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Mid Devon Green Infrastructure Strategy-Initial Consultation

Presentational Issues

This is clearly intended to be a wide-ranging exercise, looking (as it should) at the whole range of environmental factors, notwithstanding the wide diversity of ownership and control that these entail across both private and public sectors.

The point I want to make here is that as the strategy develops, and documents are published, there will need to be clarity and realism about which aspects the District Council can directly control, which aspects it can realistically hope to develop in partnership with others and which aspects are merely aspirational.

I will give just two examples:

The first is that the launch document heavily features images of the Knightshayes Estate, which is certainly a prime environmental asset within the District, but which is owned and managed by the National Trust.

The second is that public access to the countryside, including rights of way, cycle routes and public footpaths, will clearly be a core issue. However footpaths are largely administered at County rather than District level and creating or enhancing routes of whatever category usually involves complex negotiations with multiple owners.

It would be counterproductive, and undermine credibility, to produce a strategy document spanning the entire green infrastructure without including a realistic analysis of the actual levers of change in terms of ownership, authority and funding.

Having made that general point, I would like to comment on just two of the policy areas outlined in the consultation document:

Objective 1 ...Encouraging Green Tourism

There is much scope here as Mid Devon is rich in unspoilt natural attractions, many of which are little known to visitors and well off the usual Devon tourist itineraries. It will however be important to improve access, awareness and revenues without the commercialisation which would alter the essential charm & nature of the area.

Much of the district's hinterland is accessed by many miles of narrow lanes, often sunk into the landscape and bordered by high hedges or "Devon Banks". Whether travelling on foot, bicycle or by car there are many locations where views over, and access into, the countryside could be greatly enhanced by a small pull-in, viewpoint or layby. Only the most intrepid walker is likely to use paths if there is neither a bus-stop nor a parking place within a mile of the trail-head. Similarly, many travellers will pass through but, because of the restricted views and limited stopping places, remain unaware of what they are missing. Maybe this situation could be improved in carefully selected locations throughout the district; the works involved would be small scale, low impact and low budget.

Objective 2...Enhancing Rights of Way and Cycling Networks

On paper, there is a good network of existing footpaths within the district, but on the ground there are too many instances where walkers either have to abandon their excursion, or end up wandering off the right of way. For the following reasons, access is not as good in practice as the maps and leaflets might suggest.

Signage is often adequate where a path intersects a public road, but is confusing or entirely missing once out into the countryside. Although on some occasions this might be the result of deliberate action by vandals or landowners, it is actually against the interest of the landowner as well as the walker as once people lose the track, they are much more likely to stray over planted ground, disturb livestock or unwittingly trespass into private areas.

There are also far too many instances where access to footpaths is deliberately made difficult, dangerous or simply unpleasant by the way in which the land is managed. Whilst a right of way may not actually be blocked, walkers (especially those less versed in the ways of the countryside) are much less likely to continue a walk or repeat the experience if to do so they have to hazard a gateway through fifty head of closely packed cattle in eighteen inches of mud and slurry.

Let me give two examples each of good and bad practice within the district.

The Good:

The Grand Canal Towpath. There are several access points with adequate parking, There is good signage and it is accessible to walkers and cyclists in most conditions. The interests of anglers are well reconciled with the needs of other recreational users. As a result it is very well used and provides good exercise, glorious vistas over the Mid Devon countryside and non-motorised access to several villages. Use of the canal itself as an active waterway could be further encouraged.

The Sandford Millennium Path. Once again it is well signposted and provides year-round access to walkers and cyclists. It is frequently used by visitors on foot to Sandford, increasing trade in the village pubs and shop and thus improving the rural economy at the same time as reducing car use. It also serves a valuable safety function in separating motor traffic on the adjacent busy and narrow road from those who choose to travel on foot or by bike.

The Less Good

The District is traversed by at least two long-distance footpaths, the Two Moors Way and the Exe Valley Trail. These attractive names and their promotional leaflets raise expectations that the track will be well signposted, respected by landowners and of a standard that can easily be followed by well-shod walkers in most conditions. Sections of both routes falls far short of these standards and really there ought to be a determined effort to improve public access along both these potentially valuable assets. In the longer term, it would be good if they could be upgraded to cycle as well as pedestrian use, as that not only opens them up to another category of user but ensures that they are well enough delineated to protect their continuity.

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