

Forestry Commission access – specification for LAF activity

There has been much discussion over the last two or three years with regard to the lack of consistency in the approach of different Forestry Commission areas to the provision and management of access to the national woodland estate. Their approach ranges from exemplar to deplorable, the latter is exemplified by what appears as a prejudice against horse riders contrasting with a laissez-faire attitude towards pedestrians and cyclists in the South East of Britain.

A web-search for “Forestry Commission Access Policy” reveals a varied local approach but no apparent national policy. Several LAFs have raised this issue at the regional level with a view to escalating it to the England Access Forum in order to bring pressure on Government to give clearer direction on this issue to the Forestry Commission. However discussions with the Forestry Commission in the South East have suggested that they are open to positive suggestions (rather than criticism) and the SE LAF Working Group would like to make the following proposal to test their real commitment to listening.

Each LAF is requested to set up a Forestry Commission Access Group, ideally representing all potential user classifications.

[NB. It is recognised that the proposal below might be too extensive for some LAFs to undertake. If this is the case then a partial submission would be welcome, addressing as much of the specification as can be achieved]

Each LAF group should choose one FC woodland in their area that it believes should be able to provide significantly better public access than currently available (perhaps a woodland that currently has no public access at all). The group is asked to produce an ‘Ideal Access Plan’ to satisfy the aspirations of pedestrians, cyclists, horse riders and disabled visitors. They should also consider opportunities for carriage drivers if appropriate. The FC has told us that one of the major hurdles to widening access is the fact that many of their woodlands are leasehold only. With that in mind the area chosen should be FC owned unless you know that the freeholder will be kindly disposed to your suggestions (e.g. the National Trust).

All FC owned sites should have been dedicated as “Access Land” under the CRoW Act 2000 thereby granting a “Freedom to Roam” across the sites. It follows that no new pedestrian rights need be considered but there may be a need to consider protection of some of these pedestrian rights from interference or disturbance by other uses.

All aspects of access should be considered, including:-

- 1 / Statutory and permitted access within the site itself.
- 2 / Existing facilities within the site which are not currently accessible to the public but which would be of value for non-damaging recreational use (eg Forestry service roads/tracks)
- 3 / Any useful contributions that additional cross-site access could make to the wider RoW network

4 / Parking needs on the site including

- Vehicles adapted to carry wheelchairs
- Bicycles on roof racks
- Motor caravans
- Horse boxes
- The need to discourage occupation by travellers.

5 / The provision of or need for any other facilities

Please provide a map of the site and a summary of your proposals in a form that could be presented to Forestry Commission management.

If the proposals include new works, an estimate of the cost should be provided, together with suggestions as to how this money could be found.

There should be a presumption that any new rights to use routes will be for permitted use initially so that an assessment of the real problems arising can be made before committing to the long term adoption of these routes or dedication of new public rights.

GJ, ATM, March 2010.