

Leicester
City Council

WARDS AFFECTED
Rushey Mead Aylestone Rowley Fields
Beaumont Leys East Knighton Coleman

FORWARD TIMETABLE OF CONSULTATION AND MEETINGS:

Cabinet

17^h June 2002

Proposed Local Nature Reserves

Report of the Corporate Director of Environment, Regeneration and Development and the Corporate Director of Culture Services and Neighbourhood Renewal

1 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To authorise the declaration of Local Nature Reserves at Watermead Country Park, Watermead Ecology Park and Birstall Meadows; Goss Meadows and the Orchards in Anstey Green Wedge; Knighton Spinney; and the Greenlife Reserve and the Rally Bank next to Humberstone Park.
- 1.2 To confirm Aylestone Meadows, with a slightly amended boundary, as a proposed Local Nature Reserve, and to authorise the required consultations and formal declaration procedures.

2. Summary

- 2.1 The proposed Nature Reserves are some of the best sites for wildlife in Leicester. Declaring and managing these sites as Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) demonstrates the City Council's commitment to nature conservation, environmental awareness and lifelong learning.
- 2.2 The proposed LNRs are shown on the attached plans. 6 of the sites (Goss Meadows, The Orchards, Knighton Spinney, Watermead Ecology Park, Greenlife Reserve and Rally Bank) have been managed as Nature Reserves for a number of years by Environ on behalf of the City Council, funded through a Service Level Agreement. Watermead Country Park is managed for nature conservation and for informal recreation. Although it is owned by the City Council, part of it is within Charnwood District. Aylestone Meadows has been managed for nature conservation since the process for declaring it as a LNR began in 1994. This process was never completed and it is important that this is done, with a minor change to the original boundary, so that Aylestone can be eligible for grant aid (see 2.4 below).
- 2.3 LNRs are defined in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 as being '*land managed for the purpose of providing . . . special opportunities for the study of . . . the flora and fauna of Great Britain, or of preserving flora and fauna of special interest.*' Ideas have changed a little since then, and English Nature now recognise that the main function of LNRs is the opportunity they give people to

become involved in practical nature conservation work and in caring for wildlife and their local environment.

- 2.4 LNR declaration opens the door to small and medium scale grants for improvements to nature conservation, public access and interpretation of the sites, through English Nature's LNR Grants Scheme, the Heritage Lottery's New Opportunities' Fund and other grant regimes. Environ have already secured £76,000 of grant aid for their Nature Reserves, which is conditional on LNR status.

3 Recommendations

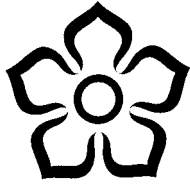
- 3.1 That, following consultation with English Nature and agreement with Charnwood District Council, the land at Watermead is declared a LNR.
- 3.2 That the formal procedure of declaring Aylestone Meadows a LNR is completed, with a minor amendment to the original boundary proposed in 1990.
- 3.3 That following consultation with English Nature the 6 nature reserves managed by Environ for the City Council are jointly declared a LNR.

4 Headline Financial and Legal Implications

- 4.1 There are no financial implications to declaring a LNR. The sites already have allocated budgets through the Grounds Maintenance and Country Parks budgets, the Environ Service Level Agreement and as part of the Riverside Project. However LNR status creates opportunities for grants which the sites do not have at present, for which the above budgets can be used as match funding.
- 4.2 LNR can be declared by Local Authorities in areas over which they have jurisdiction, using powers under Sections 19 and 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act (1949), after consultation with English Nature. LNRs can only be declared by Local Authorities on land which they own or have a legal interest in. Because part of Watermead Country Park is within Charnwood, the District Council would need to delegate powers to the City Council in order that the City can complete the declaration of the site as a LNR.
- 4.3 LNR status is a statutory designation. However, the responsibility for declaring them rests with Local Authorities, on consultation with English Nature. The power of de-declaration, should the land be required for other purposes, also rests with the Local Authority, again after consultation with English Nature.

5 Officers to contact

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Ray Tunks, Parks Development Services Manager (ext. 7357)



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FORWARD TIMETABLE OF CONSULTATION AND MEETINGS:

Leader's Briefing
Cabinet

27th May 2002

17th June 2002

Proposed Local Nature Reserves

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1. Purpose of Local Nature Reserves (LNRs)

LNRs should be the priority sites for nature conservation in the city and for public enjoyment of wildlife, and should be a focus for environmental awareness activities and programmes. The relevant goal within the Community Plan is:

'To protect and enhance the role of Leicester's parks, trees and open spaces as an amenity for people and a home for wildlife'.

Declaring the sites as LNRs can be the key to improvements in nature conservation, environmental awareness and public access to the countryside. LNR status is an obvious signal of the Council's commitment to the environment, to sustainable development and to national and regional biodiversity.

2 Watermead and Birstall

2.1 Watermead Country Park is at the southern extreme of a larger complex of lakes and wetlands created as a result of gravel extraction within the floodplain of the River Soar. Gravel extraction in the area owned by the City ceased in 1989, and landscape improvements to convert the two flooded gravel pits and the surrounding land into a Country Park took place from 1989 to 1994. The administrative boundary between the City Council and Charnwood District Council cuts through the northern of the two lakes, but the City Council own and manage both lakes and the surrounding land, including the area within Charnwood. The former gravel pits to the north are also managed by the County Council as a Country Park.

2.2 In the past the northern of the two lakes has been used for windsurfing and other non-noisy aquatic sports, but this has now ceased. A small amount of angling takes place on the northern lake. These recreational activities are compatible with nature conservation objectives, as long as they are well managed and supervised.

- 2.3 Watermead Country Park is particularly important for waterfowl and other birds, and for its wetland habitats associated with the two lakes. It has the only area of reed bed habitat in the City, which is a rare habitat within our region and a national priority for conservation.
- 2.4 **Birstall Meadows** is on the opposite bank to the Country Park, and is also owned by the City Council. It is a series of damp meadows grazed by cattle under a grazing licence, and is managed by Property Services. It is regularly flooded in winter. When flooded it complements the open water habitats of the Country Park, and is important as a feeding area during winter for waterbirds such as geese and waders. It also has species-rich grassland and wetland habitats. Being grazing land it is not managed as public open space, but there is informal public access and a public right of way crosses one of the fields. As a patch of 'real' and traditionally managed countryside it is an attractive counterpart to the Country Park, which is essentially a recent man-made habitat.
- 2.5 **Watermead Ecology Park** is owned by the City Council but leased to the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust. It is managed on their behalf by Environ, through the Council's Service Level Agreement, in accordance with an agreed management plan. Part of the site was formerly allotments and pony paddocks, but in the 1990s a large pool was created and much of the surrounding area was planted with trees. An important principle of the site's Management Plan is that local people are involved in the care of the site, and most of the work on site is carried out by volunteers.

3. Aylestone Meadows Nature Reserve

- 3.1 Aylestone Meadows is particularly important for species-rich grasslands and has the largest and best examples of this habitat in the City. The rivers Soar and Biam flow through the site, and together with their associated tributaries, ponds, marshland and wetlands they are also important habitats. It has long been recognised by the Council as being a priority site for management as a nature reserve. Much of the northern part of the site is owned by Arts and Leisure and most of the southern part is managed by Property Services through grazing licences. The Great Central Way, owned by the Environment and Development Department, runs through the centre of the site.
- 3.2 During 1990 the Recreation, Planning, Property, Public Services and Policy and Resources Committees approved the proposal to declare it a LNR, after appropriate consultations. Whilst some of the consultations took place, such as with English Nature and Blaby District Council, other consultations such as with British Waterways and the Environment Agency were not completed. The nature reserve was launched at an event in June 1994, but the site was never formally and legally declared a LNR.
- 3.3 The site has always been managed as a nature reserve, and a draft management plan was commissioned from Environ. This plan has not been adopted and some of its recommendations have not been implemented due to resource implications. However many of the recommendations, especially those regarding changes in procedures to protect wildlife value, have been adopted and implemented. This draft management plan is now in need of review.

- 3.4 The original LNR proposed in 1990 included an area of land outside the City, in Blaby. A legal agreement with Blaby District Council was signed in May 1994 concerning the declaration of this land, which is owned by the City Council, as a LNR. This agreement is still valid.
- 3.5 The 1990 proposal also included the Grand Union canal through Aylestone. It would be necessary to enter into a long-term management agreement with British Waterways before this section of canal could be declared a LNR. This is likely to be a lengthy procedure which would delay formal declaration of the whole site. Although important for wildlife, the canal is not an integral part of the proposed Aylestone LNR, and its prime purpose is as a navigational waterway. It is not considered that the advantages of including the canal within the LNR is justified by this time delay, and therefore a slight amendment to the original boundary proposed in 1990, is proposed, to exclude the canal. If necessary the canal could be the subject of a 'Phase 2' of Aylestone LNR declaration.

4. Knighton Spinney

- 4.1 This is one of the best and largest woodlands in Leicester and is a very popular feature of Knighton Park. It is opened for one day a month by local volunteers, supported by Environ, and is managed by the City Council. It was planted with oak and ash in the 19th century and has developed into an attractive woodland, full of woodland birds, Wood Anemones and other attractive wildflowers in Spring.

5. Greenlife Reserve and Rally Bank.

- 5.1 The eastern part of the city has fewer natural open spaces than the western side, so sites like this are particularly valuable for giving people the opportunity to see wildlife on their doorstep. Both sites are managed by Environ, mainly by volunteers, and are adjacent to Humberstone Park. The Rally Bank is a former railway embankment, now colonised by woodland, and the Greenlife reserve is disused allotments, now a mixture of scrub grassland with a small pond.

6. Goss Meadows and The Orchards (Anstey Green Wedge)

- 6.1 These sites are granted to the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust on licences but are managed by Environ through the SLA. Most of the practical conservation work is done by volunteers. Goss Meadows is a narrow but extremely rich strip of grassland alongside the Anstey Lane, which supports some unusual wildflowers, like Spiny Restharrow. It is one of the best areas of grassland in Leicester, and may have once been a drover's lane used by farmers driving their livestock into the City's markets. The Orchards reserve used to be allotments, but is now developing into woodland whilst retaining some of the original orchard trees from the allotments. The last few allotments have recently closed and it is proposed that the existing nature reserve is extended to include this area.

7. LNRs, public access and recreation

- 7.1 LNRs are not just for specialists in natural history, or for formal education, although these groups are important users of LNRs. LNRs are places where everyone can

enjoy wildlife in an attractive setting at whatever level they want to, and in general access by all is to be encouraged. Many countryside recreational uses such as rambling, angling, sailing, orienteering, dog walking, bird-watching, cycling and horse-riding are compatible with nature conservation aims, as long as they are well managed and supervised. By participating in these kinds of activities, people are getting out into the fresh air and the natural environment, with benefits to their health and fitness. For most people that take part in these pursuits, seeing and enjoying wildlife is part of the attraction of the activity. Grazing, such as at Aylestone Meadows and Birstall Meadows, is also compatible - indeed essential - for nature conservation as long as it is well managed.

- 7.2 Declaration of an LNR would not stop these kind of activities. The existing grazing and recreational uses should continue, and LNR status should not be seen as an unreasonable constraint on these activities.

8. Management of proposed Local Nature Reserves: The role of Environ and the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers

- 8.1 6 of the sites (The Orchards, Goss Meadows, The Rally Bank, Watermead Ecology Park, Knighton Spinney and the Greenlife reserve, Humberstone) are managed by Environ, funded jointly by Arts and Leisure and Environment & Development through the Service Level Agreement.
- 8.2 The funding supports a Conservation Officer, whose role is to recruit and organise volunteers, primarily from the local community around each reserve. The volunteers help to look after the reserve and carry out practical nature conservation management tasks in accordance with the reserve management plan, under the supervision, training and guidance of the Conservation Officer.
- 8.3 The management plans are agreed between officers in Arts and Leisure, Environment and Development and Environ, and a condition of the SLA is that the actions within the Management Plan are implemented. In the past, Arts and Leisure have carried out major items of work - such as the felling of dangerous trees - which are beyond the scope of volunteers.
- 8.4 The funding also supports a small revenue budget for each reserve, to purchase materials, etc. Environ are often able to use this as leverage for additional small grants or sponsorship for projects on the reserves.
- 8.5 Environ have been successful in obtaining a grant of £76,000 from English Nature, which is conditional on the designation of the sites as LNRs. The grant will support an additional part-time member of staff for three years, plus some funding for capital works. The main purpose of this new post will be to increase the volunteer input into the sites, to increase use and awareness by the local community through events, publicity, marketing etc., and to develop them as an educational resource for local schools and as a place for lifelong learning opportunities.
- 8.6 Through this programme of community involvement it is hoped to engender a feeling of ownership of and respect for the sites by local people, targetting problems such as the issue of flytipping and litter at the Rally Bank. Environ are at present working with

officers within the Arts and Leisure department to look at practical solutions to this problem.

- 8.7 Environ volunteers are also becoming involved in specialist nature conservation management tasks at Watermead County park, funded through the SLA, and it is intended to increase this involvement in future years. This is in addition to the maintenance work carried out by City Landscapes through the Grounds Maintenance contract.
- 8.8 At Aylestone, many of the specialist nature conservation tasks are carried out by the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, supervised by the Riverside Rangers and funded through E&D's Riverside budgets. Again, this is in addition to the maintenance work carried out by City Landscapes through the Grounds Maintenance contract.

9 Financial and Legal implications

- 9.1 There are no financial implications of declaring a LNR. The sites already have allocated budgets through the Grounds Maintenance and Country Parks budgets, the Environ Service Level Agreement and as part of the Riverside Project. However LNR status creates opportunities for grants which the sites do not have at present, for which the above budgets can be used as match funding.
- 9.2 Local Nature Reserves can be declared by Local Authorities in areas over which they have jurisdiction, using powers under Sections 19 and 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act (1949), after consultation with English Nature. LNRs can only be declared by Local Authorities on land which they own or have a legal interest in. Because part of the City-owned Watermead Country Park is within Charnwood, the District Council would need to delegate powers to the City Council in order that the City can complete the declaration of the site as an LNR.
- 9.3 LNR status would not be an additional constraint on development of these sites, since they are already afforded protection from harmful developments by their current Local Plan designations as Green Wedge and Nature Area and their status as SINC's. LNR or SINC status does not necessarily preclude developments intended to benefit the site and its wildlife, such as visitor centres, etc., as long as they are sensitively sited. Apart from the initial consultation when the land is declared, there is no requirement to consult English Nature over any other proposals which do not need planning permission. However, LNR status does create a public expectation of good management for wildlife and people, but this is not a statutory requirement.
- 9.4 LNR status will not affect the use of the some of the sites for grazing, under licence. The licences are already conditioned to protect wildlife, and grazing is necessary to maintain the sites' value.

10 Other Implications

<i>Other implication</i>		paragraph references within supporting information
Equal Opportunities	no	
Policy	yes	1

Sustainable and Environmental	yes	1 (and throughout)
Crime and Disorder	no	
Human Rights Act	no	
Elderly/People on Low Income	no	

11. Consultations

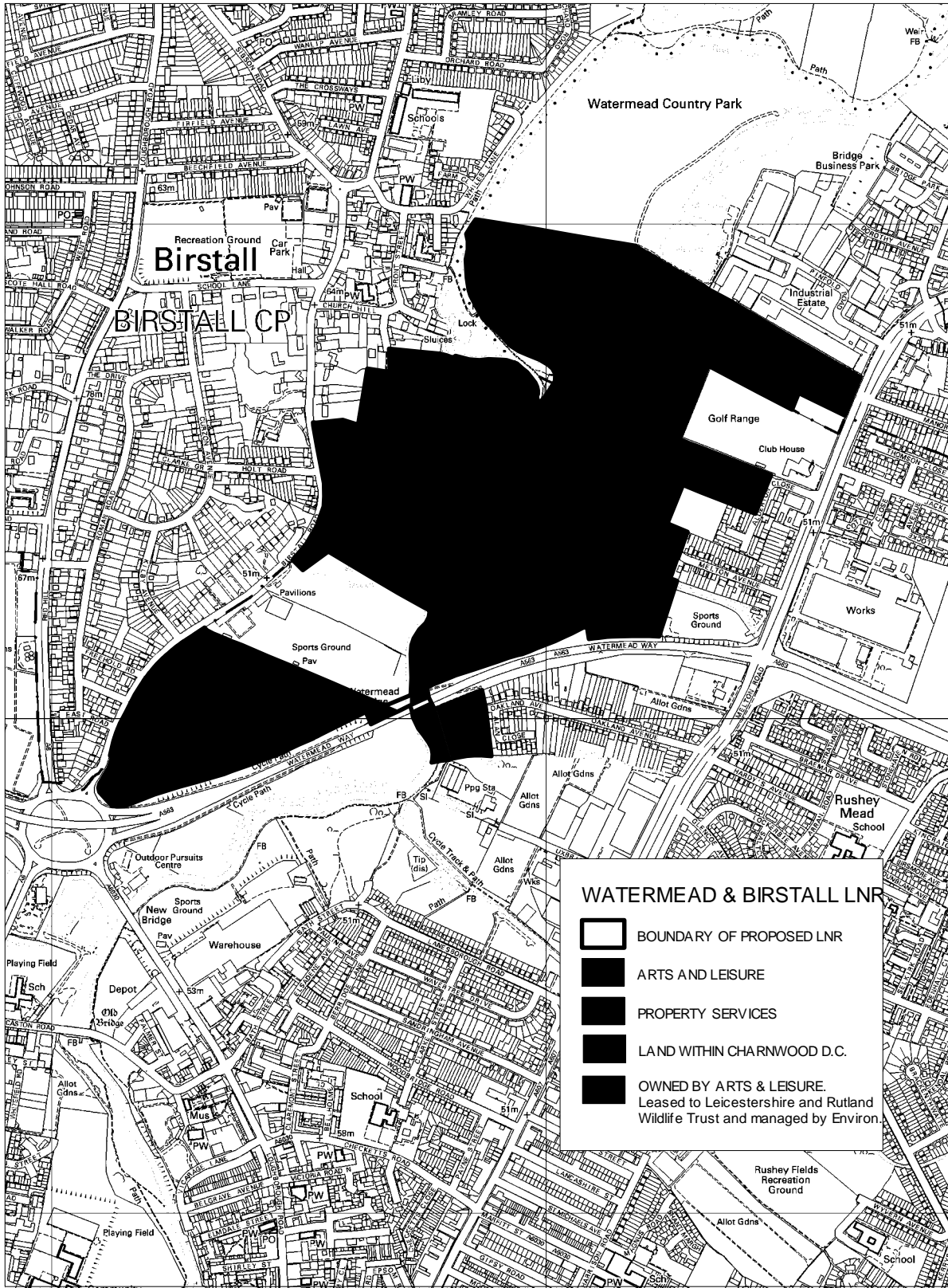
Adrian Lane and Peter Flavel, Riverside Rangers, E & D:
 Barry Ingram, Country Parks Ranger, A & L
 Bob Mullins, Senior Monitoring Officer, Grounds Maintenance, A & L
 David Robinson and Parul Valand, Property Services, E & D
 Eddie Tyrer, Highways, E & D
 Anna Dodd, Environment Team, E&D
 Andy Lees, Environ

12. Background Papers - Local Government Act 1972






D1 Environ SLA

13. Officers to contact:

Sue Timms, ext. 7268
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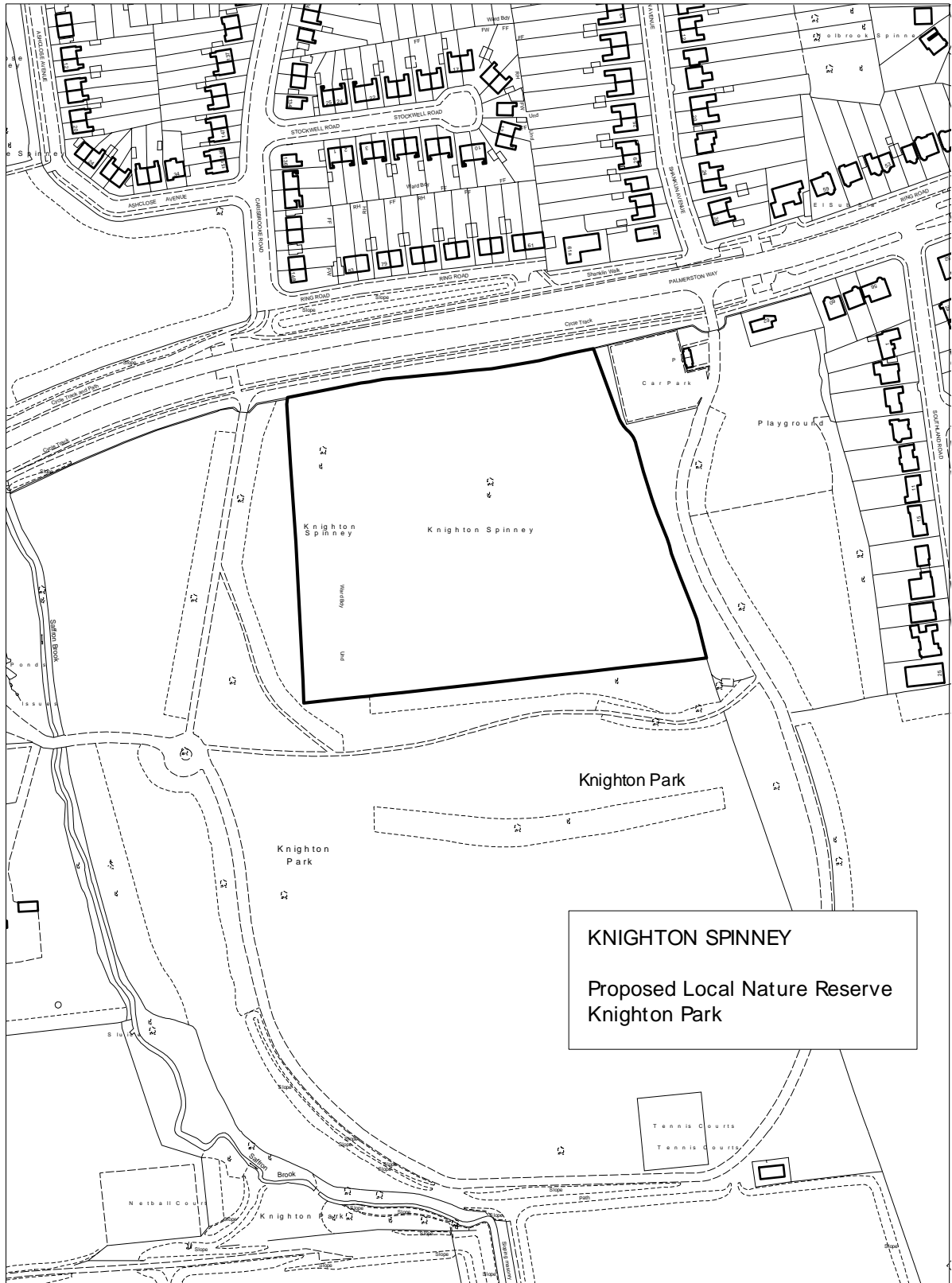
WATERMEAD & BIRSTALL LNR

-  BOUNDARY OF PROPOSED LNR
-  ARTS AND LEISURE
-  PROPERTY SERVICES
-  LAND WITHIN CHARNWOOD D.C.
-  OWNED BY ARTS & LEISURE.
Leased to Leicestershire and Rutland
Wildlife Trust and managed by Environ

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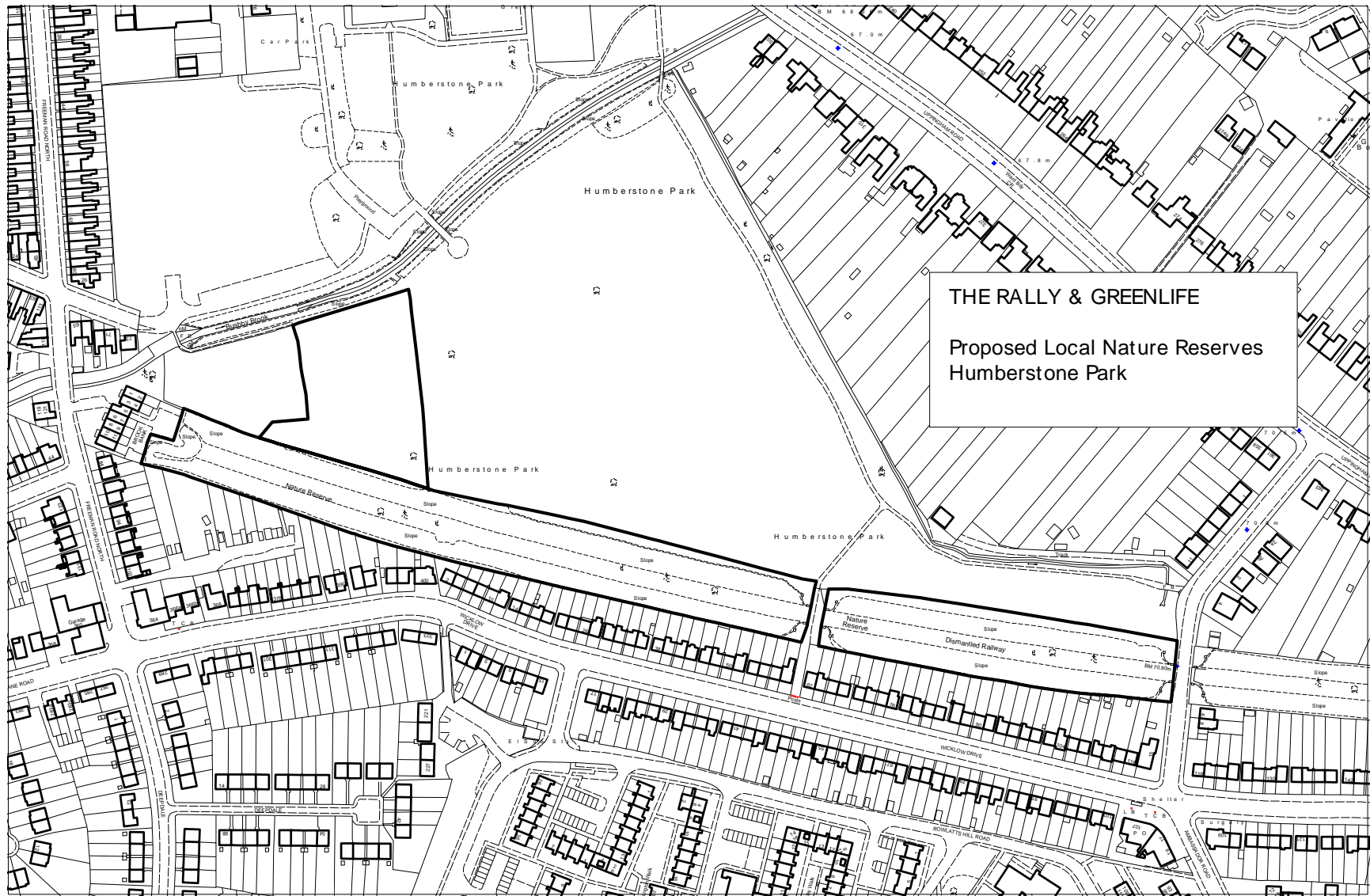
The Director,
Environment, Development & Commercial Services
Leicester City Council



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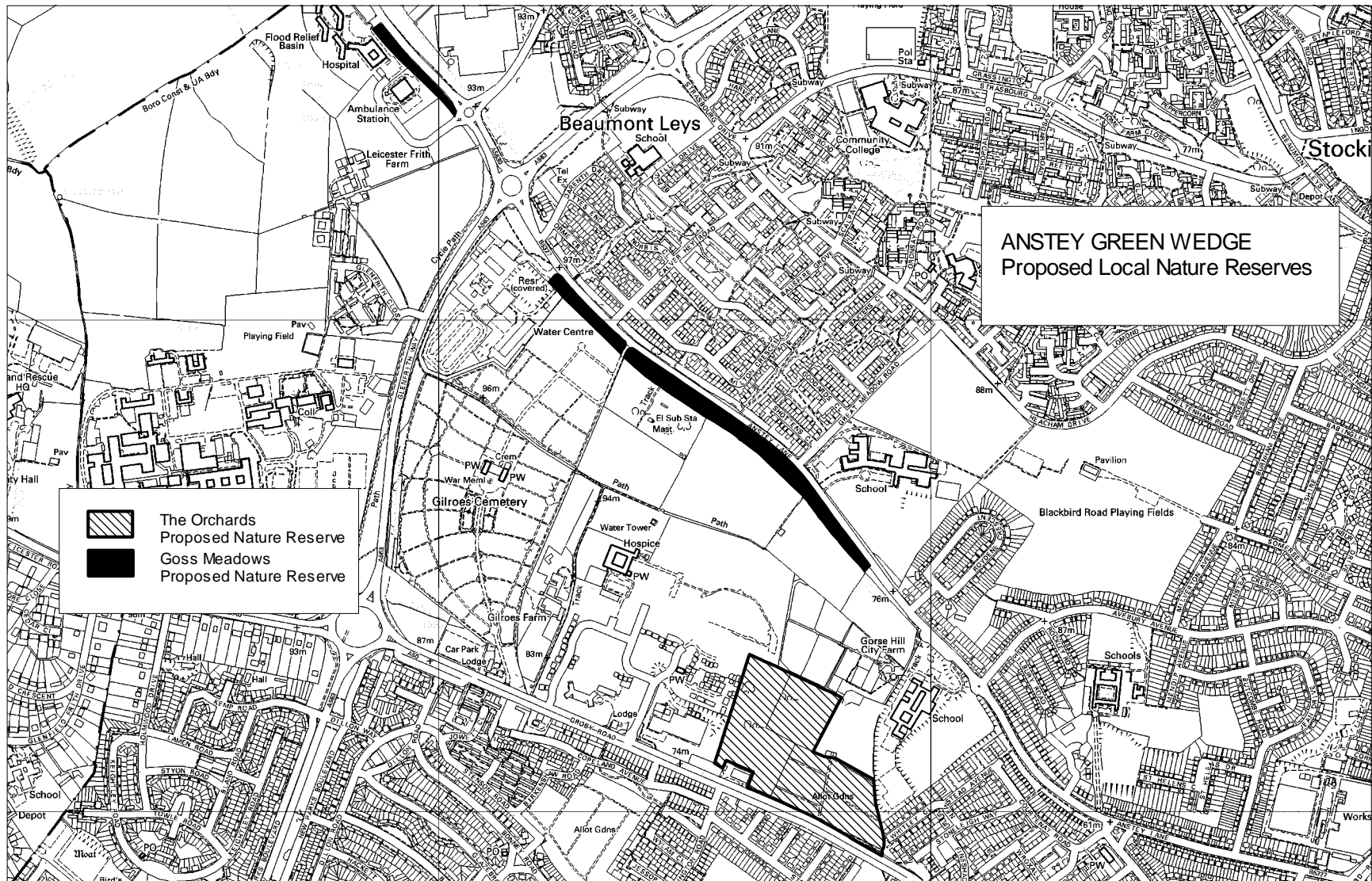


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