

OXFORDSHIRE COUNTRYSIDE ACCESS FORUM

MINUTES OF THIRD MEETING – 7 July 2003
County Hall, Oxford

2003(3)

Attending**Members**

Ian Anderson	John Griffin	Anne Luttnan-Johnson
Anthony Austin	Chris Hall	Sarah Martin
Chris Duncan	Neil Hennion	Tanya Newbery
Christopher Gowers (Chair)	Marilyn Ivings	Harry St John
David Greasby	Andrew Hawkins	Paul Warburton

Officers

Paul Harris OCC- Forum Secretariat/Strategic Countryside Access Officer
Daniel Weeks OCC- Field Officer- west area

Public Presence

6 members of the public were present

Action Points

<i>Action 1:</i> The Secretary to contact the Countryside Agency to demand an additional roadshow venue.
<i>Action 2:</i> The Secretary to attempt to place copies of the local draft maps in Wallingford, Henley or Wantage libraries in consultation with the Library Service.
<i>Action 3:</i> All OCAF members to reserve the 25 July and 3 rd October as OCAF meeting dates.
<i>Action 4:</i> The Secretary to attempt to book Lewknor Village Hall and attendance of English Nature at Aston Rowant Nature Reserve for the 25 July.
<i>Action 5:</i> The Secretary to circulate his proposed consultation letter being sent to Parishes at the next meeting of the Forum.
<i>Action 6:</i> The Secretary to contact the Countryside Agency immediately: To convey their disappointment with the process and demanding another roadshow venue in the south of the county (Action Point 1); To seek reassurance that their views would be taken account of; To request details of pre-issue publicity and to remedy any deficiencies; To request advance notice of publicity for their members.
<i>Action 7:</i> The Secretary to issue a press release encouraging people to get involved in the consultation process.
<i>Action 8:</i> Keith Wheel to ensure that the technical response by the County Council includes a check of the Commons Register by the Keeper of the record.

Welcome

The Chair opened the meeting at 1pm and welcomed the Forum members to the third meeting of the Oxfordshire Countryside Access Forum (OCAF). A formal welcome was extended to Tanya Newbery, at her first meeting of the Forum.

1. Apologies for absence

Neil Fawcett, Alan Scholan (Vice-chair), Keith Wheal (Countryside Services Manager).

Christopher Gowers and John Griffin informed OCAF that they would be unable to attend the meeting on the 25 July.

2. Minutes of previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 23 April 2003 were APPROVED and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

3. Matters Arising

2003(2)/1 Apologies The Secretary explained that apologies were received from Andrew Hawkins and Marilyn Ivings for the meeting on 23 April but that he was unable to check his telephone and email before the meeting, which was why the apologies were not recorded in the minutes.

2003(2)/6 Venues of mapping roadshows The Secretary reported that he had written to the Countryside Agency with OCAF's request for an additional roadshow in the south of Oxfordshire. He explained that the Countryside Agency had declined to hold an additional roadshow. OCAF members expressed their disappointment with this situation and requested that the Secretary immediately demand an additional roadshow venue. It was also felt necessary to arrange the deposit of maps in the south of the county, independent of the Countryside Agency.

Action 1: The Secretary to contact the Countryside Agency to demand an additional roadshow venue.

Action 2: The Secretary to attempt to place copies of the local draft maps in Wallingford, Henley or Wantage libraries in consultation with the Library Service

4. Member's resignation

It was reported that Mike Lupton had tendered his resignation from OCAF due to a relocation of his employment. The Forum noted this point. The Secretary confirmed that the Forum remained reasonably balanced and that the recruitment process would be undertaken at the end of the first year of OCAF.

5. Date of next meeting

The date of the fourth meeting was confirmed as Friday 25 July 2003. The Secretary suggested a site visit to Aston Rowant Nature Reserve could be arranged with the formal meeting being held in Lewknor Village Hall. This was AGREED by OCAF, a meeting time of 10.00 was agreed with the public meeting to start at 1.30 pm, subject to the Village Hall and the reserve being available.

It was AGREED to schedule the fifth meeting of the Forum for 3 Oct 2003.

Action 3: All OCAF members to reserve the 25 July and 3 October as OCAF meeting dates.

Action 4: The Secretary to attempt to book Lewknor Village Hall and attendance of English Nature at Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve for the 25 July.

6. Consultation on Rights Of Way Improvement Plan, Action Plan

Paul Harris reporting as the OCC Strategic Countryside Access Officer ("the officer") introduced the draft Rights of Way Improvement Plan Action Plan as being the first stage in the process of improvement planning. OCAF members were requested to consider the plan, discuss any amendments to it and then approve, the recommendations to the County Council's Executive.

The immediate general response of Members was that as there is no duty to implement the improvement plans it seems to be a lot of work for possibly no reason. The officer commented that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) wanted the plans to be wide-ranging and aspirational which was why implementation was not imposed as a duty. The officer also pointed out that as implementation was not a statutory duty, there would be opportunities to bid for other sources of funding not normally available for public rights of way work, including TOE (Trust for Oxfordshire Environment), Aggregates Levy, National Lottery and Local Transport Plan funds.

Members commented on the scale of the operation of the plan. It was suggested that unless issues were examined at parish level the document would not be of much use, especially as the proposed reform of the Common Agricultural Policy in 2007 had to be considered. However some members also spoke of the danger of creating a hierarchy of paths and recreational routes simply because some parishes are a great deal more active than others. Members were reminded of the highway authority's existing statutory duty to define, protect and maintain all public rights of way regardless of whether the path was promoted as a recreational route.

The officer said that the intended aim of the improvement plan is to be a strategic and aspirational document and not to be a detailed document, due to the size of the county and the consequent size of the report. Some support was received for this view as it was felt more focus should be put on improving what is presently on the ground rather than coming up with new county-wide ideas. It was suggested that parish councils should be asked to help in establishing a base situation, but again it was pointed out that some parishes are more active than others.

Other members raised the need to provide information and changes on the ground to improve access for people with disabilities, and cyclists. It was confirmed by the officer that the consultation process should identify specific improvements and there were no reasons why these improvements should not be looked at by the rights of way field team before the plan is actually produced, provided that resources were available.

The officer also reminded members that the first stage of the action plan will include parish councils.

On a question of the funding needed to implement the plan, the officer was unable to give an idea of the sums involved at this stage. However Members were advised that significant bids had been put forward by the Countryside Service for 2004 – 2007 budget pressures to increase the basic standard of public path provision. Members were advised that OCAF itself may be able to bid for external funds for specific improvements or could advise the County Council to give priority to bids for funds, but that further research was needed on funding generally. This may include for example the potential allocation of funds from the IACS payments system (Integrated Administration and Control System) into rights of way work.

Members also mentioned that when discussing the improvement plans it was also essential to distinguish between development (improvement) and maintenance. Members also requested that they inspect the proposed draft letter to parish councils, especially in light of the potential workload for parishes and the tight deadlines of the consultation. The Secretary was directed to have this ready by the next meeting on the 25th July.

Action 5: The Secretary to circulate his proposed consultation letter being sent to Parishes at the next meeting of the Forum.

The Forum AGREED to propose the following amendments to the action plan:

1. The timescale for the completion of stage 1 should be extended to February 2004
2. Consultation to be directed to AONBs and volunteer groups as well
3. The report should include a mention of vehicular users
4. It was also proposed and AGREED on a show of hands by a majority of 7 to 1 that paragraph 10 (c) should be amended by adding "...paying particular attention to the continuing inability of the County Council to maintain the present network of public rights of way in accordance with its statutory duties."
5. Re-write Page 1, Para 6 in light of the meeting of the 7 July

Public Question time – Rights of Way Improvement Plan Action Plan

The Chair opened the discussion to the members of the public present. Andrew Fletcher, Forum Secretariat for the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Local Access Forum reported about the processes adopted with their improvement plan and their hopes that the plan would fundamentally change and lead on all aspects of countryside access management.

Tom Bindoff, a member of the public and access gate designer and manufacturer stated that in his opinion twenty percent of stiles were redundant and this could be included in the letter to parishes as potential access improvements. He also recommended the adoption of the British Standard 5709: 2001 for gaps gates and stiles, to be a benchmark to judge quality of access provision. The Forum noted his comments

7. Draft Maps Of Open Countryside and Registered Common Land

The Forum discussed the access maps under four heading areas.

1. Consultation Process

Members noted that it appeared that farms with a holding number had been contacted by the Countryside Agency but that there had been little information provided to the general public. Members concluded that publicity for the launch of the maps had been poor and that the Countryside Agency appeared to be cutting corners. Responding to a request for the Council to place an advertisement, the Secretary informed the Forum that it was unlikely that OCC funding could be found to place an advertisement or notice in the press because this was a Countryside Agency responsibility, but that attempts would be made to issue a press release communicating the statutory process to the public.

Members expressed their extreme disappointment with the publicity process and AGREED to direct the Secretary to contact the Countryside Agency on the Forum's behalf to convey their disappointment in the poor level of publicity for the release of the

access maps and to issue a release from the Forum encouraging people to get involved in the process.

Action 6: The Secretary to contact the Countryside Agency immediately: To convey their disappointment with the process and demanding another roadshow venue in the south of the county (Action point 1); To seek reassurance that their views would be taken account of; To request details of pre-issue publicity and to remedy any deficiencies; To request advance notice of publicity for their members.

Action 7: The Secretary to issue a press release encouraging people to get involved in the consultation process.

2. Accuracy

A question was raised whether Oxfordshire County Council were satisfied that all commons had been added to the Draft map of open countryside and registered common land and whether the Keeper of the Commons Register would confirm this. The Secretary confirmed that the County Council would be making its own technical response to the maps and this would include a check of the commons register by the Keeper.

Action 8: Keith Wheal to ensure that the technical response by the County Council includes a check of the Commons Register by the Keeper of the record.

It was pointed out that Muswell Hill is in Buckinghamshire, highlighting a shortcoming of the draft maps, as they did not show county boundaries clearly.

Questions were also raised about the rationale for the areas coloured purple on the map. The officer explained that these are areas of land that fall within the definitions of open country but are less than 5 hectares in size and are designated as being too small to be included as access land. The officer advised that it is vital that local people check these areas as they could make representations that they should be included as access land, and that this includes all areas of unimproved grassland including Ironstone areas in Cherwell district.

3. Significant Issues

None were raised

4. Expectations

Worries were raised that no thought was going to be given to nature conservation, as some of this land falls within existing nature reserves and unrestricted access may damage these sites. Ideas brought forward for management of access in these areas included the development of recommended and waymarked routes and appropriate interpretation. There was general discussion over the actual versus the perceived impact of access on biodiversity. It was agreed that expert advice would be needed on nature,

although it was pointed out that most county wildlife sites should be aware of the legislation. The Secretary also highlighted the section of the Countryside Agency's mapping leaflet that explained that English Nature would be consulted about restrictions on access land for nature conservation reasons.

Concern was raised about how restricted land classifications will be advertised as this could cause problems for users. General points were also raised about the lack of access land available and what claims may arise from this. Alison Muldal, a DEFRA officer who was present as a member of the public, was able to clarify that although DEFRA do not give access payments on land that could become access land, they can provide support for creating permissive links to this land.

8. Public question time

Nick Jeffries, a member of Buckinghamshire's Local Access Forum reported on his ideas for a project requiring joint working between Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire's Local Access Forum and countryside officers. This was particularly centred on a triangle of land between Thame, Chinnor and Princes Risborough and would involve the removal of fixed barriers such as stiles and narrow kissing gates, and include research on the "lost ways" – un recorded or mis-recorded paths across the area.

Members welcomed the idea and AGREED that the Secretary would present the project paper, together with the Bucks LAF feedback at a suitable meeting in the future.

The Secretary informed members of an invitation to Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead LAF meeting. No member could attend and the Secretary said that he may attend.

The Chair concluded the meeting at 3.55 pm and thanked the Forum members and the members of the public present for the discussion and contributions

Minutes by Paul Harris and Daniel Weeks (01865) 810206. Oxfordshire County Council, Countryside Service, Holton, Oxford OX33 1QQ

Signed

Vice-chair Oxfordshire Countryside Access Forum