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Date: 11th December 2008
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Dear Mr Tebbitt,

Blaby LDF Core Strategy Alternative Options – Leicestershire Local Access Forum

Please find enclosed a response to your LDF proposals, 'Core Strategy Alternative Options Document', by the Leicestershire Local Access Forum. The Forum is particularly interested in these proposals and values the opportunity to comment.

I would be grateful if you could consider the following. Comments on specific policies are in the section entitled specific comments towards the end of the document.

Background

The Leicestershire Local Access Forum (LAF) is an independent statutory body, set up as a result of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW) 2000, and exists to represent the interests of everyone concerned with access to the countryside and the public rights of way network including footpaths, bridleways and byways, cycleways and areas of open access.

In 2007, following new regulations, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural affairs issued new guidance for forums. Section 94 of the CROW act makes it a statutory function of the forum to give advice to a range of bodies, including local authorities, on access issues in respect of land use planning matters.

The Secretary of State advises that the most effective use of these powers is focusing on the relevant policies in the emerging Local Development framework. In particular forums are asked to focus on:

- The impact and options for minimising possible adverse effects, of planning policies and development proposals in respect of future public access to land:
- Identifying and expressing support for opportunities to improve public access, or associated infrastructure, which might be delivered through planning policies or new development.

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Local planning authorities are required to involve the community from an early stage and the forum has a key role to play when looking at access.

The development of public access policies within the county has been greatly helped with the establishment of a Rights of Way Improvement Plan for Leicestershire. The County Council developed the plan in conjunction with the forum. It is a statutory document subject to guidance. A Plan was published in conjunction with the Second Local Transport Plan in 2006 and was subject to public consultation. Relevant policy areas are discussed below.

The forum has also been closely monitoring the developing Regional Spatial Strategy and the debate around Green Infrastructure. Last year the group hosted a seminar on 'Green Routes for New Urban Growth'. This considered how rights of way, open access areas and other 'Green Infrastructure' can ensure new urban developments encourage healthier lifestyles and sustainable communities. The seminar brought together representatives from various agencies to discuss how they could work towards these ends. This included representatives from all levels of local government, regional organisations and local groups.

Access & Rights of Way

The network of Rights of Way in the district remain the single most important recreational resource to explore and enjoy the area. The paths also provide local routes that join communities and provide routes used to access shops, schools and workplaces for many.

In researching the ROWIP, the authority considered national, regional and local research. This includes local surveys, exemplar projects set up by the Countryside Agency and a raft of national studies. All of these have underlined the importance of walking and riding in people's everyday lives. Some of the key findings include:

- most walking journeys, including for recreation begin on the doorstep
- 94% of the County population live in urban or built up areas
- The main motivation for walkers is that it is fun
- Physical activity, walking in particular could make the single most effective contribution to the nations health.
- Over the past 25 years the amount of miles travelled on foot and bicycle fell by more than 25%

The current revision of the Regional Spatial Strategy picks up on a number of these threads in Policy 1 of the regional core objectives, seeking:

- ***To protect and enhance the environmental quality of urban and rural settlements to make them safe and attractive places to live, work and invest in, through the promotion of 'green infrastructure (including walking and riding)'***
- ***To improve the health of the Region's residents through improvements in access to health, leisure and recreation facilities & services.***
- ***To improve accessibility to jobs, homes and Services through the promotion and integration of opportunities for walking and cycling;***

To move these issues forward, the Rights of Way Improvement Plan concluded that improved walking and riding facilities need to be available:

- close to where people live work and play
- accessible by a wide range of the local community
- lead to repeat activities and contribute to health

Access, including Green Infrastructure in most of its guises should be accessible and allow humans to enjoy, touch, smell and interact with their local environment. Much can and should be done with existing networks as well as considering new infrastructure.

The walking and riding environment also helps to contribute to a number of areas other than general access. By its very nature, walking and riding, is a socially inclusive activity. The public repeatedly underlined the quality of life contribution that walking provided both within the local community and accessing the landscapes around them. It is also sustainable in the short and long term, providing opportunities for people now and hopefully in the future.

At the heart of the proposals set out in the Improvement Plan, was the desire to provide improved opportunities for walking and riding. Much needs to be done to arrest the current falls in walking and riding. Society is increasingly dependent on the car and we live ever more sedentary lifestyles. Often those groups in society that would benefit most from more active lifestyles, are those least likely to undertake exercise.

Despite this, both local and national studies show that walking and riding remain extremely popular. The challenge is to involve a wider section of society and make walking and riding part of our everyday lives. Access should be for all, and to be so it needs to compete with the car for utilitarian journeys and a host of other activities for recreational time. It needs to be available near to everyone's home, be fun, attractive and free from physical and mental barriers.

Any proposals for access, including in conjunction with Green Infrastructure should reflect the above. The RSS goes on to underline many of the above points, stressing the need for all parties, including the Regional Assembly, with Government, public and local bodies, and service providers, should work together to develop and implement measures for behavioural change to encourage a reduction in the need to travel and to change public attitudes toward car usage and public transport, walking and cycling. Such measures should be co-ordinated with the implementation of other policies in the RTS and in Local Transport Plans. Local Development Frameworks and Local Transport Plans should include measures to encourage an increase in walking and cycling.

Improving and Broadening Access

A series of proposed policies in the ROWIP seek to encourage developers to encourage walking and riding from the doorstep. This includes within new developments and links to surrounding areas and public services

The Rights of Way network is a managed resource. The network of paths especially those in and around urban areas are the focus of a programme of path maintenance and improvement set out in the ROWIP action plan and the Local Transport Plan. More can always be done, and should be, especially in areas accommodating new development.

The LDF documents should place more importance on this substantial resource at a local level. It is inter urban and routes linking communities, settlements and the local countryside that offer the best opportunities to make a real difference and contribute towards the goals set out in the Draft RSS. More emphasis should be given to this resource and the value of local regular journeys and how to encourage the public to use local access and enjoy green infrastructure.

It is difficult to comment in any detail on specific proposals including the Growth point proposals around the District without reference to a more detailed master plan. We are aware of the work on the progression of a Green Infrastructure Strategy for the 6 C's area and subsequent growth point green infrastructure master plans. We would want to comment on any specific proposals as and when they become available.

Principles relating to future growth and development may be more useful. The ROWIP does contain a series of proposals for consideration for new development and accordingly the role of green infrastructure.

ROWIP Policy P3

Developers will be expected to maximise the potential for access within, to and from new development by walking and cycling. This should include links to travel plans and public transport.

Potential sites should be capable of leading to good design that takes account of the needs of all, including the disabled and less able, with the development of high quality walking and cycling networks. There is a need to not just provide the infrastructure but to provide an attractive environment that encourages people to move around on foot or bicycle. This includes enhancing the feeling of personal safety, linking green areas and providing an attractive environment to live in and enjoy recreational time. Existing facilities should be retained and enhanced where possible as well as considering new ones.

It is not just in new developments that non motorised travel should be considered. Developers are expected to maximise the potential access to and from new development by walking, cycling and public transport. This may extend beyond the developed site. Developers are asked to 'meet the requirements for, and costs of, relevant infrastructure and facilities and other resources required to support the development.

This can include existing local networks that are likely to be used by people living in the new development (see below). We also note Policy 4 in the RSS Promoting Better Design. All partners including local authorities, regional bodies, utility providers and developers should work together. We agree with the principle that this should be achieved by promoting access from new development to local facilities on foot, by cycle or by public transport.

ROWIP Policy P4

Infrastructure assessments to access new development sites, including for developer contributions, should include foot and cycle proposals.

Employment sites are likely to need specific routes to allow access to and within the development. Housing development needs a broader approach. The development would also need access into and within the site, including links to open or recreational areas in the development. However, new residents are going to want to access and enjoy the surrounding area for recreation. Existing paths may need to be upgraded to meet demand or new routes considered to link to the surrounding network or communities.

In most cases the developer will not control land beyond the application site, in others he will. The County Council has powers to carry out improvements on the path network and is experienced in doing so. A mapping and then where appropriate, a local survey should be carried out (mini master plans). This will then determine if existing routes are likely to be used by communities within the new development. Whilst routes that deliver utilitarian journeys will take priority, the local recreational network should not be overlooked.

Where local paths feed from or are near the development then a programme of suggested improvements, such as reducing barriers, new gates, and appropriate surfacing can be considered. New local destination fingerposts and improved signing and waymarking will encourage and allow those new to the area to become familiar with local walking and riding opportunities. There may be other specific works that could be considered. In each instance this is a judgement call that will need to relate to increasing local use of the paths with particular focus on those in any new estate. This should then lead to a suggested way forward that could be discussed as part of the contributions and green infrastructure package.

ROWIP Policy P5

Consideration should be given to linking new housing sites into the surrounding recreational networks or where there isn't one, creating routes that link to surrounding paths, communities or facilities.

Sometimes new developments have no formal links to existing paths. The development of new or linking footpaths, bridleways and cycleways can be considered anywhere. The provision of local recreational opportunities on the doorstep reduces pressure on areas with greater leisure and tourist demand, as well as encouraging more frequent exercise and non motorised journeys.

Specific Policy Proposals

The forum welcomes development being concentrated in specific areas to allow for the planning of broader facilities, including those linked to recreation (see above).

The forum has discussed the proposed SUE locations. The preferred location of housing was within area B and part of C, provided that the two areas could be developed as a whole. The second preferred option was within area C.

The forum has concerns regarding the housing and or industrial development within area A. The area may cause the effective merger of four communities. In addition part of the site falls within the Rothley Brook flood plain.

The forum asks to be included in any further consultations or discussions related to the proposals.

Yours sincerely

Roy Denney
Chairman
Leicestershire Local Access Forum