Neighbourhood Plans – Guidance on Access to the Countryside

1. Introduction

Cheshire East Local Access Forum (CELAF) is a statutory body, set up under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, to promote access to the countryside. We are keen to see provision for such access to be included in Neighbourhood Plans, and have therefore prepared this guidance, which we hope might assist you.

The model submission, which follows this introduction, could be used as it stands (with the addition of local material where appropriate) or adapted to fit your own framework. It follows a generally accepted outline: Objectives; Policies; Justification, and Plans. We include reference, under “justification” to supporting material, but provide fuller information on this in an Appendix – this could be use to supplement our suggestions. The “Plans” section (placed in italics) will need to be developed locally with reference to local conditions or issues, though suggestions are made for points which might be considered.

We feel that the points presented here should be included in consultations with local residents prior to writing of the Plan. It should also be noted that there is room for cross-referencing to other sections of the Plan. For example, a general description of the neighbourhood might include reference to the value of the local countryside. A section on housing or other developments should take note of the need to preserve existing rights of way, and where possible develop new routes. Discussion of road and traffic issues may include reference to the need to promote sustainable transport and ensure safety on rural roads and lanes.

This guidance reflects CELAF’s current thinking on Neighbourhood Plans. It consists of our suggestions. If you can identify omissions or ways in which it can be improved, we would be grateful for your comments.

We acknowledge that in places we have included material taken, direct or with modification, from Plans already produced for Sandbach and Holmes Chapel.
2. The Model Submission

Objective

To improve access to the countryside throughout the Plan area.

Policies

1. Access to the countryside will be promoted through protection and maintenance of the existing Public Right of Way (PROW) network (see map of existing PROW), its enhancement where possible, and the safety of users of rural roads and lanes.

2. Any development which leads to the loss or degradation of any PROW, or any cycleway, will not be permitted in other than very special circumstances. Proposals to divert PROWs or cycleways should provide clear and demonstrable benefits for the wider community.

3. Any new development must provide easy, accessible traffic-free routes for non-motorised users (to include pedestrians, disabled people, people with prams or baby-buggies, cyclists and where appropriate equestrians) to town/shopping centres, parks and open spaces, and nearby countryside. The provision of any such additional routes will be supported.

4. The needs of non-motorised users (as described in para 2 above) must be taken into account in all traffic planning, but especially in relation to rural lanes and roads. Hazards arising from an increase in vehicle numbers where agricultural buildings are converted to residential or commercial use will need to be taken into consideration.

5. Measures to be taken to ensure this may include, for example, separation of pedestrians/cyclists from vehicular traffic where possible, improvements to signage, or means of speed reduction.

Justification

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence ("Walking and cycling: local measures to promote walking and cycling as forms of travel or recreation" - 2012) the Department of Health ("Be active, be healthy: a plan for getting the nation moving" 2009) and the Chief Medical Officer for England (Report, 2004) emphasise the value of walking and cycling in health promotion. Cheshire East Local Plan (Sustainable Community Strategy) refers to “driving out the causes of poor health.” Access to the countryside makes an important
contribution to these objectives, by encouraging sustainable means of transport and active leisure.

Countryside access also plays a part in helping the rural economy, by encouraging visitors who use hotels and B&Bs, equestrian establishments, and visitor attractions. The National Planning Policy Framework states that “Planning policies should support economic growth in rural areas” by measures which include supporting “sustainable rural tourism and leisure developments that benefit businesses in rural areas, communities and visitors, and which respect the character of the countryside”. Cheshire East’s Visitor Economy Strategy (April 2016) has as one of its key priorities “developing a distinctive rural tourism offer” and notes that “the visitor economy is an important contributor to the prosperity of communities….”

The National Planning Policy Framework states that “planning policies should protect and enhance public rights of way and access. Local authorities should seek to provide better facilities for users, for example by adding links to exiting rights of way networks…” Developments should include creating “safe and secure layouts which minimise conflicts between traffic and cyclists or pedestrians.” Cheshire East’s Local Plan (Policy EG4 Tourism) includes “improving access to our natural and historic landscapes through enhancing our vital public rights of way network”, and its Local Transport Plan and Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2011-2016 refers to a policy to “Protect and advance our public rights of way and green infrastructure and endeavour to create new links beneficial for health, safety or access to greenspaces: leisure routes for cyclist, horse riders and walkers.”

Plans

We cannot offer detailed guidance on plans: these will need to reflect local needs and conditions. By way of suggestion, plans might take into account identification of new routes which can link to those already existing or create circular routes; identification of places where there are hazards which should be eliminated or other improvements brought about; measures such as maintaining unobstructed verges as safe areas, or use of signage and Speed Indicator Devices to enhance safety on rural roads and lanes; seeking to have developers install suitable exit signage drawing attention to hazards where conversion of agricultural buildings to residential or commercial use is likely to increase the number of vehicles using a country road. Local knowledge and local thinking will be the key to this section.
3. Appendix – Sources for Justification of Policies

National Planning Policy Framework
The National Planning Policy Framework states that “planning policies should protect and enhance public rights of way and access. Local authorities should seek opportunities to provide better facilities for users, for example by adding links to existing rights of way networks including National Trails” (para 75). NPPF continues to state (para. 35) that “Plans should protect and exploit opportunities for the use of sustainable transport modes for the movement of goods or people. Therefore, developments should be located and designed where practical to.....

- give priority to pedestrian and cycle movements, and have access to high quality public transport facilities;
- create safe and secure layouts which minimise conflicts between traffic and cyclists or pedestrians”.

Paragraph 28 states that: “Planning policies should support economic growth in rural areas in order to create jobs and prosperity by taking a positive approach to sustainable new development. To promote a strong rural economy, local and neighbourhood plans should:

- support the sustainable growth and expansion of all types of business and enterprise in rural areas, both through conversion of existing buildings and well designed new buildings;
- promote the development and diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural businesses;
- support sustainable rural tourism and leisure developments that benefit businesses in rural areas, communities and visitors, and which respect the character of the countryside.”

Cheshire East Council Local Plan (Submission Version)
Strategic Priority 2: “Creating sustainable communities, where all members are able to contribute and where all the infrastructure required to support the community is provided. This will be delivered by:

2. Ensuring that development provides the opportunity for healthier lifestyles through provision of high quality green infrastructure and cultural, recreational, leisure and sports opportunities
4. Improving links between existing and new neighbourhoods by giving priority to walking, cycling and public transport and providing a genuine choice of transport modes and supporting community integration”.

Policy EG 4 Tourism
The Local Plan Strategy will protect and enhance the unique features of Cheshire East that attract visitors to the area, including their settings, whilst encouraging investment. This will be achieved through:

- The protection of Cheshire East's tourist assets, such as Tatton Park, Quarry Bank Mill, Little Moreton Hall, Macclesfield Silk Museum, Jodrell Bank, the Peak District National Park (adjoining the plan area), Alderley Edge, the Gritstone Trail, Tegg’s Nose Country Park, Sandstone Ridge and the waterways that support appropriate sustainable tourist related development;
o Protecting visitor attraction sites;
o Promoting the enhancement and expansion of existing visitor attractions and tourist accommodation, and the provision of new visitor and tourism facilities, in sustainable and appropriate locations;
o Encouraging sustainable transport to tourist and cultural sites;
o Encouraging and promoting opportunities for new tourist attractions in the historic and natural environment in sustainable and appropriate locations; and
o Improving access to our natural and historic landscapes through enhancing our vital public rights of way network

Cheshire East Visitor Economy Strategy, April 2016
One of the key priorities of the Cheshire East Visitor Economy Strategy 2016-2020 is developing a distinctive rural tourism offer. The strategy includes aims to:

- Increase performance, prosperity and wellbeing
- maximise opportunities to exploit the trends amongst consumers for staycations, and from “things to see” towards “things to do”.

The strategy recognises that “increasing urbanisation in our day-to-day lives has helped the appeal of the countryside grow as a destination for ‘getting away’. On the other hand, younger people with less knowledge or experience of rural areas may not understand the opportunities that the countryside offers and may fail to be attracted to rural locations.”

“The visitor economy is an important contributor to the prosperity of communities and quality of place including rural and semirural areas. It creates jobs and stimulates start-ups in related areas, creating a cluster and supply chain.”

Cheshire East Council corporate plan 2016-2020
- Outcome 4 Cheshire East is a green and sustainable place;
- Outcome 5 People live well and for longer;

Cheshire East Sustainable Community Strategy
- Ensure a sustainable future;
- Drive out the causes of poor health;

Cheshire East Council’s Quality of Place strategic priority
- Quality of Place is defined as the quality of our built and natural environment, its interaction with our residents and businesses and the ability of individuals to make a life here, as well as defining the vibrancy and culture to attract visitors to our unique Borough.
- The Council recognises that it can therefore support the economic well-being of our area by retaining and communicating the characteristics that hold us apart from our neighbours and competitors.
- The priorities of the Council under this heading include
  o Place making,
  o Place management; and
Place marketing

Cheshire East Local Transport Plan and Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2011-2026:

- Policy H2 Promotion of Active Travel and Healthy activities: Work in partnership to promote walking, cycling and horse riding as active travel options and healthy activities: Promote opportunities and facilities.
- Policy H3: Public rights of way and green infrastructure: Protect and enhance our public rights of way and green infrastructure and endeavour to create new links where beneficial for health, safety or access to greenspaces: leisure routes for cyclists, horse riders and walkers.

Defra Rights of Way Circular

Proposed developments which would have a direct/indirect and significant effect on a Public Right of Way constitutes “a material consideration in the determination of applications for planning permission and local planning authorities should ensure that the potential consequences are taken into account whenever such applications are considered” (Defra Rights of Way Circular (1/09), Guidance for Local Authorities, Version 2, October 2009, para 7.2).

“any alternative alignment [of a Public Right of Way] should avoid the use of estate roads for the purpose wherever possible and preference should be given to the use of made up estate paths through landscaped or open space areas away from vehicular traffic” (Defra Rights of Way Circular (1/09), Guidance for Local Authorities, Version 2, October 2009, para 7.8).

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence

In order to encourage people to walk and cycle for travel purposes, specific support and facilities should be offered to people at a ‘transition point’ in their lives, for instance, when they are changing job, house or school. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidance Walking and cycling: local measures to promote walking & cycling as forms of travel or recreation, November 2012, states that “at these times people may be open to trying a new mode of transport or new types of recreation”. It is therefore important that the facilities for walking and cycling, including routes, destination signage and information materials, are completed and available for use prior to the first occupation of any property within any phase of the development, and remain available for use during the completion of other phases.

Inactivity and health

There is considerable evidence to show that exercise can improve physical and mental health and reduce the risk by 20-50% of a wide range of conditions including some cancers, muscular-skeletal conditions and coronary heart disease. Inactivity is responsible for 17% of early deaths in the UK. In 2010, each Primary Care Trust was spending an average of £6.2m per year on dealing with the consequences of physical inactivity, with an inactive
person spends 37% more days in hospital and visits the doctor 5.5% more often than an active personiii.

Physical activity is now a major strand of national policy to prevent ill health and tackle health inequalities, with the first national cross-government framework outlined in Be active, be healthy: A plan for getting the nation moving (DoH, February 2009). This is reiterated in the objectives of the Public Health Outcomes Framework for England which comprises 2 outcomes, both of which can be delivered through the project:
- Outcome 1: Increased healthy life expectancy; and,
- Outcome 2: Reduced differences in life expectancy and healthy life expectancy between communities.

The Chief Medical Officer for England stated that “for most people, the easiest and most acceptable forms of physical activity are those that can be incorporated into every day life. Examples include walking or cyclingiv”. A range of factors influence levels of healthy activity, with research concluding that both “soft” measures that promote walking and “hard” measures that provide high quality infrastructure are necessary to reduce the barriers that prevent people from walkingv.

Research supports the use of walking activity and high quality green spaces access programmes as a cost effective method of delivering public health improvement interventionsvi, with a cost-benefit ratio of 1 to 7 and a cost per quality-adjusted life year (QALY) of between £750 and £3150, well below the NICE value-for-money thresholdvii.

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i Walking for Health: Walking Works – summary report


iii Walking for Health Factsheet for Local Authorities

iv Chief Medical Officer’s Report (2004) At least 5 times a week: evidence on the impact of physical activity and its relationship to health, Department of Health

v Heron, c & Bradshaw, G. (2010) Walk this Way: Recognising value in active health prevention. Local Government Information Unit and Natural England


vii Wang, G., Macera, C., Scudder-Soucie, B., Schmid, T., Pratt, M., Buchner, D, A cost-benefit analysis of physical activity using bike/pedestrian trails, Health Promotion Practice, April 2005, Volume 6, Number 2, pages 174-179

centre-based exercise, community-based walking and advice only, Health Technology Assessment, 2007, Volume 11, Issue 10, pages 1-184

Hillsdon, M., Jones, A. & Coombes, E. For Natural England Green spaces access, green space use, physical activity and overweight: a research summary. David Stone, Natural England

Walking for Health Factsheet for Local Authorities