

Harston Neighbourhood Plan – January 2025 Consultation

Response on behalf of the Cambridge Group of the Ramblers, a statutory consultee

Introduction

The Cambridge Group of the Ramblers welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft Harston Neighbourhood Plan. The focus of our response relates to proposals which impact on the opportunities for recreational walking both within the parish and on linking paths to neighbouring parishes. It appears that most of the relevant discussion and policies are covered by Chapter 12 'Active Travel'.

Detailed response

Whilst we support Objectives 14 and 15 insofar as they aim to improve the connectivity and safety of 'non-motorised' travel routes, we consider that an opportunity has been missed to state clearly that there is the need for an improved network of public rights of way (PRoWs). Compared to many other parishes Harston has very poor provision of public footpaths, bridleways and byways. As Map 17 shows, there are a number of 'permissive' footpaths, but their future is very precarious as the landowners could withdraw access at any time.

The draft Plan is constrained by relegating the discussion of all recreational walking, horse-riding and off-road cycling routes to the heading 'Active Travel'. The Plan's authors should be made aware that Cambridgeshire County Council defines 'active travel' in tightly constrained terms. It is overwhelmingly concerned with getting people out of cars and onto 'wheels' or their feet – but purely for such purposes as going to work, schools, shops, the doctors etc. It completely ignores recreation – going for a countryside walk. Reference is made in 12.4 to Cambridgeshire County Council's Active Travel Strategy and Active Travel Toolkit for New Developments as guiding the proposals for all non-motorized travel. It is of great concern that no mention at all is made of the same County Council's 'Rights of Way Improvement Plan', last updated in 2016. It is this document which provides a framework for developing recreational routes.

We recommend changing the heading of Chapter 12 to 'Active Travel and Recreational Routes', reflecting the discussion and proposals.

It is difficult to measure the demand for recreational walking and cycling routes, although increased use of paths was observed when Covid meant that residents sought out local opportunities for exercise. The Plan's authors might also like to consider the fact that DEFRA estimates that the UK dog population is now around 13.5 million, with 33% of households owning 1 or more dogs. All of these need walking – and most owners prefer paths away from hard surface pavements!

When considering the 'aspirations' for rural routes, as shown on Map 18 and detailed in Policy HAR 21, it is clear that only some of these are underpinned by the 'active travel' objective – routes (1), (3), (4) and route (6). Routes (2), (5), (7) and (8) are all about recreation! So PLEASE make it clear that Chapter 12 is about far more than reducing car use; it should promote the use of appropriate off-road, non-motorised paths for recreation. Physical activity improves both physical and mental health and is essential for dog owners!

As already mentioned, Harston has a relatively poor network of PRoWs. The heavy reliance on 'permissive' paths, both now and in the future, is very precarious, as permission can be removed at any time. Do not assume that these will be available in future. It would be very helpful if local landowners with 'permissive paths' and who are unwilling to support new public rights of way could

be encouraged to enter into agreements with the Highways Authority (Cambridgeshire County Council), to provide permissive paths for a specified length of time. For example, some permissive routes close to Cambridge have been approved for a 15 or 20 year period. Landowners concerned about dogs running through crops could sign paths, requiring animals to be kept on a short lead.

We suggest that it would be useful if Map 17 could show Public Rights of Way in adjacent parishes, for example the public footpath to Barrington. Could the dead-end public footpath to St Margaret's Mount and the Obelisk be continued as a circular path back to Harston?

Finally, it is of concern that 'aspirational rural route 3', on the road verge to Newton, has been allowed by Cambridgeshire County Council to get into a poor state of repair. The County Council initially developed this safe route, but has done nothing to maintain it.

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