

Agenda Item 9

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Plans, Policies and Place-Making Team, Charnwood Borough Council

Via email - localplans@charnwood.gov.uk

The Leicestershire Local Access Forum (LLAF) has advised numerous authorities on their plans and feels it can contribute to your present exercise. The LLAF 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. We take access to include the adequate provision of sustainable and public transport and travel opportunities.

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 advised that in particular forums were 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. Forums are tasked with identifying and expressing support for opportunities to improve public access, or associated infrastructure, which might be delivered through planning policies or new developments.

We will only be commenting on those aspects which fall within our remit or have an impact of our areas of involvement.

We would first make some general observations. All authorities have not only to satisfy their housing needs but to also have a plan in place which demonstrates the availability of land to meet targets for the future. Without this not only do you fall down on provision but you can have developments imposed upon you where you would deem them inappropriate.

Charnwood does have some particular problems. The area is cut by major roads (M1, A512, A6, A46 etc) and the Leicester and Leicestershire 'Strategic Growth Plan' advocates an infrastructure led approach to development with a new A46 proposed eastern distributor road to connect the A46 to the north east of Leicester to the M1 at a new junction to the south of the city which will also impact on part of the borough. The area is also cut by the river valleys and associated flood plains and has the historic Charnwood Forest Regional Park at its heart. The Park and the watercourses do need protection and give the authority challenges but they also give you the opportunity to make Charnwood a very desirable place to live, work and visit. Planning to meet the housing need will not be easy while at the same time protecting the in places unique environment

Open spaces are invaluable for many reasons and whilst grass pitches are needed for organised sport e.g. for Rugby, Hockey, Soccer, and Cricket etc., you must provide green space which can be enjoyed for general recreation. Allotments, golf courses and school playing fields can offer wildlife oases and improve the visual aspect from nearby paths or indeed paths crossing them. Similarly cemeteries and graveyards can provide pleasant environments for taking quiet relaxation and as such open space needs to be viewed in all its entirety.

From our experience informal natural and semi natural green spaces serve the needs of more of the population than organised parks and of course cost far less to maintain. To enjoy these there must be an adequate network of paths and cycleways and many paths themselves provide linear open access land especially when fringed by natural growth. Green spaces of whatever designation also help to provide wildlife corridors improving the general biodiversity in the area.

Green wedges and Area of Local Separation afford many opportunities for such considerations. They also help keep distinct communities rather than urban sprawl

Improving the rights of way network to ensure that there are appropriate linkages between key open space sites and settlements in the district would improve access and promote more sustainable forms of transport. You cannot create new land and the only privately owned land which might become available as amenity land invariably only happens as part of a large development which itself usually means a loss of farmland. The best way to get more benefit from what is already there is to improve access and links and to an extent, public transport.

We are firmly of the view that housing needs should be satisfied by major schemes with all the needed infrastructure rather than constantly bolting a few more properties onto the edge of small communities whose services are already badly stretched. Charnwood has many picturesque villages which have retained their strong sense of identity and these must not be subsumed into larger conurbations. In addition given that the rivers systems flood regularly impeding traffic flows badly, we are against small piecemeal developments as they do not have the scope and scale to make the needed improvements to the low lying roads

One final consideration but a very important one is that of air quality. Many parts of Leicestershire have problems with this and any new housing being considered should whenever possible not be downwind of major traffic junctions or industrial units. One benefit of large schemes is that they afford space to plant trees to act as a buffer against pollutants but also space to create off road routes well away from motorised traffic.

LOUGHBOROUGH – in looking at Charnwood we feel that Loughborough needs to be treated as a stand alone situation without decrying its importance to the larger area as the main shopping and service centre. A vibrant and diverse economy provides many employment opportunities for local people which help keep communities together. With the strength of the science and education sectors in Loughborough these jobs include higher skilled, better paid jobs. That does mean people need housing and adequate transport and leisure areas which will impact on the nearby Soar Valley and Forest Park and we would like to see an enhanced off road network of routes giving access to these. We also feel a lot of the potential housing should be centred in or on the edge of Loughborough as it does have the services to support this growth. There appear to be several brown

field sites available. Expansion is probably most justified to the west, towards the M1 and Shepshed although some green separation should be maintained in addition to the M1. There is also a need to accommodate the growing student numbers although we do feel these should be spread throughout the community rather than creating student areas.

SOAR VALLEY - Thurmaston and the Watermead Regeneration Corridor offers another opportunity for a good contribution to the housing requirement. It would involve some loss of countryside and the extension of the urban area, which will make non-motorised access to the remaining countryside more difficult for existing residents and must increase the need and temptation to take the car to reach a pleasant walk, or just exercise the dog. Watermead Country Park should however never be far away and we would suggest more access points over the canal/river. Thurmaston itself is rather 'tired' and badly cut by road and rail but old warehousing units and other brown field sites could be replaced by a well balanced range of housing facing towards the park and making Thurmaston a more attractive place with a more balanced community. Economic and commercial sites would have to be provided to replace these older units and that presumably would mean in the nearby countryside.

OTHER LARGE CENTRES – Charnwood's other larger settlements; Shepshed, Birstall and Syston have services and facilities that could support some additional housing but Syston in particular has roads close to capacity. Anstey similarly has a distinct services and retail heart but is currently seeing major housing addition and the centre has roads that are highly congested. There seems little scope for expansion here as it almost conjoins Cropston now and you have approved housing on the edge of Glenfield. Barrow upon Soar is not as well served but could possibly see a little expansion but with all these distinct communities we would wish to see green separation zones to maintain their independent identities and a network of off road routes allowing passage between them without using vehicles.

Sileby is a smaller community without the services to sustain much growth but we would wish to see this kept separate from Barrow.

The old A6 corridor is seeing infill and there is the real risk that Rothley, Mountsorrel and Quorn will lose their separate identities

LEICESTER – Some housing could be located on the edge of the city to rely on that city for services etc. At the same time this should not effectively bridge existing communities leading to a loss of their identities. The area between Leicester and Thurmaston may offer opportunities but we would not like to see Barkby with Barkby Thorpe lose identity

HOUSING – Looking beyond the boundaries of the borough the cities of Leicester, Derby and Nottingham add to the pressure for development. Even discounting any need for Charnwood to help neighbouring authorities who are struggling to meet their targets it would seem the borough needs close to 1000 new homes a year for the period under review.

We think that evidence elsewhere suggests that the needs should be met by major 'new' developments giving the authority a chance to develop those communities holistically. We have already commented on the proposals for Garendon and Broadnook and in general we support those sorts of projects whilst having issues with some detail. The smaller villages have few services available and we see no real benefit in moiré housing in these other than to fill gaps in the provision

Places like Barkby, Burton, Hathern, Queniborough, Rearsby, Cossington, Seagrave, Wymeswold and Thrusington might need a few smaller homes for people to retire into or start up from, to keep the communities together. The families of residents in Newtown Linford and Swithland would struggle to find start up homes to remain near their relatives. We feel that Woodhouse and Woodhouse Eaves could be viewed as one community and properties there are a bit more mixed but there are gaps in the balance. There is a need for affordable homes, both social housing for people that can not access housing through the open market and small properties for purchase because of a growing older population and more single people.

OPEN AREAS – Wherever housing is to be located will determine where the green separation zones will be and our prime interest is in the protection of those and the maximising of public and environmental benefit which can be had from them. To the east you have Wolds and the Wreake Valley; through the centre the Soar and to its south, Watermead; and to the west the Forest Park and at its southern edge the Rothley Brook. These are a wonderful areas; ecologically and environmentally valuable and for reasons of their topography, little developed and therefore of historic interest.

We are not entirely sure how you define an Area of Local Separation as opposed to green wedge but we are generally supportive of any protected separation zones. We certainly would wish to see a gap between Loughborough and Quorn, Syston and Queniborough and Barrow and Sileby and do think there should be a gap between Rothley and Birstall but should that not be between Wanlip and Rothley and Wanlip and Birstall as we take Broadnook to be part of Wanlip

SUMMARY - When considering new developments, the design of our neighbourhoods is key to promoting healthy travel habits, with local facilities such as shops, doctors, schools and other services being located to encourage routine walking and cycling. The benefits of the footpath, bridleway and cycleway networks are multi-dimensional and have impacts on sustainable travel, green infrastructure, recreation, tourism, local economies, health and general well-being. They are an essential mechanism for linking communities and facilities if we are to reduce motorised transport and the carbon emissions that ensue and they play a major part in the development of the recreational potential of any area. These benefits have to be balanced against the need to protect and enhance the ecology and landscape and enable regeneration and economic growth. These should not be viewed simply as competing demands but as a challenge to use best practice and/or innovative approaches to achieve good quality outcomes to meet each of the aspirations.

We need to ensure that in the planning of our communities, access to basic amenities and services is not dependent on car ownership but is always available to those on foot, bicycle, wheelchair and public transport.

If we are to encourage walking we need attractive places to visit. Green open spaces are great for wildlife and provide an outlet for residents to enjoy. If trees feature they are also 'lungs' helping counteract air pollution. The presence of, and access to, green areas and the natural environment can help increase activity and reduce obesity. Daily physical activity is essential for maintaining health; inactivity directly contributes to 15% of deaths in the UK.

Larger developments are required to leave green oases but these are often overly manicured. Sewn and fertilised 'parks' are good at absorbing rainwater but rough grassland is over four times more effective and trees improve things further. Such wilder 'semi-natural' areas are also much better for wildlife. We must plan for more absorbent habitats especially in the flood plains. Wetlands and woodlands are ideal at holding back floodwaters and also provide a varied landscape for residents to access and enjoy.

It can be a win-win situation. If we create wetland and woodland areas and green corridors linking them, we can help wildlife to migrate between populations keeping them healthier and introducing them to our gardens; can create ideal walking possibilities for the health and general well being of the population and cut down the risk of flooding all at the same time.

We would just broadly summarise our take on the issues by saying that whatever direction future housing development takes it must ensure appropriate provision of facilities such as schools, local shops, public amenity / recreation spaces and adequate off road routes between them. In as far as you can encourage private enterprises you must facilitate adequate transport facilities and opportunities of employment as close to residential areas as possible

We trust you find our observations of help

John Howells, Chairman
Roy Denney, Vice Chairman
Leicestershire Local Access Forum,
C/o Room 700, County Hall, Leicester, LE3 8RJ
(www.leics.gov.uk/laf)
Telephone - County Hall 0116 305 7086