



BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

Report

AGENDA ITEM 7

Date 11 June 2003

Title Improving Access to the Countryside – Making a Start

Author Nick Jeffery, Forum Member

Contact Officer Karen Jones (01296) 383614

Summary

1. This paper proposes that the Local Access Forum instigates a practical pilot project to provide 'Access for All' across a significant area straddling the Buckinghamshire/Oxfordshire county boundary. Within this area all rights of way would be accessible to users of all abilities (consistent with the requirement for reasonable stock control) and all 'Lost Ways' would be researched and incorporated. The pilot project is intended as a demonstration of what can be achieved by co-operative working – both within the Bucks LAF and its partner organisations and also with a neighbouring (Oxfordshire) Countryside Access Forum. The project is also intended to assist work currently under way by Buckinghamshire County Council in deriving its Rights of Way Improvement Plan.

Recommendation

Members of the Forum are requested to:

APPROVE the concept in principle and that contact be made by the Chairman with the Secretariat of the Oxfordshire Countryside Access Forum

PARTICIPATE in a preliminary survey walk in the selected area with invited users, local councillors and land managers (to be organised by Author of this paper, timing to be determined)

CONSIDER, prior to the next meeting, the role they, and organisations with which they are connected, can play in building a consensus of support and in implementing the project

The Project

2. To take the area bounded by the B4009 (Chinnor to Longwick), A4129 (Longwick to Thame) and B4445 (Thame to Chinnor). Approximately half this area is in Buckinghamshire, half is in Oxfordshire. The ultimate aim within this area would be:
 - To have no fixed physical obstructions across any public right of way which would prevent a pushchair or wheelchair using that right of way. Accessible gates/kissing gates with wheelchair access would (where necessary) replace stiles and other obstructive features. Structures over watercourses and other physical features would permit wheelchair/pushchair use. The principle expressed in the relevant British Standard (BS5709:2001) of the 'least obstructive option' would be employed – mindful always that legitimate stock control must be provided for.
 - To have conclusively recorded all 'Lost Ways' with their correct status
3. To have no fixed physical obstructions might seem an ambitious aim. Given the topography of the area though it should be perfectly achievable – it merely requires a fundamental re-think of how access to the countryside is to be provided and strong focus on the objective. This new way of thinking is supported by the law (Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000) and the changing expectations and demographic profile of users (see para 6.2).

Supporting framework

4. The supporting framework underlying the pilot project approach includes:
 - 4.1 The mandated involvement of the LAF in the Rights of Way Improvement Plan process and its role and responsibilities in giving advice on the development and implementation of a recreation and access strategy which sets rights of way and open access in a broad, integrated context and ensures provision is made for all users.
 - 4.2 The 'Lost Ways' project (the recording by 2026 of existing rights which are not currently conclusively recorded). The completion of the 'Lost Ways' project is obviously a pre-requisite before any meaningful assessment can be made of the extent to which the rights of way network meets the existing or future needs of users. It is also necessary to resolve the uncertain status of a number of routes.
 - 4.3 The requirement for joint working/consultation with other Highway Authorities and bodies as outlined in the Statutory Guidance for LAFs
 - 4.4 The involvement of all user and interest groups as encouraged in the Statutory Guidance.
 - 4.5 The requirement placed on Highway Authorities to have specific regard to the needs of blind or partially sighted people and those with mobility problems.

The Area

5. The attached plan (based on the 1:25000 Ordnance Survey map) shows the area described, with the Rights of Way and general highway network depicted in the normal OS manner. Annotated on the plan are:

- The County Boundary (black continuous line) – between Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire
- The boundary of the project area (black dashed line) – that bounded by the three above roads
- Potential 'Lost Ways' (red dashed lines) – broadly speaking these are either not shown on the Definitive Map at all or are shown with a different status to that which research suggests they actually have. They generally form either continuation pedestrian routes of what are currently cul de sac routes, or make circular routes available for cyclists, equestrian and harness horse drivers
- The Phoenix Trail (green continuous line) – a shared-use pedestrian/equestrian/cycle permissive path managed by Sustrans
- Hotel, pub, refreshment and bed and breakfast facilities (red cross inside circle)

Why this Area?

6. This area is suggested because:

6.1 It is well demarcated by the three bounding roads and is within easy reach of the three bounding towns (Princes Risborough, Chinnor and Thame). It also contains the villages of Longwick, Ilmer, Bledlow and Kingsey (Bucks) and Towersey, Emmington and Henton (Oxon). It would therefore provide a significant accessible local rights of way network to these communities. Being an 'area-based' approach (as opposed to the conventional traditional approach of identifying individual accessible linear routes) it would offer a choice of integrated routes hitherto unavailable to any users unable to surmount physical barriers preventing access.

6.2 Viewed strategically, demographic and land use pressures in the area imply that the availability of local rights of way will be increasingly important. For example, Park Mill Farm, Princes Risborough (on the edge of the designated area) is the largest identified housing development in Wycombe District's Local Plan (with the capacity for 600 dwellings); Census figures show that Chinnor's demographic profile has altered such that there are a substantially larger number of older people than historically. Lea Park Estate in Thame has increased its population substantially. Anecdotally, equestrian use is constantly increasing. The rights of way network, by contrast, has not increased or adjusted to suit such users.

6.3 It spans two counties, with the consequent advantage of enabling an integrated consistent approach to access to be developed, and covers both north and south Rights of Way areas for Buckinghamshire County Council. It will therefore be easy for experience gained through the project to be transferred to other areas.

6.4 It already possesses several wide 'restraint-free' routes of useful length (e.g. the Phoenix Trail from Thame to Princes Risborough; the footpath and bridleway running from Penn Farm, Towersey to Henton; and the bridleway running from Henton to Emmington). It also has very few 'through' tarmac motor roads, and those minor roads it has possess natural 'traffic calming' features. Hence it would allow initial rapid progress to be made quickly.

6.5 It is relatively flat, although slightly undulating, so poses an easier task for all users. (Please note it is certainly not suggested that users with limited mobility can not, or do not want to, access physically more demanding routes – merely that one must start somewhere. Future proposed areas can be far more demanding)

6.6 With regard to facilities, it has a number of pubs, hotels, refreshment and bed and breakfast establishments within, or bounding, it. These could offer general facilities and satisfy the pre-requisite for good disabled access – accessible parking and toilets. It is also located close to 'live' rail lines (London-Marylebone to Birmingham at Princes Risborough/Thame Parkway and the Chinnor and Princes Risborough Railway at Chinnor) with the potential to link in to these stations.

6.7 It provides superb views of the Chilterns and across the Vale of Aylesbury and of such features as Whiteleaf and Bledlow Crosses etc. It also features abundant wildlife – red kites and numerous other birds, hares, badgers, foxes, muntjac are regularly seen.

6.8 It is predominantly pasture so the issues raised by ploughing and cropping of arable fields are largely avoided.

6.9 It contains, from initial research conducted by the Author and others, many 'Lost Ways' of varying status, the recording of which would 'link up' many routes which are currently ostensibly 'culs de sac'. This research includes study of Inclosure Awards, Tithe Awards, railway plans, 1909-1910 Finance Act survey records, old maps, local histories, user evidence and Highway Authority records.

Steps to Implement

7. The following steps are considered necessary to implement the proposal:

7.1 Local Access Forum to approve concept in principle

7.2 An approach is made to Oxfordshire's Countryside Access Forum to establish relationships and seek agreement with the proposal

7.3 Forum members to take proposal back to their own interest group to seek involvement/commitment and determine the contribution they can make to the project, both practically and 'spreading the word'. The early building of consensus with, and support from, for example, County, Parish and Town Councils and land managers is essential and the involvement of all will be vital. The objectives of the project can then be communicated effectively and the experience and knowledge of all may be utilised in the implementation stage.

7.4 Survey of area to identify physical obstructions, special features inhibiting access, location of disabled facilities etc

7.5 Research 'Lost Ways' and process their necessary recording

7.6 Devise programme for removal/replacement of structures, retaining specialist advice where necessary

7.7 Consider funding means for structure replacement – possibilities include routine replacement by landowner; contribution by Highway Authority in accordance with statutory duty/policy; access to charitable funding; access to other funding schemes (Local Transport Plan, 'Vital Villages' etc)

7.8 Maintain the network such that it remains accessible to users

7.9 Select next area and repeat process

The End Result

8. From the limited research conducted by the Author into 'Lost Ways' the end result of this would be a logical, integrated network of footpaths, bridleways, byways and minor roads that would make available routes for all types of users. There will literally be 'Access for All'.
9. It will enable pedestrian users, to whom the traditional network of rights of way has been restricted, the freedom to explore whether they wished to use a certain route without physical constraint, whether by wheelchair, with pushchair, with small children – it will be the user making the decision whether or not a route is suitable, not the physical obstruction across the route deterring or preventing the user.
10. It will enable users who traditionally have been restricted to 'cul de sac' there-and-back linear routes to create circular routes – particularly equestrian users and cyclists - without having to traverse roads with fast-moving traffic.
11. It will provide quiet routes for harness horse drivers who, as a user group, have hitherto had few suitable access opportunities.

What the Proposal is Not

12. This proposal is not about 'tarmac-ing the countryside'. No changes in the surfaces of rural footpaths are envisaged because, it is perceived, users do not want that. It may be considered necessary to develop some form of hierarchy of surfaces such that those prone to damage by, for example, equestrian traffic are rendered more durable than those which are not. The major enemy of surface durability is water and improved drainage (clearing ditches, attention to levels and removing screening vegetation etc) is vital as a first step before any consideration is given to surface 'improvement'.
13. It does not create new rights. It is interesting that the network that would exist (if the potential 'Lost Way' routes are proven) is so logical and comprehensive. No new rights are created under this process, which only involves going through the stages necessary to meet the deadline imposed by law for recording these rights.
14. The First Steps – Prior to Next LAF Meeting
15. To have an initial walk in the area, led by the Author of this paper. It is hoped that participants would include users with mobility problems (e.g. via contact with Disabled Ramblers) and invitees from local councils and land managers within the area.
16. To make contact with Oxfordshire CAF Secretariat to determine initial response to the project proposal
17. To follow up results and agree future action at the next meeting.

Background Papers

None

Your questions and views

If you have any questions about the matters contained in this paper please get in touch with the Contact Officer whose name, telephone number and email address is given at the head of the paper.