



The Greensand Trust

Luton Borough

Landscape Character Assessment



A Report by the Greensand Trust on behalf of Luton Borough Council

June 2014

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1. Introduction

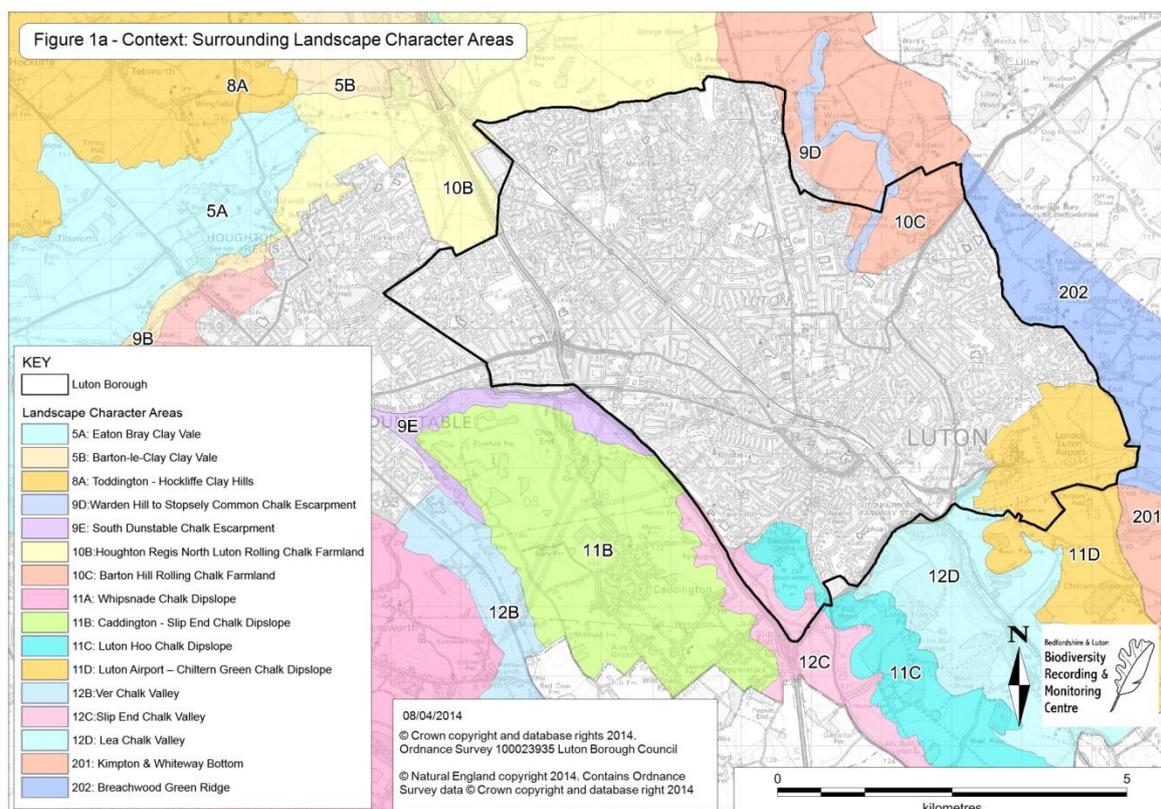
1.1 Background

Luton Borough Council is producing a “Local Plan Review” in 2014 which will replace the previous Local Plan (2001-2011). It is estimated that the town will require new dwellings (and associated infrastructure and employment land) for approximately 50,000 new residents in the period to 2031 (figures provided by Luton Borough Council Local Plans Team).

There is a need to plan for this growth, and to ensure that it does not have an adverse effect on Luton’s environment, including its landscape. Luton is situated in the gap carved through the chalk hills by the River Lea, and the influence of the chalk geology is significant, providing the setting for the town. The Luton Local Plan (2011-2031) is intended to provide the blueprint for growth in a sustainable context.

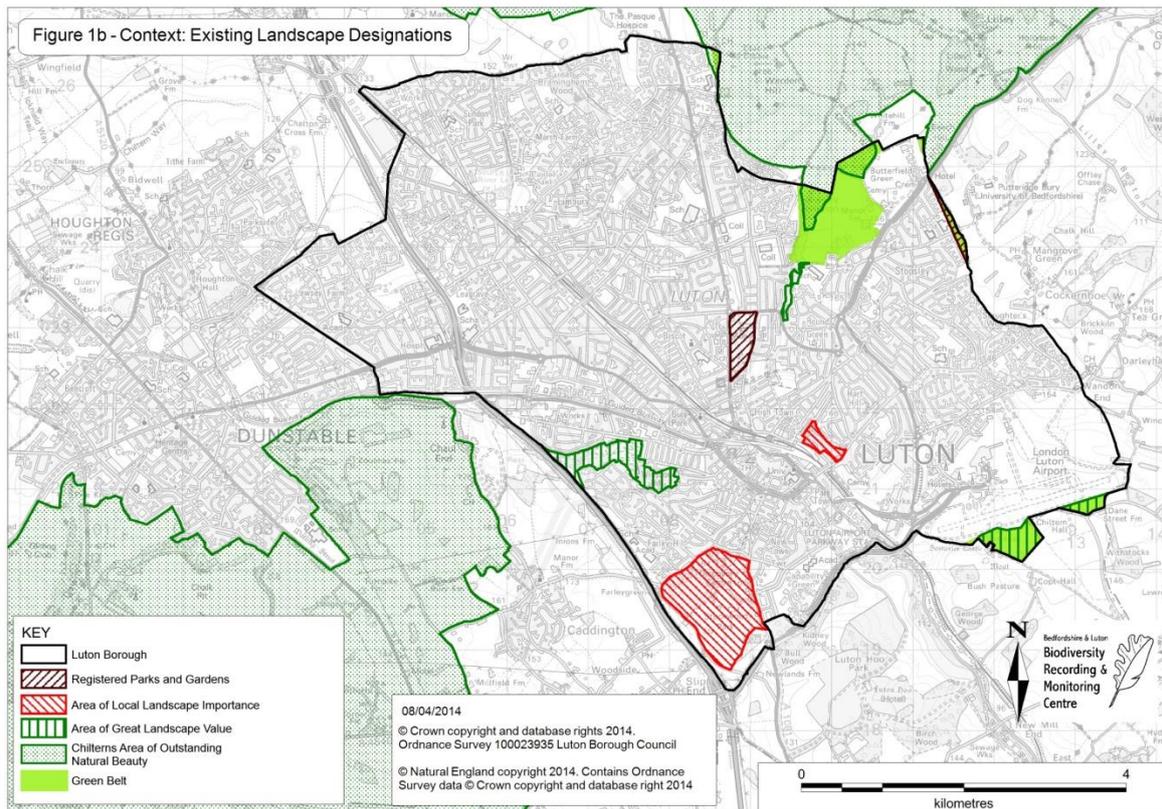
Landscape Character Assessments have been carried out in all of the surrounding areas but Luton itself excluded either administratively or because of its urban nature (or both), so there is no LCA covering Luton (notwithstanding a small amount of overlap in other assessments). Additionally, the 2007 study carried out on behalf of the Chalk Arc Initiative included the northern fringe of the town (Chalk Arc Landscape Character Assessment, Hyder Consulting, 2007) but worked at a smaller scale than standard assessments.

Landscape Character Assessments carried out in the surrounding areas are illustrated by **Figure 1a**:



A very small part of the landscape of the Borough of Luton is protected by 'Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty' (AONB) status, with other key areas previously protected through local landscape designations; 'Area of Great Landscape Value' (AGLV) and 'Area of Local Landscape Importance' (ALLI). The AONB, AGLVs and ALLIs are illustrated in **Figure 1b**. The relevant policies in the Local Plan (2001-2011) were 'saved' in order to continue this protection, but will be replaced by the new Local Plan. The need now is to create a new, rigorous basis for landscape protection for the new Local Plan.

Figure 1b: Existing Landscape Designations



1.2 What is Landscape?

“Landscape is about the relationship between people and place. It provides the setting for our day-to-day lives. The term does not mean just special or designated landscapes and it does not only apply to the countryside. Landscape can mean a small patch of urban wasteland as much as a mountain range, and an urban park as much as an expanse of lowland plain. It results from the way that different components of our environment - both natural (the influences of geology, soils, climate, flora and fauna) and cultural (the historical and current impact of land use, settlement, enclosure and other human interventions) - interact together and are perceived by us. People’s perceptions turn land into the concept of landscape” (Landscape Character Assessment – Guidance for England and Scotland, University of Sheffield & LUC, 2002)

It was therefore considered important that a Landscape Character Assessment be carried out for Luton, the Local Plan and potential future policy.

1.3 Purpose of the Landscape Character Assessment

The main purpose of this Landscape Character Assessment is:

- to provide an overview of the landscape of the town of Luton, dividing it up into a series of 'Landscape Character Areas' which are individually distinctive. It was agreed the 1:25,000 scale would be an appropriate level;
- to identify landscape of high value that is not currently protected by designation, and to establish a process where such a designation could be developed through the Local Plan (now dealt with in a separate report); and
- to identify opportunities for improving the landscape and strengthening landscape character (which can be fed into future Green Infrastructure Planning).

1.4 The Planning Policy Background and the NPPF

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) provides the framework within which local planning policy is developed. The key reference in the NPPF with regard to landscape is actually in the context of the Historic Environment:

Para 170: Where appropriate LCAs should also be prepared, integrated with an assessment of the historic landscape character, and for areas where there are major expansion options assessment of landscape sensitivity.

Landscape is also mentioned in the context of climate change and ecological network. A basis for assessing at the local level is provided:

Para 99: Local Plans should take account of climate change over the long term, including factors such as Landscape.

Para 113: Local planning authorities should set criteria based policies against which proposals for any development on or affecting protected wildlife or geological sites or landscape areas will be judged. Distinctions should be made between the hierarchy of international, national and local designation so protection is commensurate with status and gives appropriate weight to their importance and the contribution they make to the wider ecological networks.

Para 114: Local planning authorities should set out a strategic approach in their Local Plans, planning positively for the creation, protection and enhancement and management of networks of biodiversity and green infrastructure.

Para 117: To minimise impacts on biodiversity and geodiversity, planning policies should...plan for biodiversity at a landscape scale across local authority boundaries.

*Para 156: Local planning authorities should set out the **strategic priorities** for the area in the Local Plan. This should include strategic policies to deliver....climate change mitigation and adaptation, conservation and enhancement of the natural and historic environment, including landscape.*

1.5 The Study Area

The administrative boundary of Luton Borough is the boundary for this study (as shown in Figures 1a, 1b, 2 and 3). There will be some overlap with South Bedfordshire Landscape Character Areas where these cross into the Luton area. This is noted in the descriptions for the Character Areas.

It was initially agreed not to include the Chalk Arc Landscape Character Assessment study area to avoid overlap, but the Chalk Arc study was carried out at a much finer level of detail than Luton Borough Council required for this Assessment, and resulted in a large number of very small Character Areas. The areas involved have therefore been included in this Assessment, with the Chalk Arc LCA being used to inform the process.

2. Methodology

2.1 Introduction to the Methodology

The methodology followed is that set out in the guidance document “Landscape Character Assessment – Guidance for England and Scotland” produced by the University of Sheffield and Land Use Consultants in 2002, and endorsed by Natural England (and Scottish Natural Heritage). It sets out a process divided up into the following stages:

- i. Define Scope – need to clearly define the purpose, which critically affects the scale and level of detail of the assessment (see section 1.2 above).
- ii. Desk Study – assessment of background reports, mapped information and other data to assist in the identification of areas of common character (usually draft landscape character types and/or areas).
- iii. Field survey - Field data is collected in a rigorous way to test and refine the draft landscape character types/areas, to inform written descriptions of their character, to identify aesthetic and perceptual qualities which are unlikely to be evident from desk information, and to identify the current condition of landscape elements.
- iv. Classification & Description - This step then refines and finalises the output of the characterisation process by classifying the landscape into landscape character types and mapping their extent, based on all the information collected, followed by preparation of clear descriptions of their character.

The only departure from this guidance was the addition of a consideration of ‘townscape’ or ‘streetscape’. In a place such as Luton it is impossible to ignore the effect that the built environment has on the landscape, and this has been taken into account. It should be noted that the built environment can complement the landscape within which it sits, and does not always detract from it. A key study used to help inform this Assessment was the Luton Townscape Assessment (2012) which assesses residential building types and streetscape.

2.2 Desk study

A range of documents were used to help inform the initial identification of broad character types and draft character areas. They are listed below:

Natural Character Areas (Natural England):

The entire Luton administrative area falls within **Natural Character Area 110, Chilterns**, which covers a broader area than the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

It is described as an “extensively wooded and farmed Chilterns landscape underlain by chalk bedrock that rises up from the London Basin to form a north-west facing escarpment offering long views over the adjacent vales”.

South Bedfordshire Landscape Character Assessment (LUC, 2007):

Luton is surrounded by the “Chilterns” Countryside Character Area but excluded as an urban area. The Landscape Types identified surround Luton, but don’t include it, because it was a study following the former South Beds District boundary. Those directly adjacent to Luton are as follows, and are illustrated in **Figure 1a** above:

- 9 = Chalk Escarpments
- 10 = Rolling Chalk Farmland
- 11 = Wooded Arable Chalk Plateau with Valleys
- 12 = Arterial Chalk River Valleys

The Character Areas derived from these are as follows, and are also illustrated in **Figure 1a**:

- 9D = Warden Hill to Stopsley Common Chalk Escarpment
- 9E = South Dunstable Chalk Escarpment
- 10B = Houghton Regis North Luton Rolling Chalk Farmland
- 10C = Barton Hill Rolling Chalk Farmland
- 11C = Luton Hoo Chalk Dipslope
- 11D = Luton Airport – Chiltern Green Chalk Dipslope
- 12B = Ver Chalk Valley
- 12C = Slip End Chalk Valley
- 12D = Lea Chalk Valley

Hertfordshire Landscape Character Assessments

From information sourced on the Hertfordshire County Council website it was possible to collate all of the district-scale Landscape Character Area statements created between 2000 and 2005 for the adjoining part of Hertfordshire. Those adjacent to Luton are mapped on **Figure 1a** and listed below:

- 201 - Kimpton & Whiteway Bottom
- 202 - Breachwood Green Ridge

Chalk Arc Landscape Character Assessment (Hyder Consulting, 2007):

The scope of this study includes the northern fringe of Luton. As mentioned above, this assessment was used to inform the draft Landscape Character Areas, but it looked at a far greater level of detail – it covered less than 10% of the land area of Luton yet identifies 30 different character areas.

Luton Townscape Assessment (LBC 2012):

The analysis within this study is carried out on a ward-by-ward basis, and therefore does not create new 'character areas' as such. However it does identify clearly demarcated areas of predominantly characteristic residential developments in terms of age, streetscape and style.

Luton Local Plan 2001-2011:

The previous Local Plan provided information on existing/previous landscape designations, as well as potential development pressures.

In addition, extensive use of Google Maps and Streetview provided useful supplementary information. These were utilised both before and during the Field Surveys.

2.3 Draft Landscape Character Areas:

Draft character areas were drawn up to form the basis of the characterisation, and to act as a start point for field surveys. They were based on desk study and existing knowledge.

2.4 Field Surveys:

Field Surveys were carried out between October 2012 and November 2013 on foot and in a car, through a systematic and thorough process, with notes being recorded on a pro-forma developed specifically for this purpose (**see Appendix 1**) and extensive numbers of photographs taken.

The field surveys allowed for detailed analysis of character, quality, sensitivity, key features, detractors and tranquillity. The process helped refine and verify the Character Areas previously identified. Boundaries and names were refined, creating sub-divisions as appropriate.

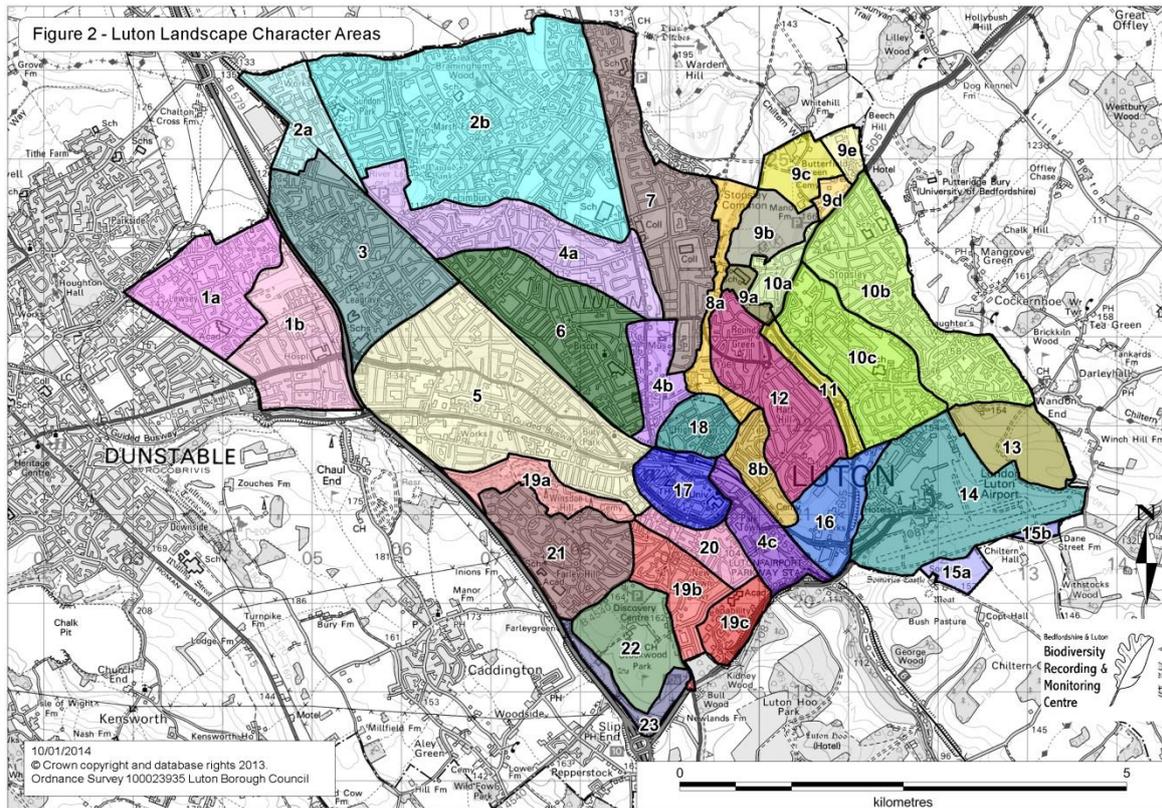
Opportunities for landscape enhancement, and constraints or barriers to improvement were also noted.

Whilst carrying out field surveys, areas noted as potentially worthy of consideration for a future local landscape designation through the Local Plan were identified. A separate report (“Proposed Local Landscape Designations for Luton”, The Greensand Trust, 2014) looks at this specifically and in greater detail.

3. The Landscape Character Areas

The Draft Landscape Character Areas initially identified (which were really 'Types') were refined to 36 Character Areas (22 broad character types, then sub-divided). These are illustrated in **Figure 2** below. A full description of each Character Area is contained in **Appendix 2**.

Figure 2 – Landscape Character Areas



The broad character types represent the key landscape features of the town including the steep chalk valley sides in the west (19) and east (8) through which the River Lea has carved a gap, to create the classic “Chiltern Gap Town” and the River Lea Valley (4) running through the town from north-west to south. The landscape of the town has been heavily modified with buildings, transport corridors, industrial use and the airport. This made survey and classification difficult in many areas, and in many of the urban ‘core’ areas the “Luton Townscape Assessment” (Luton Borough Council 2012) remains the primary source of reference.

4. Landscape Opportunity Areas

4.1 Definition

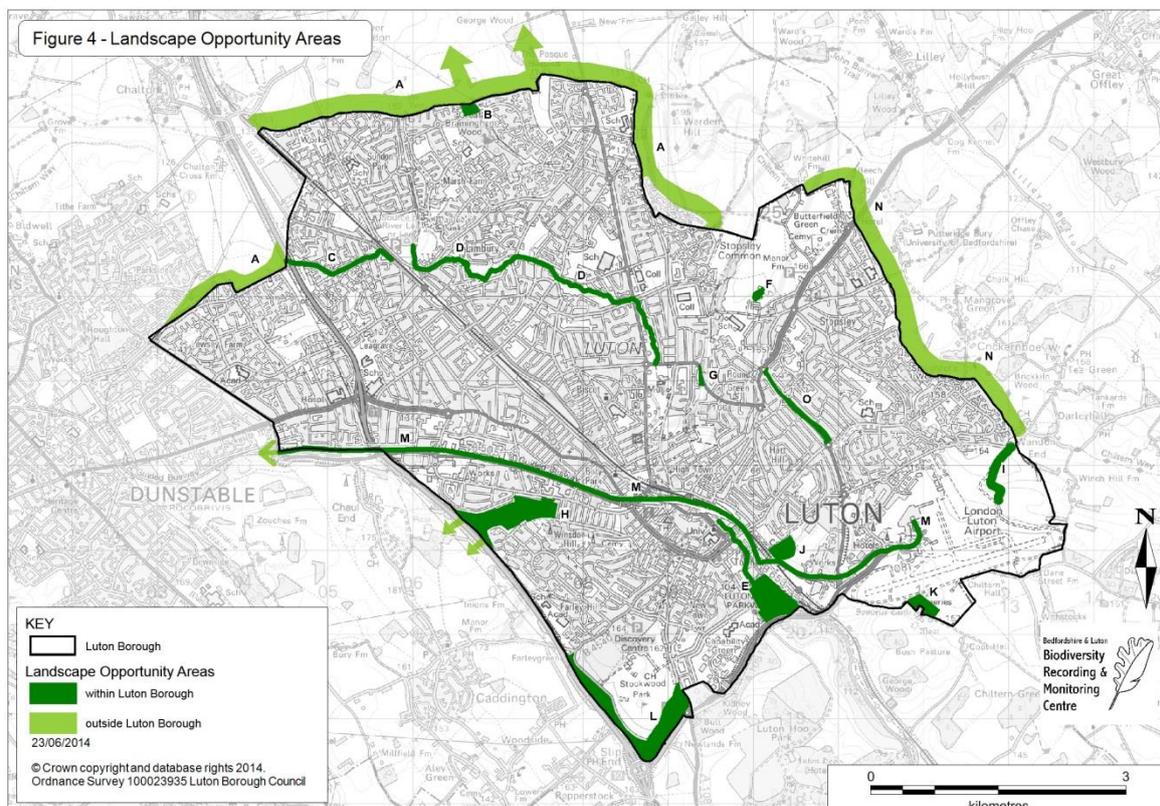
As part of the field survey work any potential opportunities for strengthening and enhancing landscape character were identified. Opportunities for enhancing the landscape exist across the whole town, at varying scales. What this study attempts to identify are the key strategic opportunities, usually area or corridor based. Some are where an area of degraded landscape can be restored or enhanced, while others are where an already attractive landscape can be further improved. Some improvements suggested will be achievable through management interventions or alterations, while others will require planting or infrastructure. Some could be achieved in a relatively short timescale, while others may take years to achieve.

Although not technically ‘opportunities’ to enhance landscape quality, suggestions are also made for opportunities to engage people and communities with the landscape around them.

The ‘opportunity areas’ are illustrated in **Figure 3** and listed below. They have been identified with a knowledge of potential future developments in the area and with a necessary degree of realism.

These opportunity areas will also be used to update and enhance the Green Infrastructure network identified in the Luton and Southern Bedfordshire GI Plan (2010) alongside other updated thematic layers.

Figure 3 – Landscape Opportunity Areas



4.1 The Opportunity Areas:

A: Northern Urban Edge:

There is a need to create better integration between the urban edge and the wider countryside, with an often poorly designed (or lacking in any design) interface. With potential future development immediately to the north of Luton in this area, better quality design is required to ensure this blends with and enhances the existing edge, and maximises opportunities for green corridors and green spaces, protecting existing landscape and access assets including the route of the 'Thedeway' and existing hedge and field patterns. The area includes key 'gateways' to the town, the rail corridor and the A6, through which many people travel. The opportunity to enhance landscape (and access opportunities) in the form of corridors extending north has also been identified, particularly in the vicinity of Bramingham Wood and Bramingham Park. These would link town and country for the benefit of people and wildlife, extending from well within the urban area and linking with features such as George Wood in the wider countryside.

Views from northern edge of Luton



B: Bramingham Wood:

Linked to (A) above, enhanced management coupled with well-designed tree planting of the area between Bramingham Wood and the Luton boundary, adjacent to Whitehorse Vale, would create a stronger woodland corridor from Bramingham Wood (though any planting should not detract from existing ecological value as a District Wildlife Site).

View looking north across site towards open countryside



C: Houghton Brook Corridor:

Creation of a more varied and natural watercourse and banks would significantly enhance the landscape value of this corridor. Management of areas with significant numbers of large trees in a relatively narrow corridor would open up views of the watercourse and potentially improve community safety. It would also decrease shading of channel and have potential water quality benefits. Replacement of footbridges with more sympathetic designs, enclosing exposed pipework and generally reducing hard infrastructure would create a less urban feel – while it is recognised that structures need a degree of robustness better quality of design has been achieved elsewhere along the Lea corridor. Stretches of incongruous metal fencing could be removed or replaced with a more sympathetic alternative (though where vandalism is likely this may not be possible). While it is recognised that they perform a safety function, only parts of the watercourse are fenced.

Where a mowing regime has left longer (but still managed) vegetation immediately adjacent to the bank this benefits visual amenity, wildlife and also helps discourage access where banks are steep and potentially dangerous. Such management can also be used to introduce curves and ‘scallops’ into otherwise linear features.

Examples of Incongruous Features and Detractors

Metal fencing



Unightly bridge with exposed pipe



Brick bridge side/crash barrier



Area on right is where watercourse is – completely hidden



More attractive urban bridge design (over the lea in Luton) Illustration of sympathetic bankside management



D: Upper Lea Corridor:

This corridor runs across the town from its source at Leagrave towards the town centre. While in many places it provides an attractive green corridor, it could still be enhanced to make more of this clear-flowing river. Vegetation management to open up views of river channel (including the removal of invasive non-native species) would both improve the visual amenity and raise awareness of this important part of the town's landscape, ecology and history. Further use of public art, especially at key points where significant roads cross, could also help improve the immediate environment and raise awareness. Such 'gateways' could also benefit from tree planting to enhance the 'green corridor' feel.

The creation of more varied and naturalised channel and banks would be of benefit in some areas, with more meanders on straighter stretches and restoration of 'riffle-pool' sequences. Desilting of some slower stretches would also benefit wildlife. The removal of hard structures such as some of the larger and more obtrusive concrete culverts wherever possible, replacing with 'softer' alternatives, would make a significant difference in areas that otherwise appear quite natural. Where this is not possible, management of bankside vegetation should be used to help screen such structures.

While some footbridges make a reasonable compromise between aesthetics and function/vandal resistance, others do not - replacement of these with a similar design would not just improve visual amenity but also create a visual consistency along the watercourse.

Examples of vegetation growth obscuring and choking the channel



E: Lower Lea Corridor:

The key here is to re-connect the river with the wider landscape. At the northern (upstream) end this is a serious undertaking, as the river is buried sub-surface underneath large buildings and roads. However, there is an emerging desire to bring the river back to the surface wherever possible, and celebrating it as a feature. Therefore any future development proposals within the area should look to make this happen, though it must be planned and delivered strategically.

In the southern (downstream) section similar measures to those mentioned above would be of benefit. While the river is at the surface here, and has some good tree cover along its banks, it is some distance below ground level and within a steep, narrow and straight channel. Any enhancements should look to re-naturalise and build on existing ecological value.

In addition to landscape enhancements, it is recommended that public access to this area is significantly increased, giving people the opportunity to better engage with this large area adjacent to the town centre, re-connecting with the river and its landscape. If feasible, reducing the level of the land where it has been artificially raised (for the creation of sports facilities in the past) would help re-connect the river with its floodplain.

'Floodplain' of River Lea



Culverted River Lea near Manor Road



F: Stopsley Common:

At the time of surveying the former Regional Sports Centre was still standing, but due to be demolished. The landscaping of the area afterwards should be done in a way that best integrates with the wider landscape of Stopsley Common.

View of Sports Centre and its Landscaping



G: Stockingstone Road Greenspace:

This relatively small and somewhat neglected area of greenspace offers some of the most stunning panoramic views the town has. Some sensitive vegetation management to improve these views in key places (without the loss of significant trees and still screening/improving screening of adjacent properties) would significantly enhance this greenspace. The addition of appropriately located and designed furniture and interpretation would help people appreciate and understand landscape from one of the best points at which to do so.

Views from Stockingstone Road Greenspace



H: Dallow Downs and Runley Wood:

Some scrub removal would help to restore the shape and form of the ancient hedgerow that runs along much of Dallow Downs – it has become so overgrown that it is now a scrub belt. Careful scrub removal would have benefits for wildlife, could increase the visibility of the mediaeval strip lynchets and open up views across the town.

Key ‘gateways’ such as the Runley Road Recreation ground could be enhanced through tree planting and removal of unused hard standing areas.

Where the M1 runs adjacent to the southern part of Runley Wood (and on to Bluebell Wood) acoustic fencing and enhanced hedge planting would better screen the motorway and reduce noise levels.

Overgrown Ancient Hedgerow



View of Runley Road Rec



I: Wigmore:

While Wigmore Valley Park is an important greenspace on the edge of the built up area, it could be better integrated with the wider landscape through the planting of trees and hedgerows. This area has been identified for development as employment land, therefore any such development needs to take account of this opportunity.



J: Southern end of Hart Hill:

Some tree planting would help to re-integrate this section of the chalk valley side and reduce the impact of scarring on the landscape. Retention of areas of open grassland would also be desirable from a landscape and ecological perspective. Currently it is an incongruous toe sticking out of the otherwise attractive and well-wooded valley side.



K: Area adjacent to Someries Farm:

While there isn't anything that can be done that would have a significant effect on reducing the impact of the adjacent airport, better screening of landfill activities would reduce their impact on the landscape, with hedge planting/gapping up improving field structure and connectivity.

Landfill operations



L: Stockwood Perimeter:

While Stockwood Park itself is a highly attractive landscape, the area to the west, between the Park and the M1 embankment has been subjected to the development of sports facilities and other buildings, and has a generally incongruous and non-cohesive feel. Although it is separated by a road, efforts should be made to re-integrate this narrow wedge of land in the future, with no further unsympathetic built development permitted.

To the south of the Park is an area of arable land, which could also be better integrated into the landscape. The impacts of ongoing road re-alignment should be carefully managed and monitored.

There is also an opportunity for new heathland creation arising from the road re-alignment (this is the only area of Luton where conditions are right for heathland) which could create additional interest within the landscape, particularly if heather were to establish (and flower).

Areas to west and south of Stockwood Park



M: Guided Busway Corridor:

The creation of the Guided Busway has resulted in a linear corridor stretching right across the town and beyond. With landscaping incorporated into the design, it will be important to monitor the development of this, and to enhance it in the future as it becomes more established and planting

matures. Management of grass strips could create important wildlife corridors, particularly benefiting invertebrates but also enhancing visual amenity through the addition of colour. As a key transit corridor passing various points of interest, it presents an important opportunity to engage people with the landscape.

N: Eastern Fringe:

An opportunity exists here to better integrate the urban edge with the attractive rolling landscape adjacent, protecting the setting of Putteridge Bury and Cockernhoe hamlet. The northern section north of the A505 is actually within the Chilterns AONB, and tree planting could help both screen buildings in Butterfield green further as well as enhance this key gateway into the town and airport. It would also help integrate it with the landscape to the south of the A505.

The area to the south of the A505 would also benefit from restoration of the parkland landscape of Putteridge Bury – features such as trees and tree avenues are still evident, but much of the land has been converted to arable.

North of A505 – Butterfield Green



South of A505 – Putteridge Bury



Putteridge Fieldscape



View of Urban Edge



O: Vauxhall Way:

Enhanced management of hedges with additional planting to improve structure could enhance this green corridor along a major transport route, with opportunities to extend into adjacent/joining roads. Sections of chain link fencing could potentially be removed where hedges become better established. The grass areas could be managed for wildflowers (seeding may be required), creating a

colourful display through spring and summer months as well as creating an important resource for wildlife. This could be created alongside the ability to close-mow a narrow strip along the roadside for safety purposes.



References:

South Bedfordshire Landscape Character Assessment (LUC, 2007)

Chalk Arc Landscape Character Assessment (Hyder Consulting, 2007)

Hertfordshire Landscape Character Assessments (2002-2005)

Landscape Character Assessment – Guidance for England and Scotland (University of Sheffield & LUC, 2002)

Luton Townscape Assessment (Luton Borough Council, 2012)

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Jacqueline Veater & Jackie Collins (formerly of LBC)

Appendix 1: Field Survey Pro-forma

Luton Landscape Character Assessment

Date: 23/11/12
 Weather: Sunny
 Location & Boundaries: Bells Close area

Physical Influences:

Geology:
 Gault Clay Glacial Gravel Alluvium
 Chalk Boulder Clay

Elevation:
 Lowland (<50m) Transitional (50-200m)

Landform:
 Flat Steep Slope Escarpment Broad Valley
 Shelving Gentle Slopes Knoll Narrow Valley
 Rolling Hills Plateau Shallow Valley
 Undulating Floodplain Deep Valley
 terraced?

Key physical characteristics (geology/topography) and their significance/contribution to the character:
 Chalk slope - tree free avenues around perimeter, trees planted at top - quite open.

Soils and hydrology:
 Slightly deeper soils at bottom, though contrast less marked than adjacent Peoples Park.

Visible Features:

Motorway	Farm buildings	Town edge
Dual carriageway	Manor/Parkland	suburb adjacent terraced housing mainly
Single carriageway	Fieldscape	Masts/poles
Elevated road	Landmark building	telecom masts - distant
Rural Road	Office building	Pylons
Rural lane/track	Industrial building	Other:
Sunken lane	Warehouse	Lighting - not unattractive in park setting.
Bridleway	Church	Bins, benches
Footpath	Millfort	Trin trail equipment - low key
Alley	Ruin	Play area, basketball area
Cyclepath	Earthworks	Small car park, toilet block - all at bottom end/perimeter.
Railway	Moat	

Describe the key visible features and their significance/contribution to the character:
 Largely open space, attractive exposed wooded slope. More 'active' stuff at bottom of slope - good division.

Human Influences:

Land Use:
 Residential Commercial Parkland Other natural
 Industrial Transportation Trees/Hedge other
 Leisure/recreation Woodland Mineral extraction

Land/Vegetation cover:

Arable	Amenity grassland	Shelterbelt	River/stream
Perm Pasture	Conif Plantation	Copse/clump	Gardens
Ley/improved	Decid wood	Wood belt	Common
Paddocks	Mixed wood	Scattered trees	Green
Rough grazing	Parkland	H/row trees	Other
Wet meadow	Avenues	Scrub	
Chalk grassland	Orchard	Wetland	
Fallow/setaside	hedgerow	Open water	

Describe features and their significance/contribution to the character:
 The avenues of trees and scattered wooded area frame the park in an attractive manner.

Evidence of Recreational Use/Character:
 High + obvious.

Perceptual Characteristics:

Scale:	Intimate	Small	Medium	Large
Enclosure:	Tight	Enclosed	Open	Exposed
Diversity:	Unified	Varied	Diverse	Complex
Texture:	Smooth	Textured	Rough	V Rough
Form:	Vertical	Sloping	Rolling	Horizontal
Line:	Straight	Angular	Curved	Sinuous
Colour:	M/chrome	Muted	Colourful	Garish
Balance:	Harmonious	Balanced	Discordant	Chaotic
Movement:	Dead	Still	Calm	Busy - at bottom
Pattern:	Random	Organised	Regular	Formal

Tranquility:

Noise levels: M - H

Perceived naturalness: M/H at top, L for rest

Visible overt human impact: Exclusively a recreational park

Density of settlement: M adjacent to park.

Artificial lighting: Through middle of park along paths.

Overall tranquillity taking into account the above: Low Medium High
 M given context.

Views:

Views within: Across open area.

Views to: steep valley side to W & S

Views from: Adjacent streets.

Landscape Condition/Intactness:

Detracting features: Flats on N edge and to S - poor integration.

Physical state of Individual Features: Good

Visual Unity & Intactness: Good