strategy and also within the wider natural environment literature. There is strong evidence that physical activity in the outdoors is more likely to be sustained over time (OAIP, 2013) and creates an enhanced sense of wellbeing.

The Outdoor Access Improvement Plan states: ‘accessing rights of way and countryside sites for walking, sports, play and recreation could significantly contribute to achieving health priorities’. The benefits of physical activity on health and wellbeing are considerable and include a reduction of the physiological manifestations of stress, improved sleep and reduced anxiety (‘Start Active, Stay Active’ report, 2011, Department of Health). Regular physical activity reduces the risk of depression and has a positive impact on self-esteem (see Priority 5).

With physical inactivity as one of the leading causes of death in developed countries, responsible for an estimated 23% of Coronary Heart Disease and 15% diabetes (The World Health Report 2002, WHO), the adoption of proposed projects, from getting the community actively involved in allotments to using new outdoor exercise equipment, would be of significance.

Involvement in the Walking for Health Programme would be an ideal way to reap the benefits of exercising outdoors. The closest organised walks to Flitton and Greenfield are in Flitwick and Ampthill. Links to these towns could be better highlighted using ‘health walk’ signs from Central Bedfordshire Council or a local walking group could be established with the help of www.walkingforhealth.org.uk. Funding for keeping the participation in health walks free can also be found on the website.

‘Clear, well maintained paths and bridleways are important to give people access to the natural environment and can be enjoyed by cyclists, walkers and horse riders’ (Natural Environment White Paper, 2010). Easily accessible rights of way are important to encourage walkers and currently the Friends of Flitton Moor and The Greensand Trust manage the footpaths on the moor with the guidance of Central Bedfordshire Council. Issues may arise with ploughed fields and overgrown nettles but generally they are well maintained.

Increased signage to indicate ‘health walks’, links to circular walks or recreation facilities would be an easy way to get people accessing new areas of the local outdoors. Finger posts giving the distances to nearby service locations could encourage people to walk places they might have driven to before. Developing the barn site at the bottom of Brook Lane, Flitton (see map Appendix 1b and

2) as a central information point for local walks would be a great way to provide route times and links to longer trails. Current signage needs to be updated (see Appendix 2).

As the council aims to continue its promotion of cycling as a sustainable, healthy and new way of exploring the countryside, there may be an opportunity for Central Bedfordshire Council to develop 'Simply Cycling' in Flitton and Greenfield (OAIP, 2013).

Some progress has already been made in this area (see Priority 3) with the Woodlands Estate connection to the local recreation park but there are many more opportunities that could be realised such as a link into the Clophill circular cycle route (Appendix 3).

Involving Local Communities



Fig. 2

Involving local communities is an important aspect of The Central Bedfordshire Together vision for a sustainable future. It is also a core theme of the Outdoor Strategy, as some of the Parish Council's current responsibilities could benefit from more community input. Although the parish is considered rural and green spaces are well used, there are some projects that could encourage people to access a wider range of Flitton and Greenfield's outdoor amenities.

'Community gardens' and 'mini plots' have grown in popularity since 2008 due to food insecurity and rising prices. According to The Big Dig organisation, the ideal of local gardens is more popular than the traditional allotment. See Appendix 2.

Community awareness of the availability of Flitton and Greenfield's allotment plots could be increased with public posters and open days. The Big Dig's 'growing food together' initiative runs events such as; seed swaps, herb walks, wildlife gardening, harvest festivals and apple days.

Although the Mid Bedfordshire Green Infrastructure Plan (2008) does not include allotments in its study, they are an important component of the Outdoor Strategy. Central Bedfordshire Council states allotments are 'significant to our green spaces and provide habitats for many forms of wildlife'.

Promotion of the parish allotments should be a key part of involving the local community which helps people to feel responsible for their outdoor spaces. First time allotment gardeners may feel daunted by maintaining a whole plot and the ability to rent half a plot or share the space with a

friend should be an advertised option (The National Archives, Communities and Neighbourhoods, 2002). Local community groups could be offered discounts on plots, such as gardening clubs at the lower school. People could be made more aware of the benefits of allotment keeping by having the chance to pick produce themselves in plots set aside for 'community gardening', such as herbs and cut flowers.

Community gardens are increasingly fashionable in urban areas where open space is scarce but Flitton and Greenfield has sufficient access to green areas. The allotments should be promoted as a place to socialise and learn new skills. Volunteers could offer gardening tips and coffee and cake events would provide the chance to meet new people (Priority 3).

Raising Public Confidence and Understanding



Fig. 3

Participation of friends and other community groups in managing the local outdoors can lead to an increase in public confidence and understanding. This in turn can 'highlight the value of greenspace to the community, allow a degree of self-determination and bring a sense of identity to the area' (Natural England, 2010).

It is argued that rural communities are more willing to participate proactively in initiatives such as allotment keeping and conservation management and that their relatively close association with the natural resources in question dictates that such participation is of particular importance (Edwards et al, 1997). One way to achieve high participation is to increase the volunteering opportunities in the parish. Priority 4 is one area of the council's responsibilities that could benefit from the involvement of volunteers.

An area of the parish council's work that should be linked into increasing public confidence is increasing bike usage. Central Bedfordshire Council currently has a 'Travel Choices' Project running but it is aimed at the Dunstable region. Improved access to employment opportunities, safer road crossings and improved lighting would encourage people to use bikes as a sustainable mode of transport. A similar plan could be developed for Flitton and Greenfield.

By concentrating on a community project to achieve this, people would be able to use their new skills to better access the outdoors. Sustrans suggests that one of the main barriers to cycling is a lack of road confidence but this could easily be overcome with information from The National Cycle Training Charity (<http://www.ctc.org.uk/community-outreach>). Raising awareness of safe cycling practice through small events at the local school, tips in the community newsletter, 'Flit 'N' More', or a Sustrans-style stall at village events, would help people to feel better able to tackle a bike ride. In

this way, the community is providing itself with more access to the outdoors (Priority 1) and also increasing use and enjoyment of the countryside (Priority 5).

In Flitton and Greenfield there are limited rights of way suitable for the use of bikes (kissing gates and surfaces being unsuitable for an easy journey) but there is a possibility to link into the Clophill Recreational cycle route (see Appendix 3). The easiest connection to the route is from nearby Silsoe. Signage could be installed in Flitton and Greenfield to mark the direction for cyclists to link into the route. There is potential for this connection to the wider outdoors to appeal to a range of people, from young adults wanting to access the Chicksands Bike Park to countryside enthusiasts linking into the Greensand Ridge Cycleway.

The Woodlands Connection to the recreation park has been completed and provides a traffic-free access route from the Woodlands Estate. The Parish Plan identified the need to upgrade rights of way and improvements have taken place since its publication.

This Priority can also be closely aligned with the following Priority (4) related to the natural environment. Participation in conservation volunteer groups allows for the sharing of local knowledge and the creation of an informal education network. Conservation walks such as the Two Moors Walks following a local heritage trail are a great way for people to access the outdoors and increase their understanding of the environment.

Providing Improved Biodiversity and Heritage Management



Fig. 4

In the parish of Flitton and Greenfield, the most significant natural countryside space is the moor. The site consists of fen and moor habitat and supports neutral grassland and wetland wildlife. Flitton Moor is managed by The Greensand Trust and Friends of Flitton Moor. Management in the area involves cattle grazing of the grassland, planted shelter belts and areas seeded with grass and wildflower mix (The Greensand Trust). See map (Appendix 1a) for wildlife areas included in this strategy.

Research carried out by The Conservation Volunteers has found that participants reported feeling fitter and having more energy than before. In addition to the health benefits (see Priority 1), volunteering can give the local community a chance to manage their natural environment and is a sociable way to protect the countryside.

In Flitton and Greenfield, volunteering opportunities with The Friends of Flitton Moor and The Greensand Trust are frequent and easy to get involved with. Activities can range from clearing waterways of invasive plant species to mowing grass footpaths. Sessions mostly run during the week, although there are plans to assess the popularity of weekend work parties.

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Increasing Use and Enjoyment



Fig. 5

Flitton and Greenfield have many facilities that can be accessed to increase use and enjoyment of the outdoors.

Evidence shows that nature is good for our health and natural greenspaces can provide solutions to many chronic illnesses. Regular exercise can lower the risk of heart disease and stroke by up to 35% and diabetes by up to 50%, boost self-esteem and mood as well as reducing the risk of depression and Alzheimer’s Disease by 30% (www.nhs.uk/Livewell/fitness/pages/whybeactive.aspx).

There are many opportunities for activities to improve health through physical exercise but there are gaps that could be filled with recommendations by Natural England and Central Bedfordshire Council. Communities must be empowered to protect greenspaces and improve access to the outdoors in order for the following ideas to be successful. This can be linked into the priority ‘involving local communities’ (see Priority 2)

The Central Bedfordshire Council Leisure Strategy (2013) defines facilities for young people as, ‘youth shelters, skate parks and Multi Use Games Areas (MUGA). The broad objective of the provision of these facilities is to provide opportunities for young people to play and interact with their peers’. After the recent parish plan and consultation, a lack of facilities for young people was

cited as a concern, although it was suggested that there was an opportunity to include a basketball hoop on the recreation site. This would fit in well with the Leisure Strategy definition and promote a range of different skills and interests that would allow the recreation grounds to function better for young people. Depending on the demand for such sports equipment, a mobile hoop may provide a better option as it can be stored away during the week, reducing the chance of vandalism and the space needed to use it. 'Anti- Vandal' permanent equipment is expensive but if combined with a football goal could provide for different interests.

Outdoor exercise equipment could also be seen as a way of providing high-quality facilities for young people but would also appeal to those looking to get fit without spending too much money and at a site close to their homes. Working out in green spaces is an ideal way to relieve stress and can help to combat depression (<http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/get-involved/build-your-skills/how-to-guides/outdoor-gym/>). Exercising outdoors can provide a Vitamin D boost important for maintaining healthy bones and the body works harder to improve balance on uneven surfaces and in the natural elements. See Appendix 2.

The People's Health Trust can provide funding for Outdoor Gyms.

Linking conservation and exercise has led to The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) initiative of 'Green Gyms'. This has strong connections to the priority 'providing improved biodiversity and heritage management' (see Priority 4) as alongside an improvement in fitness, people will learn about environmental conservation and ways to improve their local surroundings.

Taking part in the Green Gym improves muscle strength, which is particularly important for older people, helping to maintain independence in later life. <http://www.tcv.org.uk/greengym/start-green-gym#public> has ways in which to set up a local Green Gym. However, as there are many opportunities to join in with a conservation volunteer group in Flitton and Greenfield (see Priority 4) the most suitable option may be to apply for a 'Green Gym Licence'. This would involve training organisers to a high standard so that the community group could run their own Green Gym based on the tasks they already carry out. This empowering action would also link in closely with Priority 2.

The Conservation Volunteers may be able to advise third sector organisations and community groups on sources of funding (TCV website).

Conclusions

How will this Strategy be followed up? How often will it be reviewed?

The brief for the Outdoor Strategy stated that it should allow for any meaningful investment of council funds for the period covering 2013 -2018. A cost assessment should be carried out for the suggested priorities outlined below, although some may require additional funding from external resources.

This strategy could be reviewed in conjunction with the Parish Action Plan to save resources. The Outdoor Strategy highlights some of the same actions that need to be implemented within the context of the Flitton and Greenfield Parish Plan. A review should be carried out every 5 years to keep the included information relevant and up-to-date.

This strategy provides part of the evidence base for planning future policies and highlight areas that could be better linked for more effective planning by the local authority.

Below is a summary of the key priorities for the parish council that if achieved, could go some way to providing the local community with increased access and enjoyment of their green spaces for a sustainable future;

1. Providing Access – Increase signage to outdoor recreation sites and walking trails.
2. Involving Local Communities – Allotment projects and increase awareness of available plots.
3. Raising Public Confidence and Understanding – Cycle training opportunities.
4. Providing Improved Biodiversity and Heritage Management – Increase awareness of volunteering.
5. Increasing Use and Enjoyment – Set up a ‘Green Gym’ and review new exercise equipment.

Funding opportunities

Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity – a focus on community development and seeks to ensure that everyone is involved in a thriving community and that all residents have access to the natural environment.

Sustrans – develops strategy and vision for the delivery of achievable cycling, walking and sustainable transport change. James Cleeton- Active Travel in the Community Officer (community@sustrans.org.uk). Provides information and resources.

Natural England – recognises the proven benefits of access to good quality natural greenspaces. ‘Paths for Communities’ (P4C) Grant closes 31st December 2013. Aimed at community groups seeking to effect change in their local area and bid must include an element of new public rights of way creation.

The People’s Health Trust – provides funding for outdoor gyms, although not yet available in the local area, www.peopleshealthtrust.org.uk offers useful information on the funding process.

The Co-Operative Fund – Grants of up to £2000 for projects that provide a good long-term benefit to the community <http://www.co-operative.coop/communityfund>. Ideally innovative in its approach, the grant may be suitable for the development of the barn as an information point on the moors.

The appendix includes location maps, references, annotated photographs and relevant articles to the Outdoor Strategy.

Appendix.

a.

2.



Potential to use the barn as an information point for walking routes.

c.



b.



Update signage – in particular on featured walks and links to other outdoor areas.



Manage the allotments as a 'community garden' space. Encourage a working group to maintain the area if plots are left unused.

Sub-divide large unused plots for a more manageable growing space.

e.



Potential for an exercise course around the edge of the playing fields. Using equipment here, would feel more private.

Suitable for use all year.

References

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