

Eco-towns – Living a Greener Future

Response to Government Consultation Paper

by

The Marston Vale Trust

on behalf of

The Forest of Marston Vale

1. The Forest of Marston Vale

a. Background

The Forest of Marston Vale is one of the 12 Community Forests in England. It was established by Government in 1991 to use trees and woodlands to transform 61 square miles between Bedford and Milton Keynes, repairing a degraded landscape scarred by decades of clay extraction, brickmaking and landfill by increasing woodland cover from 3% to 30% by 2031. Working with local communities, government and businesses, the 40-year vision is to deliver environmentally-led regeneration that facilitates social and economic regeneration of the area, whilst providing major recreation, landscape, biodiversity, and quality of life benefits. The creation of the Forest of Marston Vale is guided by the Forest Plan, a politically and publicly endorsed strategy produced through extensive consultation.

The Forest of Marston Vale was initiated by a partnership of the local councils, the Forestry Commission, the Countryside Agency and other local and national organisations. In 1997, the partners created the Marston Vale Trust, an independent registered charity, to take forward the creation of the Forest of Marston Vale.

The Trust is a social enterprise that owns and operates the Forest Centre, a purpose-built visitor centre and conferencing facility set in the 225 hectare Millennium Country Park. The Forest Centre generates revenue for the charity, both to manage the Millennium Country Park and to secure the Forest Team that is delivering the Forest of Marston Vale. The Forest of Marston Vale lies at the heart of the Milton Keynes and South Midlands Growth Area and the pressing need for new green infrastructure to meet the needs of growth in the Vale has brought even stronger relevance to the aims of the Forest, demonstrating the synergy between regeneration and growth. Important components of the green infrastructure delivered by the Forest have been secured through Growth Area Funding from the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) and through section 106 agreements as well as through grants, donations and corporate partnerships.

b. Policy support

The creation of the Forest of Marston Vale is supported by extensive local and Regional policies as outlined in Annex 1. Of particular importance is the support in the East of

England Plan (Adopted May 2008), which names the Forest of Marston Vale as a regional priority for the provision of green infrastructure and confirms the importance of achieving the agreed 30% woodland cover target by 2031, together with clear support in the emerging LDF's.

In addition to this extensive policy support, the Inspector's Report on the successful Center Parcs appeal confirmed that contributions to the Forest in line with the Government 30% target for Community Forests are compliant with Circular 5/2005, even though in this particular case the development lies outside the boundary of the Forest of Marston Vale.

c. Delivering Green Infrastructure in MKSM

The Marston Vale Trust has an impressive track record in working with developers, planners, businesses, local people and central Government to deliver green infrastructure in the MKSM growth area, through the creation of the Forest of Marston Vale. The Trust has secured in excess of £5m in Growth Area Funding and has received over £2.5m in developer contributions (in a combination of cash and donated land). The Trust now owns 1,300 acres of the Vale, which has either already been delivered as public access green space or will be delivered shortly. All contributions to the Forest have been based on a validated model of the 25 year delivery costs for creating community woodland pursuant to achieving the Government target of 30% woodland cover across the 61 square miles of the Marston Vale. In practical terms this means that 39% of undeveloped land must be converted to woodland by 2031.

The quality of the green infrastructure delivered by the Marston Vale Trust is well recognised by our partners. Of our plans for the creation of the Bedford River Valley Park, the Housing Minister (Caroline Flint) said:

"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"

2. Response to the Eco-town concept

The Eco-towns Prospectus makes it clear that Eco-towns must deliver sustainable, carbon-neutral settlements of the highest environmental value that fit well within the existing landscape. Where it is determined by Government that development should proceed, the Marston Vale Trust supports the Eco-town approach to development, provided the Eco-towns are exemplary developments that deliver the highest standards of build, design and environmental quality, significantly exceeding existing environmental and sustainability standards. Anything less will seriously damage the credibility of the concept.

The general principles of Eco-towns (sustainability, identity, zero carbon, home affordability, green infrastructure provision, community empowerment and functional communities) accord with the aims of the Forest of Marston Vale and an Eco-town in the Marston Vale could feasibly be delivered within, and consistent with, the endorsed framework for creating the Forest. The objective of the Forest of Marston Vale is the sustainable, environmentally-led regeneration of the Marston Vale through:

- Increasing the woodland cover in the Vale from 3% to 30% by 2031
- The creation of public access greenspace
- The transformation of a damaged landscape through the creation of a rich mosaic of habitats
- Increasing opportunities for sport, leisure and recreation
- Providing opportunities for education on environmental matters
- Establishing a supply of timber
- Engaging with local communities
- Creating an atmosphere for investment
- Creating jobs

The compatibility of the principles of Eco-towns and Community Forests brings unique opportunities for the creation of a sustainable Forest Town in the Marston Vale, should it be decided that this level of new development should be accommodated in the Marston Vale.

The Marston Vale Trust supports the principles in the emerging guidance from the Town and Country Planning Association on the essential role of Green Infrastructure (GI) in Eco-towns. This guidance recognizes the importance of woodlands and makes the point that: "Altogether, the provision of woodland will be a powerful mechanism for ensuring the local environmental quality and sustainability of Eco-towns". The guidance also makes the important point that Eco-towns should seek ecological and biodiversity solutions to engineering problems (surface water for example) and only resort to hard engineering solutions where more imaginative multi-purpose and environmentally solutions are not possible. The Marston Vale Surface Waters Plan has led in developing strategic and sustainable solutions and must be fully explored and exploited in the design of any Eco-town in the Marston Vale.

The consultation document makes the point that the amount of GI that Eco-towns should aim to provide will depend on the individual nature of the location but that at least 20% of individual sites should be earmarked for GI. For any Eco-town development in the Marston Vale, where all normal development is already required to contribute an area equivalent to 39% of its development footprint for woodland creation, the opportunities for significantly more GI should be realized. The consultation document refers repeatedly to the need for 'net benefits' from Eco-towns, and genuine integration of green infrastructure into, and ideally at the heart of, design principles will not only help deliver the cutting edge sustainable development that the Eco-town concept promotes, but also offer such net benefits for the existing communities and settlements. In addition to the creation of woodland, the Community Forest delivers a range of other benefits (recreation, biodiversity, educational opportunities and community engagement) that are integral to Eco-towns and could be delivered as a part of the Forest.

The Marston Vale Trust is not generally placed to comment on the scale or location of development but does agree that, where development is allocated in the future, it must deliver on the principles set out in the Eco-towns Prospectus.

3. Response to the Eco-town proposals in the Marston Vale

Since the establishment of the Forest of Marston Vale in 1991, the partners involved, including the Marston Vale Trust, have always recognised that appropriate development is a key part of the environmentally-led regeneration of the Vale. The principles of the Eco-town are broadly compatible with the creation of the Forest of Marston Vale, provided the principles contained in the Eco-towns Prospectus are adhered to and the Forest targets and objectives are incorporated into the design, delivery and management of any Eco-town that may be created in the Forest area. The existence of the Forest of Marston Vale as the agreed mechanism for the environmentally-led regeneration of the area provides any potential Eco-town development with a substantial benefit and a key opportunity to differentiate itself through delivering unprecedented levels of Green Infrastructure (e.g. >40%).

The Trust's position on development is that it will support development that directly meets the objectives of the Forest but is neutral on individual planning applications that do not directly conflict with the aims of the Forest of Marston Vale. The Marston Vale Trust is committed to working with developers within the Forest area to secure the public-access greenspace and other community benefits that the Forest of Marston Vale brings, in line with the widely consulted and locally endorsed Forest Plan. As such, the Trust's remit generally starts negotiations with developers and planners once development has been allocated, and we restrict our involvement to the environmental benefits a development should deliver. However, the scale of the proposed Eco-town in the Marston Vale is such that the impact on existing communities will be very substantial and local people will need to be assured that the proposed development will be sympathetic to the nature of the Vale and will not adversely affect existing infrastructure capacity or other quality of life issues. "Living a Greener Future" commits Eco-towns to "creating net benefits in improving landscape and biodiversity for the area and creating other new green assets". Demonstrating a clear requirement for Eco-towns to adhere to these important principles should play an important part in discussions with affected communities. The Trust is pleased to see the Government's commitment to community empowerment in the Prospectus but extensive consultation with the existing communities will be equally important. A clear commitment to establishing a dialogue with existing communities should be contained in the Prospectus, in line with the process of public consultation currently carried out as a routine for environmental projects in the Forest of Marston Vale.

If an Eco-town for the Marston Vale goes ahead, then it must as a minimum make a contribution to woodland creation that meets the government-set targets for Community Forests in England. In principle the proposed Eco-towns in the Vale would not compromise the strategic vision of the Forest of Marston Vale as outlined in the Forest Plan, provided environmental benefits that are in line with the Forest Plan are delivered by the proposed developments.

All developments in Mid Bedfordshire are required to contribute new woodland in line with the Government target of 30% woodland cover across the 61 square miles of the Vale, as explained earlier, this requires 39% of undeveloped and un-wooded land to be converted to woodland. The proposed Eco-towns must achieve as an absolute minimum this level of woodland creation and the scale of the proposed developments should enable this woodland creation to be delivered within the bounds of the proposed developments.

It would be a missed opportunity if any Eco-town created in the Marston Vale did no more than contribute to woodland creation in the Vale at the same level as is required of all developments. To truly meet the aspirations of the Eco-town Prospectus and “Living a greener future”, extensive green infrastructure should be at the heart of the design and opportunities such as the creation of the Waterway Park should also be delivered. It is encouraging to see that this is recognized in the outline proposals for the Vale.

If the proposed Eco-town in the Vale is given the go-ahead, then it is essential that the objectives and aims of the Forest of Marston Vale are incorporated in the design of the development and the Marston Vale Trust must be involved in the design, delivery and management of the green infrastructure created including options for securing *in perpetuity* funding for the ongoing management and maintenance of greenspace.

4. Conclusion

The Marston Vale Trust supports the broad principles of Eco-towns as outlined in the Eco-towns Prospectus and “Living a greener future”. In the event that the Government and the planning authorities decide that an Eco-town should be built in the Marston Vale, the Trust would have no objection provided the aims and objectives of the Forest of Marston Vale (as enshrined in the Forest Plan) as well as the principles of Eco-towns (as outlined in the Eco-towns Prospectus) are incorporated in the design, delivery and management of the development. In the event that an Eco-town in the Marston Vale goes ahead, the Marston Vale Trust would urge the developers and planners to engage in early discussions with the Trust to ensure that a high quality development that exceeds expectations is delivered to the net benefit of the regeneration of the Vale.

Plans and Policies supporting the Forest of Marston Vale and the objectives of the Forest Plan

Bedfordshire Structure Plan 2011 - adopted March 1997

Policy 16 - Marston Vale Strategy. *A non-statutory strategy prepared by the Marston Vale Partnership provides a long-term framework for change. This strategy will provide an input into development plans and will seek an input into development plans and will seek to enable the Vale to continue as a resource for brick making and waste disposal while minimising the environmental effects of those operations. In addition, the strategy supports ... improved access. Appropriate leisure and recreational activities and associated developments will be particularly encouraged.*

Policy 17 - Marston Vale Community Forest. *The Marston Vale is the highest priority for environmental improvement in the County. This environment improvement will be achieved through the Marston Vale Partnership and the nationally identified Marston Vale Community Forest. New development will be expected to assist in the realisation of the Marston Vale Community Forest.*

Bedfordshire Minerals & Waste Local Plan:

Policy MW1 - *IN all cases where extraction and/or landfill is proposed, applications for planning approval will be expected to demonstrate significant community and environmental benefits and effective restoration of the site.*

Policy MW2 - *Proposals should contribute to the improvement of the environment of the Marston Vale and the implementation of the Marston Vale Community Forest.*

Policy MW3 - *The County Council has identified the Marston Vale as a priority area for environmental improvement, with the Community Forest as an important component in the regeneration of the Vale. Mineral extraction and restoration schemes in the Marston Vale will be expected to assist in the realisation of the Community Forest.*

Policy MW43 - *When considering applications for new, or extensions to existing, landfill sites, tidy tips, recycling plants and waste transfer stations, particular regard where appropriate will be paid to:-*

a/ The opportunities to realise major environmental benefits arising from the proposal;

c/ the effect of operations on the public rights of way network and on access to the countryside in general.

General Restoration/After use Opportunities for sites in the Marston Vale. *The long-term after use proposals should include areas of open space, providing extensive and improved public access, and afforestation on a significant scale.*

Bedford Borough Local Plan Development Strategy:

A/ Overall aims:

- **To improve the quality of life for the Borough's residents** - combating pollution, creating additional facilities and ensuring access for all.
- **To improve communications and movement in and out of the Borough** - achieving improved levels of mobility, accessibility, convenience and personal safety consistent with environmental, economic and development considerations.

B/ Sustainability

- Targeting development to locations where major environmental improvements can be achieved as a direct result.

C/ Borough Strategy

Policy S5 - *The Borough Council places a very high priority on achieving the objectives and principles embodied in the Marston Vale Strategy and will use its powers and resources with others to achieve positive improvements to the landscape and environment of the Vale. Within the Marston Vale Strategy Area planning applications for development proposals will be determined in accordance with the policies of this plan, and with specific reference to the contribution that the development makes to achieving the strategy and improving the environment of the Vale.*

D/ The Natural Environment

Policy NE11 (Saved in the CS&RIP) - *The Borough Council will seek opportunities to increase access to the countryside and for the provision of environmental interpretation facilities, subject to there being no conflict with other policies.*

Policy NE20 (Saved in the CS&RIP) - *Where appropriate and necessary, the Borough Council will seek to improve the character and appearance of the Borough by seeking developer contributions for landscape and environmental improvement.*

Policy NE21 (Saved in the CS&RIP) - *The Borough Council will provide continuing support to the Marston Vale Community Forest project. When considering development proposals it will expect proposals to incorporate the aims of the project and where necessary and appropriate seek contributions towards its implementations.*

In addition, the Core Strategy and Rural Issues Plan, adopted 16th April 2008, adds (The Spatial Portrait, 2.14) *The Borough prides itself on the wealth of open spaces within the urban areas and the attractive countryside that surrounds the rural villages. In the south of the borough however, there are areas of landscape degradation due to the legacy of brickmaking in the Marston Vale. Through the designation of the Forest of Marston Vale the area has become a focus for landscape enhancement.*

The Spatial Vision (3.6) notes - *Regional policy sets the context for development in the region as a whole. The vision and policies of this plan should be in general conformity with regional policy....*

Policy CP24 – Landscape Protection and Enhancement - *The landscape and character of the borough will be conserved and where appropriate enhanced. The Marston Vale will be the focus for landscape enhancement and restoration and the council will continue to support the Forest of Marston Vale. New development should protect and where appropriate enhance the quality and character of the landscape. The nature and scale of development should be appropriate within the wider landscape. Management measures will be required where new development or activities are proposed in the rural area.*

F/ Leisure & Recreation

Policy LR10 - *In determining planning applications the borough Council will:-*

- (i) safeguard existing footpath/bridleway links and ensure they are successfully incorporated into new development or diverted as appropriate;*
- (ii) seek opportunities to enhance existing footpath, bridleway and cycle networks in conjunction with new development in particular from the urban area into the countryside and where appropriate, the Community Forest;*

The Mid Bedfordshire Local Plan

In addition to the policy support listed below, the Planning Obligations Strategy SPD approved in February 2008 and live May 1st 2008 states:

Countryside Recreation Space and Green Infrastructure 11.6.14 *Developers will be required to contribute district wide towards the continued creation of the Forest of Marston Vale, now formally supported by Policy ENV1 and ENV5 contained in emerging RSS14 (Now adopted – see below) as a primary element of green infrastructure provision.*

Policy LPS7 - *The Council supports 'A Strategy for the Marston Vale' ... appropriate leisure and recreational activities will be particularly encouraged.*

Policy CS4 - *The Council supports the vision set out in the Marston Vale Community Forest Plan and will maintain its commitment as a project partner ... quiet, informal recreational use will be encouraged.*

The District Leisure Strategy

The main aims of the Leisure Strategy, in relation to recreation such as that proposed are as follows:

- To increase participation in leisure in Mid Bedfordshire

- To provide a varied programme of leisure opportunities, promoting fitness, health and general well being in the community
- To provide safe and pleasant leisure environments.

Planning Sustainable Communities – A Green Infrastructure Guide for Milton Keynes & the South Midlands

Where there are existing environmental mechanisms with delivery plans that are endorsed locally (e.g. Forest of Marston Vale Plan that is endorsed by both the relevant Local Planning Authorities), developer contributions that are in line with the endorsed plan should be sought.

RSS14 The East of England Plan , Adopted May 2008

Policy ENV1: Green Infrastructure

Areas and networks of green infrastructure should be identified, created, protected and managed 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..... Assets of particular regional significance for the retention, provision and enhancement of green infrastructure include:

- The Norfolk and Suffolk Broads.....
- **Other areas of landscape, ecological and recreational importance, notably the Community Forests (Thames, Marston Vale and Watling Chase).....**
- Strategically significant green infrastructure projects and proposals, such asthe Milton Keynes to Bedford Waterway Park, and green infrastructure projects around the fringes of Greater London.

Policy ENV5: Woodlands

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 where it would be consistent with landscape character.....

.....
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 Thames Chase, Watling Chase and Forest of Marston Vale Community Forests, with the aim of increasing their woodland cover to 30% by 2030.**
- 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.