

SCRUTINY COMMISSION – 9 JUNE 2021**QUESTIONS ASKED UNDER STANDING ORDER 34****Question asked by Mrs Sharon Scott**

“Please can the Chairman confirm that the Strategic Growth Plan (SGP) is no longer fit for purpose and should be reviewed with all urgency and before finalization of any district local plans for the following reasons:

1. The SGP is far too road-based. There is little or no consideration of rail transport, which should be considered a more sustainable option in the light of climate change issues. Large strategic developments are not sustainable if sited close to major road networks since they promote commuting by car and offer poor air quality. The emphasis for future work patterns should be on working from home or commuting by rail, not on building more roads and junctions. The increased likelihood of working from home removes the need to locate housing close to major road networks.
2. The main backbone of the SGP is the proposed A46 Expressway. Midland Connect have stated that they will not be seeking Government funding for this route. This cannot therefore be used as the main artery for growth. Since the proposed A46 Growth Corridor was a key feature of the SGP, the whole basis of the SGP is now flawed. Trying to rely on developers to provide the infrastructure will result in a haphazard mish mash of road structures and is inherently risky.
3. The over-arching aim of the SGP is to redistribute Leicester City’s unmet need. However, this needs to be revisited in the light of the Covid pandemic. Many of the changes brought about by the pandemic are likely to become permanent and will completely change Leicester City’s needs. It is likely that many people will continue to work from home for at least part of the week which will free up more brownfield sites in Leicester City due to office closures or downsizing. The likelihood of a large scale move to online shopping will also free up brownfield sites in the City which can be repurposed for housing. Leicester City should also be able to repurpose some of its disused retail and commercial buildings for distribution centres to provide ‘final mile’ delivery for online customers.
4. The SGP concentrates growth in the South West of the County. Following the designation of the East Midlands Airport as a Freeport site, it would make more sense to concentrate development in the North West of the County.
5. A key aim of the SGP was to protect Leicestershire villages from overdevelopment. It fails completely to do this in the case of Sapcote and Stoney Stanton. Indeed, the Council’s response to Blaby’s local plan questions the description of these settlements as ‘medium villages’ and suggests a more urban description would be appropriate. I know from speaking to local people that many residents of these villages settled in the

area in the expectation of being able to live in a rural area and place a high value on being able to do so.

6. Current National Government focus shows a shift towards a heavily weighted preference for reuse of brownfield sites for new builds / employment land before using countryside. This is not reflected in the SGP.
7. The SGP fails to promote tourism in the County. Indeed, the Southern Growth area centered on Stoney Stanton SDA and the proposed HNRFI would completely destroy the setting and environment of Burbage Common and Woods, which is currently one of the best bluebell woods in the County and welcomes a large number of visitors both from within and outside of the County.”

Reply by the Chairman

1. The SGP sets out indicative new essential infrastructure to support the housing, employment and other uses that existing and new communities will require in the future to enable ease of movement between communities. For many years planned growth has been ‘bolted on’ to existing communities, with infrastructure secured associated with the specific proposed development. This has meant that over time the cumulative impact on infrastructure has often become great. This is best illustrated through the impact on the Highways network where many parts of the network are operating at, or over capacity.

The vision in the SGP seeks to break this cycle through the provision of new key infrastructure to enable existing communities to grow at a more measured pace, providing new homes and access to jobs and services more easily, and to provide new communities in the form of garden communities, either as sustainable urban extensions or as free standing settlements.

It is too early at this time to say what the longer-term impacts of the pandemic might be on peoples’ economic and social activity, and by extension travel habits. What is clear, is that traffic levels on the area’s road network are continuing to increase as restriction are eased (as they are nationally). Private cars continue to be a key mode of transport, and although strong measures and initiatives are being taken to enable an increase in the use of alternative modes of transport, the reality is that in the more rural areas of Leicestershire cars are likely to form the most appropriate form of transport for longer journeys as other road based modes such as bus services may not be commercially viable.

Travel by rail continues to be considered. The Leicester and Leicestershire Rail Strategy (2017) delivers significant economic benefits from a range of improved and new direct rail services to and from Leicester and Leicestershire including reduced journey times to London and improved links to the north and the Thames Valley.

2. L&L partners are undertaking further evidence to aid the transition of the SGP to delivery through Local Plans, part of this evidence will look at whether a

more local orbital solution is required in the future to enable existing and future communities in Leicestershire and the City to access jobs and services. This may be the case even with the increase in home working in the longer term. It is also important to note that Midlands Connect has stated that its study conclusion only held true if future growth in Leicester and Leicestershire is delivered in accordance with the SGP; otherwise, if a different approach were to be taken then an entirely new set of evidence would be required.

3. The City Council is undertaking further work and revisiting evidence it prepared, or had commissioned, to inform its Draft City of Leicester Local Plan last Autumn in light of the accelerated changes we have seen due to the COVID-19 pandemic, BREXIT etc.

The County Council will carefully consider the revisited evidence, and any new evidence, to ensure 'no stone has been left unturned' in maximizing the amount of new development the City can accommodate without adversely affecting environmental quality and minimizing the amount of unmet need to be accommodated in the districts.

4. Significant growth is still directed towards the north west of the County in the SGP due to the location of major employment generators in this area and the location of Coalville and Loughborough. The successful bid to Government for an 'East Midlands Freeport: The UK's Green Gateway for Growth', will require consideration of the scope to co-locate further future residential development close to the three key sites, which will focus on safeguarding our industrial strengths in advanced manufacturing, automotive and logistics and boosting our competitiveness in green opportunities.
5. Settlements in rural areas with a good range of services will continue to form hubs for further expansion as this is one of the most sustainable approaches to providing for growth in rural areas and will help to ensure services such as schools will continue to provide for the local community. A good mix of housing and employment helps to ensure local families and individuals are able to stay living in the area where their support networks exist.
6. The SGP is required to be compliant with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and although it may not be explicitly stated in the SGP it is the intent that brownfield sites in the 'right' locations are utilized before greenfield sites.
7. The SGP seeks to protect environmental, historic and other assets important to Leicester and Leicestershire. Balancing the need for growth with the protection of assets is a difficult challenge, however, unplanned growth can bring even more unacceptable consequences. As new Local Plans are prepared and come forward new evidence about assets will be gathered and will inform work on Local Plans.

Please note the approved SGP does not include a Southern Growth area designation.

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