

Chalk Arc Initiative MFGS Scoping Summary Report

Background

The Milton Keynes and South Midlands Sub-regional Strategy (MKSMSS) identifies much of Luton and southern Bedfordshire as a major housing and employment growth area. Overall, the area has to accommodate around 26,300 new homes by 2021 and an additional 15,400 by 2031. In addition, the Regional Spatial Strategy sets a target of around 23,000 new jobs by 2021.

This planned growth will inevitably result in the development of large areas of what is now countryside. Therefore there is a need to maximise access to the remaining countryside and ensure that it is welcoming and accessible and, where possible, create new opportunities for informal open air recreation for both existing and the new planned communities.

While the planning authorities can require housing developers to provide or fund the greenspaces and other community infrastructure that the residents of their developments will require, they cannot expect developers to fund all the strategic green infrastructure that will be desirable. Planning Inspectors have repeatedly struck out attempts by councils to seek developer contributions to strategic provision unless they clearly satisfy the legal tests set out in Circular 5/2005, *Planning Obligations*. Ironically, one of the stated purposes of the proposed Community Infrastructure Levy is to allow councils to obtain funding for strategic provision from developers. Until CIL is in place, however – and at best this will take some years to achieve – the strategic green infrastructure needed to support this growth has to be planned and delivered primarily by other means. This is obviously part of the logic behind the provision of Growth Area funding to Luton and southern Bedfordshire.

The former Bedfordshire County Council recognised this and promoted a county-wide Green Infrastructure Consortium (GIC) which developed the *Bedfordshire and Luton Strategic Green Infrastructure Plan* (February 2007). It sets out a vision for the future of green infrastructure:

A strategically planned and managed network of accessible greenspace and access routes, landscapes, biodiversity and heritage which will meet the needs of existing and new communities in Bedfordshire and Luton by providing:

- An essential environmental foundation and support system
- A healthy and rich environment
- Attractive places to live and visit and a good quality of life
- A sustainable future

The green infrastructure network will be protected, conserved, enhanced and widely known and valued. It will be of high quality and an example of best practice and innovation. The long term maintenance of the network and its constituent elements will be resourced sustainably. The network will be multi-functional and meet a wide range of social, environmental and economic needs. It will connect urban and rural settlements and the countryside and provide a spatial planning framework to guide sustainable development.

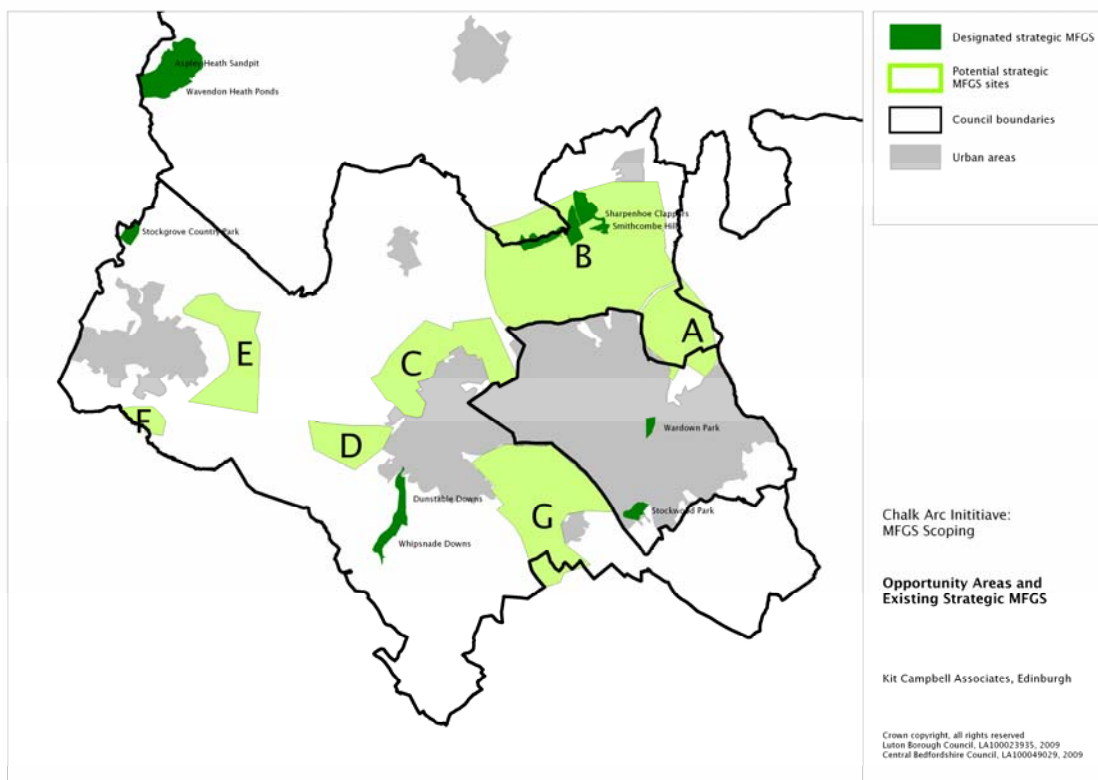
Our Brief

Against this background, the Chalk Arc Initiative appointed us with a brief:

- “To identify options for the delivery of at least 60 hectares of new strategic, multi-functional green space, concentrating on six identified “opportunity areas”; ideally this will take the form of one large site, although several smaller sites may be considered if this is deemed to be the more appropriate solution.
- To identify options for financing the delivery of the new green space, through the Chalk Arc Initiative, including identifying match funding and utilising funding from Planning Obligations Strategies
- To identify options for compiling land, from land acquisition to negotiated agreements, by working with existing partners rather than directly approaching land owners and prejudicing any future negotiations”

The map below shows the opportunity areas identified in the brief, plus an area to the west of the M1 suggested by two key stakeholders, the Wildlife Trust and Joint Technical Unit:

- A: Warden and Galley Hills
- B: North of Luton
- C: North of Dunstable and Houghton Regis
- D: Totternhoe area, west of Dunstable
- E: East of Leighton Linlade
- F: Grovebury area, south of Leighton Linlade
- G: west of the M1



Methodology

The approach we have taken to this study is:

- Summarise the “spatial policy cascade”
- Review existing market research
- Undertake an initial identification and review of potential opportunities within the areas of search defined in the brief.
- Prepare a strategic analysis using a number of social and economic indicators to identify the MFGS sites that offer the greatest potential benefit to new and existing communities
- Seek the views of a range of stakeholders on the possible sites and priorities
- Revise the analysis and site descriptions in the light of the comments received on them from the stakeholders
- Identify the key issues affecting delivery
- Prepare recommended delivery objectives and related guiding principles
- Prepare function-based recommendations for each of the main local stakeholders – the Initiative, the JTU, the local authorities and the Green Infrastructure Consortium
- Identify a general approach to delivery that the Initiative and Green Infrastructure Consortium and their partners can apply to each of the various sites

The Spatial Policy Cascade

The most significant points from our brief review of the local policy cascade are:

- The sub-regional strategy implicitly requires the

planning authorities to allocate land for a net gain in strategic green infrastructure in advance of development

- The County-wide Strategic GI Plan implicitly assumes that most GI will be either on the urban fringe or a network of accessible routes
- There is local community support for urban fringe country parks and connected networks of greenspace
- There is a clear policy justification for developer contributions towards GI in extant and emerging development plans, but a need to strengthen existing Supplementary Planning Documents relating to planning obligations and ensure they comply fully with CLG Circular 5/2005
- The priorities in the Opportunity Areas to the south and east of Leighton-Linslade are high quality open space and linkages to the countryside
- There is a clear shortage of sports pitches in the Dunstable-Houghton Regis area
- Biodiversity enhancement is a clear priority across the whole of Luton and southern Bedfordshire

Existing Market Research

The key conclusion from our review of existing market research studies was that there is an obvious need to try to widen the countryside site visitor profile and key ways of achieving this are likely to include:

- A different “offer” from that at existing sites, with opportunities for community and other events
- Access by public transport, suggesting a location close to potential park and ride sites or existing public transport routes
- Good quality built facilities
- Having something to advertise that will appeal to a wide cross-section of potential visitors

Initial Site Identification

Based on an initial “on the ground” evaluation of each of the opportunity areas (plus Rushmere Park and area G to the west of the M1), and consultation with key stakeholders, we identified the following potential strategic sites:

Opportunity Area A

- The Galley and Warden Hills immediately to the east of Luton

Opportunity Area B

- Sundon Quarry and landfill site, north of Luton
- Sundon House, north of Luton
- Sundon to Sharpenhoe Connection

Opportunity Area C

- Chalton Cross Farm flood plain, north of Dunstable
- Houghton Regis Quarry

Opportunity Area D

- Totternhoe area, from Maiden Bower to Totternhoe Castle

Opportunity Area E

- Grovebury Quarry, south of Leighton Buzzard

Opportunity Area F

- Clipstone Brook flood plain, east of Leighton Buzzard
- The SandScape project north east of Leighton Buzzard

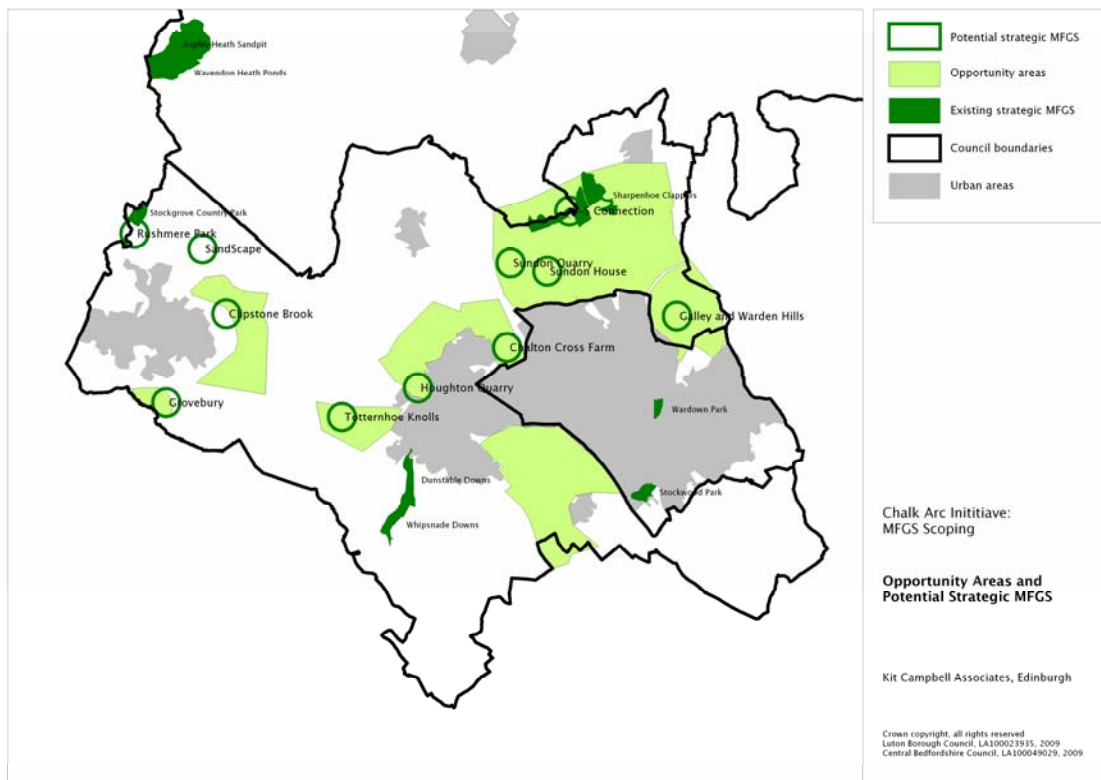
Opportunity Area G

- No sites

Other

- Roughly one third of the way through the study, it became apparent that Rushmere Park, a predominantly wooded area to the south of Stockgrove Country Park and north of Heath and Reach, partly in Bedfordshire and partly in Buckinghamshire, was about to be put on the market. With the agreement of the Steering Group, therefore, we added this site into the analysis

The map below identifies the sites:



Strategic Analysis

In order to evaluate the potential benefits to existing and new communities offered by each of the sites, we reviewed them against the following objective criteria:

- Ensuring new sites complement the existing network of strategic greenspaces
- Quality of place
- Population turnover
- Access to and from sustainable transport routes
- Wildlife interest
- Health and well-being
- Compatibility with the Strategic GI Plan
- Access to and from housing growth areas

The table below summarises the sites that score best against these criteria:

	Impact on access	Deprived communities	Population turnover	Sustainable transport	Wildlife interest	Health and well-being	GI Plan	Housing growth areas	Totals
Chalton Cross Farm	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	7
Clipstone Brook							✓		1
Grovebury Quarry	✓						✓		2
Houghton Quarry	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	6
Sundon to Sharpenhoe									0
Rushmere Park					✓				1
Sandscape									0
Sundon House						✓		✓	2
Sundon Quarry					✓			✓	1
Totternhoe				✓	✓				2
Warden and Galley Hills	✓		✓					✓	2

The key conclusions from the analysis are that:

- The provision of new strategic MFGS close to Luton, Dunstable and Houghton Regis should be a higher priority than a site or sites close to Leighton Buzzard. This will make any new sites as accessible as possible to the main concentration of population and in particular the most deprived communities in the area.
- Within the Luton-Dunstable-Houghton Regis area, the best locations for new strategic MFGS appear to be Houghton Quarry and the Chalton Cross Farm flood plain. The Galley and Warden Hills area may also be a good location, depending on the extent to which North Hertfordshire decides to promote an urban extension to the east of Luton.
- In principle, Sundon House also offers worthwhile opportunities, but it is quite small compared with the other sites.

Key Issues

The key challenges facing the Chalk Arc Initiative and its partners in delivering new strategic MFGS in Luton and southern Bedfordshire are:

- To find effective ways of managing land owners' hope value in order to allow the delivery of new strategic MFGS sites in accessible locations
- To find ways of making GI assets more attractive to a wider cross-section of the community and creating sites that are able to accommodate a significant number of visitors without unacceptable environmental damage
- To strike an appropriate balance, both on individual sites and on strategic sites in general, between the various functions that green infrastructure can support in order to maximise the beneficial impact of new GI assets
- To help ensure the planning authorities have in place the best possible policy framework for planning obligations in relation to GI
- To work with the planning authorities to deliver the most appropriate GI network in the proposed urban expansions, linking it as much as possible to greenspace and sport and recreation provision in the established urban areas
- To ensure that the planning, delivery and subsequent management of specific sites is based on objectives that reflect a broad understanding and interpretation of local needs rather than the aims of a specific delivery agency
- To find acceptable ways of generating at least most of the income that will be needed to meet the revenue costs of new strategic GI assets
- To help the local authorities make the case for development by arguing for the benefits that development can bring in terms of MFGS - benefits that will not be delivered without ensuring that new developments will deliver high quality environments that include networks of attractive, accessible greenspaces and green corridors both within developments and between them that link to the urban fringe and wider countryside

Delivery Objectives and Guiding Principles

We suggest two broad delivery objectives:

- To support the sustainable growth agenda in Luton and southern Bedfordshire by arguing for and supporting the allocation of land for the additional strategic MFGS sites that both existing and proposed new communities will need but is unlikely to be delivered solely through development
- To seek to ensure that all new and as many existing residents as possible live within an acceptable travel distance of at least one multi-functional greenspace of strategic significance to Luton and southern Bedfordshire, specifically 5 km for the residents of rural areas and 3.2 km for those living in urban settlements

In addition, we suggest that the Chalk Arc Initiative and its partners adopt the following Guiding Principles when

promoting the development of new strategic sites:

- 1 New strategic MFGS should enhance, extend and connect as much as possible to the strategic green network identified in the Luton and South Bedfordshire GI Plan
- 2 In order to manage hope value and ensure that new strategic MFGS is will located, Long term delivery depends on the planning authorities designating land for the key components of the eventual strategic MFGS network as part of the LDF process
- 3 Ideally, strategic GI assets should be in public or quasi-public ownership. However, if this is not possible, for whatever reason, entering into a long lease (of at least 25 years) will often be the next best approach if capital investment will be required to deliver the full range of potential public benefits. Access agreements and designation under the CRow Act will however be suitable for sites where there is no foreseeable need for public agency capital investment.
- 4 New GI sites must include elements that will generate at least a significant part of the cost of managing and maintaining them; and if this is unacceptable to key stakeholders, it should be incumbent upon them to identify how these costs will be met
- 5 GI planning in Luton and southern Bedfordshire should continue to be based on rational analysis of local needs and an appropriate evidence base, but delivery of sites within the overall strategic plan will of necessity have to be opportunistic
- 6 The local authority in whose area a proposed strategic MFGS site is located should lead the initial co-ordination of delivery (on a cross-boundary basis where the site is likely to be attractive to the residents of more than one local authority or town/parish Council area) with the aim of ensuring that sites deliver the best and most sustainable mix of benefits to people, wildlife and nature conservation
- 7 Those planning new strategic MFGS sites should seek to work with the existing “grain” of sites by exploiting and enhancing their unique features and characteristics, with the objectives of ensuring that:
 - * Every site is unique and designed and managed to support as many of the functions set out under “The definition of multi-functionality” in Chapter 9 as possible
 - * Collectively, GI sites should offer the widest possible range of opportunities and experiences of the highest possible quality and “something for everyone”, including tourists, in order to attract a

wider spectrum of users than traditional countryside sites

- 8 Individual sites should have clearly defined management objectives related directly to the five themes in the two GI Plans (landscape, the historic environment, rebuilding biodiversity, access routes and accessible greenspace) and the wider benefits highlighted in Chapter 8
- 9 The local authority responsible for initiating plans for the development of a strategic MFGS site should always require that the agency or partnership of agencies who will be responsible for delivery have a clear and widely supported long term vision of what they want to achieve at the outset and, in many cases, encourage the creation of a bespoke partnership to deliver it incrementally as funds become available. They should also formally review both the vision and partnership arrangements at regular intervals to ensure they remain relevant to meeting local needs, achievable and financially and environmentally sustainable.
- 10 The planning system is probably the single most important delivery mechanism for all forms of MFGS.

Recommendations

We also provide a number of specific recommendations to the Chalk Arc Initiative and its key partners in both “functional” and “agency” terms. The functions are:

- Planning policy and land allocations
- Land allocation
- Guidance for developers
- Masterplanning and development briefs
- Development management
- The co-ordination of delivery
- Public sector funding

The key agencies to whom these recommendations are addressed, and their current roles, are:

- The two local authorities (LA) ie Luton Borough Council and Central Bedfordshire Council
- The Joint Technical Unit (JTU) responsible for preparing the Local Development Framework for Luton and southern Bedfordshire
- The local planning authorities (LPA)
- The Green Infrastructure Consortium (GIC) which has co-ordinated GI Planning in Luton and southern Bedfordshire
- The Chalk Arc Initiative (CAI): the current delivery arm of the GIC, but funded from the Government’s Growth Area Fund

The recommendations relate specifically to:

- Planning policy and land allocation

- Guidance for developers
- Masterplanning of the proposed urban extensions
- Development management
- The co-ordination of delivery
- Short term delivery
- Public sector funding

Delivery Plan

The Chalk Arc Initiative will do better to focus its efforts on a limited number of sites than dissipate them over a wider area. In principle, the strategic priority for additional MFGS should be in and around Luton, Dunstable and Houghton Regis. This area has the main existing concentration of local residents and all of the significant deprivation. However, each of the other sites identified in this report has the potential to be valuable green infrastructure. In addition, some will generate greater benefits, and be more deliverable in the next few years, than others. Therefore delivery on the ground has to be based on “rational opportunism”:

- Rational in the sense that the long term aim is to deliver the carefully considered objectives set out in the Strategic GI Plan, the GI Plan for Luton and Southern Bedfordshire and this report against the broad background of the Core Strategy for Luton and Southern Bedfordshire and the community strategies for Luton and Central Bedfordshire
- Opportunism in the sense that delivery will have to take advantage of opportunities, as and when they arise, to purchase land, initiate discussions with land owners, harness development and obtain external funding

On the basis of the Core Strategy Preferred Options Report plus the potential for reasonably early delivery, the Initiative should concentrate on the following priority sites (in alphabetical order):

- Clipstone Brook
- Galley and Warden Hills
- Houghton Regis Quarry
- Rushmere Park
- Sundon to Sharpenhoe Connection
- Totternhoe

Short Term Priorities

Amongst these sites, the immediate priorities should be Rushmere Park and Houghton Regis Quarry. They are the sites that it should be possible to deliver in the next year or so.

Rushmere Park



Rushmere Park is a superb opportunity to extend Stockgrove Country Park and ease the visitor pressures on it while facilitating significantly enhanced visitor access and enjoyment. The large size of the site and its nature makes it possible to tackle a small area at a time as funds allow. It will also be possible to make extensive use of volunteers to tackle specific projects eg through BTCV or Groundwork. Specific examples of how Rushmere Park will add value include: a new access to Stockgrove CP through the estate; significant additional off-road parking, enhanced prominence with formal entrance on the southern edge; opportunities to create a range of facilities for visitors, including those with disabilities, separated by woodland, some of which could be revenue generating eg paintball, treetops high wires, camp site; and an opportunity to link the Leighton-Linslade “green spine” more effectively to the County Park.

Some of the woodland is approaching maturity and felling operations could be a source of income, provide a source of wood chips for paths and allow replanting with species that will promote enhanced biodiversity value and visitor interest.

Houghton Quarry



Houghton Quarry, on the northern edge of Houghton Regis, is a “hidden gem” of which some local people may not be aware. In theory, there is no public access but in fact it is used for various forms of anti-social behaviour, including unauthorised and dangerous off-road motorcycling, and a limited amount of “fossiling”. It has the potential to become the largest in a network of linked green sites that extend east to Blue Waters and then to

Houghton Park (and possibly in the longer term Chalton Cross Farm site) and then back through the Parkside area and Houghton Hall Park and Dog Kennel Walk to the Quarry. The quarry will also become accessible from a wide area with the creation of a park and ride site immediately to the north of it at the junction of the A5 and A505.

Medium Term Priorities

It is very unlikely that it will be possible to deliver the other priority sites within the next 2-3 years:

Clipstone Brook



The Brook is prone to flooding and this is a source of significant local concern – although it could be turned into a positive factor by damming to create a new water area and possibly some wet woodland. It has the potential to become a green corridor from the centre of Leighton Buzzard eastwards through the proposed new development to the wider countryside, connecting to existing paths and bridleways in order to create circular walks on the east side of the town. The developers of the proposed urban extension to the east of Leighton Buzzard should be responsible for creating this piece of GI.

Galley and Warden Hills



The Galley and Warden Hills already provide opportunities to enjoy the countryside to the east of Luton. However, there is an opportunity to create a country park with significant nature conservation and habitat value located on a sustainable transport route from Great Bramingham Park and the urban extension to the north of Luton round to Stopsley Common and the proposed Regional Sports Centre.

Sundon to Sharpenhoe Connection



This area of land will progressively come to be “urban fringe” for residents of the proposed urban extension to the north of Luton. It will therefore face increasing visitor pressures. Linking existing green infrastructure assets better will create a network of paths along the northern side of the extension to the attractive village of Barton-le-Clay and south to Great Bramingham Wood and Park and then round to the Galley and Warden Hills.

Totternhoe



The area to the west of Dunstable and around Totternhoe Village contains a range of sites of significant historical interest. While there is a reasonably good network of paths and by-ways already in place, it will be desirable to improve the visitor infrastructure in the area, for example by providing more parking and interpretation.

Long Term Priorities

The other sites we have identified all have the potential to be significant elements of the green infrastructure network but it will take a number of years to deliver them, not least because of hope value on the part of land owners in an area which will have to accommodate a lot of development over the next twenty years:

- **Chalton Cross:** the probable extent of this possible site is unclear but it is likely to be fairly small and not available until the full extent of development on the farm is determined. In addition, part of the site may be required for strategic flood storage. It should be possible for the planning authority to require part of the site to be allocated for MFGS as a condition relating to the development of the remainder, although it will probably be much less than 60 ha.
- **Grovebury Quarry:** this site will not be available for some years and the owner is seeking planning consent for an extension to the quarrying operations. Capital funding is already in place for the creation of the proposed playing fields and water sports centre, and any extension of planning consent will make it possible for the Mineral and Waste Authority to seek additional funding for restoration and after-use.
- **Sandscape Project:** this is a landscape project that depends on incremental delivery over a long period. The Greensand Trust and quarry owners are in broad agreement over facilitating future public access.
- **Sundon House:** the developer land owner has already proposed the restoration of the parkland linked to the former Sundon House, subject to planning consent for housing. As the site is more or less in the centre of the urban expansion proposed to the north of Luton it is likely that planning consent for some housing in the vicinity will be acceptable. Therefore there is no need for public sector investment in the short term to secure this site.
- **Sundon Quarry and landfill:** it will be at least five and more likely ten years before the landfill is complete. When it is, Central Bedfordshire Council, as the land owner, is already committed to promoting and facilitating public access. The former quarry to the south of the landfill area is already designated as open access land under the CRoW Act. Therefore there is no case for public sector investment in the short term.

Site Delivery

In general terms, the key actions required to deliver any new MFGS sites will be:

- Harness the planning system to manage hope value
- Prepare and adopt a clear vision for each site to provide clarity for land owners and developers
- Identify an appropriate management agency or partnership of agencies

- Obtain land owner and community support
- Prepare a development and business plan
- Finalise access arrangements

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