



A great opportunity to significantly benefit the environment and quality of life for thousands of new and existing residents in the Thames Gateway and surrounding communities

A NEW COMMUNITY GREENSPACE

In January 2005 the Forestry Commission (FC) began to investigate the opportunities within or adjacent to Thames Gateway for the creation of a new greenspace¹. In the spring of 2005 the FC² purchased 147 hectares of farmland, known as Jeskyns Farm using funding from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's (ODPM) Sustainable Communities Fund. The site is adjacent to the A2, just south of Gravesend and immediately next door to the village of Cobham (figures 1 and 2).



Figures 1 & 2, aerial photo and map showing the location of Jeskyns Farm

The project will involve creating an attractive, well-connected and environmentally beneficial greenspace in place of a high-intensity arable site (with a history of large quantities of chemical usage and landscape degradation). Great benefit will also be brought to those in neighbouring sites of national conservation importance.

The site will allow us to foster greater understanding of the value and uses of the countryside. This will be delivered by a mix of community engagement and environmental education programmes, as well as less formal methods such as interpretation and signage.

In short, the Forestry Commission are not proposing to just develop a desirable greenspace site, but to ensure that it will be fully sustainable over time, by encouraging community engagement and delivering biodiversity-gain.

This brief paper constitutes the FC's formal application to undertake work on this site (it is accompanied by a detailed Environmental Statement³) and as such provides the background to this project.

¹ The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's Sustainable Communities Plan has identified greenspace as one of the key mechanisms by which to increase the sustainability and quality of life for many of the proposed new and existing communities within the Thames Gateway.

² The Forestry Commission is the governmental department responsible for forestry in Britain. The advantage of community forestry within greenspace has come to be a key driver underpinning the delivery of greenspace sites. For a number of years the FC has been working with different partners in areas of regeneration to deliver such community greenspace sites. The experience gained of delivery in these areas, and the wide range of specialists that the FC employs and utilises, has meant that Jeskyns will benefit from the full knowledge and understanding required to secure the site's on-going success. In fact, the successful delivery and committed on-going management of these sites has demonstrated to the ODPM that the FC can deliver a similar scheme within the Thames Gateway.

³ The Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) (England and Wales) Regulations 1999 require that proposals to afforest land which are likely to have a significant impact on the environment (positive or negative) require the consent of the



DEVELOPING THE DESIGN PROPOSAL

In order to determine what could be done to the site to create a community greenspace, it was necessary to identify the relevant issues and potential impacts of this proposed scheme. To this end a detailed consultation exercise was undertaken (which formed the scoping requirements under the EIA regulations). This exercise commenced in May 2005 and involved, over the course of the summer and autumn, 6 public meetings including site walks, two drop-ins, an extensive distribution of a questionnaire across Gravesend, Cobham and the site's environs, a stakeholder meeting, as well as the handling of correspondence from a number of individuals and groups. Several site surveys were also undertaken to help establish the current condition of the site and determine where key opportunities and constraints lay.

This exercise purposely did not include outline designs for the site, as it is considered important that these are generated on the basis of opportunities for significant gain (both social and environmental) and mitigation of potential negative impacts. Following consideration of several options for the site, a detailed design was then developed, the impacts of this were duly considered by independent consultants and the design gradually evolved through the course of the impact assessment process.

The result is a proposed design that offers what we believe to be is the optimum of delivery against opportunities as well as eliminating, or significantly, reducing the negative impacts. This could only have been achieved through actively listening to those who have commented on the project and using their views to help us to shape the site. To support the site team during the impact assessment process a wide range of specialists have been involved⁴. Where an independent opinion was required, more specialist help from other sources was brought in, for example external consultants accessing specialist FC knowledge as and where required wrote the ES.

The resulting final design plan, as assessed within the environmental impact assessment, is attached as Appendix 1 of this application.

AIMS OF THE PROJECT

From the outset the design has sought to reflect the political context while successfully balancing the site's specific physical and environmental capacities. It is universally acknowledged human use of any site can prejudice its biodiversity. Thus the site's design has sought to overcome the tensions arising from this divergence by finding a means balancing these twin demands and maximise both access and biodiversity at different points on the site.

Forestry Commissioners. A formal screening meeting was held in May 2005 at which it was confirmed that the proposals would have a significant impact and hence require the Commissioners' consent. An application for such consent comprises a detailed proposal, plus an Environmental Statement (ES). The Environmental Statement is a document that must provide a clear and unbiased assessment of the environmental impacts, positive and negative, of the proposals

⁴ Within the FC these included:

- landscape architect
- archaeologist
- ecologists
- specialist research (via Forest Research, an agency of the Forestry Commission)
- project managers
- land managers
- community and recreation managers
- foresters
- civil engineers



To achieve this end four key, prioritised project aims were adopted. These underpin this proposal:

1. Recreation and Public Access
2. Wildlife and Biodiversity
3. Community Involvement and Education
4. Landscape and Heritage

In order to pursue these aims successfully the site must achieve a balance between the divergent demands for access and biodiversity. The introduction of different areas within the total site is designed to allow the aims to be met overall, although the degree of achievement for each aim varies area by area.

The primary objectives and key actions for the entire site, in relation to the four aims, are summarised by the following table:

Aims	Recreation & Public Access	Wildlife & Biodiversity	Community Involvement & Education	Landscape & Heritage
<i>Philosophy:</i>	Remove physical and intellectual barriers	Improve biodiversity	Maximise the opportunities for people	Celebrate Kent's heritage
<i>Action Plan:</i>	Provide a mix of different areas with a differing balance of uses - Increase access links to neighbouring sites - Construct grades of paths to cater for all abilities and interests, in styles that are appropriate to the landscape - Deliver effective orientation and interpretation	- Create habitats - Link habitats and/or extend them to neighbouring sites - Provide the conditions for rare or important species to flourish - Local providence species preferred - Use best practice management techniques	- Develop an education programme - Make a ready provision of site interpretation - Stimulate community groups' involvement	- Manage the site's Kentish features - Enhance the local landscape - Preserve archaeological interest - Practise a traditional design ethos

NAMING THE SITE

As part of the consultation and scoping exercise, it became clear that local distinctiveness was the key to any site name and that incorporating the term "Jeskyns" would be an ideal way of demonstrating such distinction.

It is therefore proposed that the site in its entirety will be referred to as "Jeskyns", and to help identify the key area within the site, five descriptive names will be used:

- *Jeskyns Wood*
- *Jeskyns Glades*
- *Jeskyns Meadows*
- *Jeskyns Orchards*
- *Jeskyns Grove*

Details of how each area contributes to the four key aims are contained in Appendix 2.



LAND USE AND MANAGEMENT

In order to help determine what could be delivered within each area, we have drawn on the extensive consultation process and the detailed surveys and analysis undertaken on site. Through undertaking the EIA process of assessing the impacts and highlighting the opportunities (essentially an iterative process of design, development and re-design) an optimum site design was determined. The final site design plan is contained in Appendix 1.

In more detail the entire site and each component area are described in turn:

Entire Jeskyns Site

The site will provide a key access link from Gravesend, via multi-user trail bridges over the CTRL and the new A2, across to Ashenbank Wood and eventually onto Shorne Wood Country Park and the Cobham Hall/CAMS project. Links will be created to ensure that people can move from the north of the site to the south and then subsequently linking into the existing footpath network.

Jeskyns will become a destination in its own right, in which all people can relax and enjoy a low-key managed site. Opportunities to walk (for all abilities), cycle or ride horses will be available, and areas of interest will be created to offer internal destination points.

Wide-scale habitat creation will take place across the site as this high intensity arable site is converted into a species rich and diverse range of habitats. Significant benefits will be brought about on site that will directly benefit the neighbouring Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Ancient Semi Natural Woodland (ASNW)⁵ through a dramatic reduction in the quantity of chemicals used to manage the site.

During the implementation phase two Rangers dedicated to the Jeskyns site will be based at the Shorne Wood Country Park office. Once this proposed site plan has been implemented, the resource will reduce to one Ranger. This Ranger will then have the dual role of delivering against the site's Management Plan⁶ as well as creating, developing and maintaining a community engagement and environmental educational programme. Both of these programmes will seek to engage primarily with the broad target audience so as ensure delivery of the significant benefits greenspace can offer.

⁵ Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) are the best examples of our natural heritage of wildlife habitats, geological features and landforms. An SSSI is an area that has been notified as being of special interest under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). Maintaining the area of ancient woodland is a key target of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP). Ancient Semi Natural Woodlands (ASNW) tend to be richer in plants and animals than other woodland areas, and also have a role in preserving locally native genotypes; they are also important as part of the historic visual and cultural landscape. Both Ashenbank Wood and Chambers Hill Wood are designated SSSI. A large section of Ashenbank Wood is designated ASNW.

⁶ The site will be managed as part of the Forestry Stewardship Council's (FSC) UK Woodland Assurance Scheme (UKWAS). The Forestry Commission will produce a site Management Plan that will be based on the best practice as highlighted in the Green Flag award, an award granted for complete and deliverable greenspace management plans (www.greenflagaward.org.uk).



Jeskyns Wood



This area represents the majority of the woodland planting. It will form the focus for the access and recreation on the site with 'BT Countryside for All' compliant trails⁷, an area for children to play in, plus a car park and picnic areas. Points of interest will be provided offering play opportunities and areas in which to relax and enjoy the countryside.

A large pond will be created to offer an attractive focus for the visitor to venture slightly deeper into the site, as well as offering opportunities for environmental education and biodiversity gains.

This area represents a significant extension to the nationally important SSSI and the ASNW at Ashenbank Wood and Chambers Hill Wood.

Jeskyns Glades

This area will form a low-key sector of the site to provide key linkages between the site entrance (Jeskyns Wood) and onto the wider footpath and trail network.

With the wildlife pond and large areas of wildflower planting, this area will also play an important part as a 'classroom' for environmental educational opportunities.



Jeskyns Meadows



This area has been designed both to maximise the longer distance views from Jeskyns Road, as well as to protect what could be potentially interesting archaeology within the fields. This area has offered the opportunity to look at hay meadows, or even possibly grazing as a way of significantly benefiting the ecological value of the site.

The archaeology and any management such as grazing will additionally offer an excellent opportunity for interpretation and environmental educational needs.

Jeskyns Orchards

This section of the site has been split into two: a traditional orchard and a coppice area. Overall the area is designed to represent a traditional Kentish landscape with land being used productively, but with the emphasis on community involvement opportunities rather than production.

The traditional orchards will be planted with widely spaced varieties on tall rootstock to reflect a traditional and formal feel. The varieties have been selected with the help of the Brogdale Horticultural Trust⁸ on the basis of native British varieties and disease resistance. By their nature the traditional orchards will offer great opportunities for community education and volunteer work. This area will also deliver considerable biodiversity gain.



⁷ The BT Countryside for All good practice guide is acknowledged as an excellent reference for all ability access in greenspaces.

⁸ The Brogdale Horticultural Trust, home to the National fruit collection, was handed responsibility for managing the site and fruit collection in 1990. More details can be found on www.brogdale.org or telephoning 01795 535286.



The coppice area will represent a working landscape that will be managed on a regular cycle. Volunteers and community engagement activities will take place regularly here providing an opportunity for the local community to become involved in coppice management and the use of the products.

Jeskyns Grove



This small field will remain a quiet, secluded area where users will have the ability to find a tranquil setting that surrounds a wildlife haven. Some structure to the area will be offered through a small patch of orchards, particularly along the road, but open space and wildflower meadows will predominate, interspersed with small areas of woodland.

The total result will be a high quality site design that offers the optimum delivery against opportunities, whilst eliminating or significantly reducing the negative impacts. This could only have been achieved through actively listening to those who have commented on the site and using these views to help us to shape it for a better future.

NEXT STEPS

Once the application has been accepted, implementation of the project will begin. This will include delivery of the civil engineering over summer 2006, and planting over winter 2006/07.

During the next 12 to 18 months, as delivery and management progress, a site Management Plan will be produced that will set out how the site will be managed into the future. This will begin to draw on many of the delivery action points to ensure this site achieves its aims. The Management Plan will follow best practice as laid out by the Green Flag Award scheme, and supported by CABE Space (www.greenflagaward.org.uk).

IN CONCLUSION

The proposals attached offer a great opportunity to benefit the quality of life for thousands of the existing and proposed new residents of the Thames Gateway in Kent while delivering against key biodiversity targets.

Please find contained⁹ the relevant documents required for the application and for the assessment of the environmental impacts.

⁹ Documents will also be available at; Gravesend Central Library, Gravesham Borough Council Offices (Cygnet House, Gravesend), Shorne Wood Country Park and on our website www.forestry.gov.uk/northkent.