Luton Local Access Forum (LLAF) letter of advice re. Power Court Stadium Development Proposal - Application 24/01075/HYBEIA

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Signatories: LLAF:

Mamnun Khan (Chair), John Mardle (Vice Chair), Louis Upton, Michel Titmus, Neville Williams, Russell Cartwright

Executive summary

The Power Court stadium proposal presents a unique opportunity to unearth and revitalise the River Lea through Luton's town centre. For years, this chalk stream has been culverted, depriving residents of natural river access, which has significantly reduced the town's ecosystem, community space, and cultural heritage. The LLAF recommendation is to fully deculvert the river at Power Court, providing a riverbank and green spaces to increase biodiversity, reduce pollution, and create a lasting legacy for Luton, not just those attending the stadium.

Background

The River Lea originates from springs in ancient chalk downland, creating a marshland and a rich, fertile valley. Unfortunately, the river has been diverted underground and degraded over the past century. Luton Football Club's plan to relocate its stadium to the Power Court site provides an opportunity to restore the river as a natural feature. Initially, the club proposed bringing the river to the surface along Church Street, bordered by retail, cafes, and other amenities. However, a 2021 revision altered this approach, retaining the river underground due to financial considerations, raising concerns about lost ecological benefits and the missed chance to enhance Luton's natural heritage.

Subsequently, a revised plan shared on Luton Developments (Facebook) on May 14, 2024, proposes redirecting the river along the site's perimeter on Church Street, with a small portion exposed in the northwest corner. While it initially seemed that the river might remain partially culverted, the LLAF believes this approach would still forgo a significant opportunity to fully surface the river, creating natural banks with trees to support wildlife and provide an accessible green space for the community. Since the site

construction will begin from the ground up, deculverting would enhance heritage, landscape, biodiversity, and community amenities across the area.

The LLAF proposal aligns with Environment Agency guidelines, encouraging the deculverting of rivers to benefit local communities and ecosystems. It would also complement nearby green spaces, such as St. Mary's Church and the River Lea Linear Park, improving not just access to the river and also a scenic river space for Luton's residents, visitors and wider community alike.

LLAF recommendation considers the following key benefits:

1. **River Revitalisation**
   Deculverting the river aligns with Environment Agency policy, providing wildlife corridors and enhancing Luton's environment. Improved river access would benefit residents and visitors, encouraging sustainable interaction with local water resources.
2. **Climate mitigation and health**
   Where it is not possible to have green roofs and solar installations, natural remedies (hedges and bushes) are recommended to offset urban heat islands, absorption of surface water and pollution, as well as produce aesthetic appealing landscape. Collaboration with others to provide a green space "offset" should not restrict or unduly impact residents access to green spaces.
3. **Natural flood management**
   Exposed riverbanks could create essential habitats while managing flood risk. A bank on one side would reduce flood hazards and enhance water retention, ensuring more sustainable urban water management.
4. **Cost savings and efficiency**
   Moving the river to the southwest perimeter could be more cost-effective than burying it, easing necessary sewage upgrades in line with the stadium's increased needs.
5. **Pollution control**
   A visible river could help monitor and control pollution. Planting along the riverbank would naturally filter contaminants, making clean-up easier and the environment healthier.
6. **Enhanced living environment for residents**
   Residents in nearby flats would benefit from views of green spaces, tree-

lined riverbanks, and improved air quality, balancing stadium noise with natural surroundings.

7. **Sustainable infrastructure**
   The stadium, residential buildings, and other facilities will require robust sewage upgrades to handle increased occupancy, ensuring long-term river health.

8. **Improved access for southern Luton**
   Extending river access to southern Luton would create new walking and cycling routes, improving connectivity, air quality, and recreational spaces.

9. **Connectivity with the national trail**
   Power Court serves as a key connection in the River Lea Linear Park, linking the northern and southern parts of town with Luton Hoo and other local attractions. Deculverting would enhance the National Trail.

10. **Community support and legacy**
    The deculverting initiative aligns with the community's interests and Luton's natural heritage goals. A restored river would symbolise a commitment to environmental stewardship and community welfare.

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