



Buckinghamshire County Council

Minutes

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LOCAL ACCESS FORUM HELD ON WEDNESDAY 2 NOVEMBER 2011, IN MEZZANINE ROOM 1, COUNTY HALL, AYLESBURY, COMMENCING AT 10.00 AM AND CONCLUDING AT 12.25 PM.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr J Elfes, in the Chair

Mr D Briggs, Mr C Hurworth, Mr A T A Lambourne, Mr R Pushman, Mr J Coombe, Mr Caspersz, Mr G Thomas and Mr S Adams

OFFICERS PRESENT

Mr M Walker, Mr J Clark, Mr A McVeigh, Ms H Beevers and Ms J Taylor

GUESTS PRESENT

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies of absence were received from Neil Harris.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 06 JULY 2011 TO BE CONFIRMED

Minutes of the Meeting held on 06 July 2011 were confirmed.

4. MATTERS ARISING

Mr Briggs enquired if there had been any feedback received regarding the Natural England Countryside Code review. Mr Clark advised that no feedback had been received.

5. A VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF COUNTRYSIDE ACCESS IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

Steve Adams, Cabinet Member for Environment was welcomed to the meeting.

Mr Adams thanked Members for inviting him to the meeting and said that he was appointed Cabinet Member for Environment in June 2011 by the new Leader, Mr Tett.

Mr Adams said that there was a number of changes across the Council with a variety of ongoing projects such as transformation and the place service. He commented that it was a busy time and that he had been talking to Officers regarding the stresses. Mr Adams commented that lessons had been learnt from other portfolios.

Mr Adams advised Members of his background and said he had lived in the Chilterns for all of his life and that he was from a farming family.

He explained that he would be approaching his role by looking at the ways services are currently operating to see if there is a way of doing these better and also be looking at Local Enterprise Partnerships and Parish Partnerships.

Mr Adams invited Members to ask any questions, comments or provide a steer into what they feel he should be looking at.

Mr Thomas referred to agenda item 9, point 17 and said that there appeared to be little joined up thinking. He referred to the proposed bridleway and the bridge at Watermead and said that monies were available which could not be used. Mr Thomas highlighted that there appeared to be a lack of consistency with decisions and that the outcome was dependant on who was making the decision. Mr Adams said that he would look at the consistency of decision making.

Action: Mr Adams

Mr Elfes said that members of the forum had watched cuts affect the areas which they are interested in and asked how far these cuts will go. He enquired if Mr Adams had found any areas where the Council could change or improve the way they were currently done. Mr Adams said the reality within the current economic climate is that on the frontline it will mean doing less or looking for ways to pay less. The options are to work with other big partners which have spending power to drive down prices or recruit more people on a voluntary basis. He said that the County Council would like to do both of these. Other options are continually being explored as the Council will not have the same amount of money to spend as previously. Mr Adams said that he was in fact meeting with the Environment Officer from the Local Government Association that afternoon to discuss good practice. Ultimately however he said it will be a combination of goodwill and a can do attitude.

Mr Briggs suggested that landowners be involved more and provided an example of Council contractors being used to fix latches on farm gates. Ms Taylor said that the Council is looking at moving responsibilities back to landowners.

Mr Lambourne suggested that some Parish Councils could carry out some minor works. Mr Adams said that the Localism Act provides a general power of competence to Parish Councils.

The Chairman thanked Mr Adams for attending.

6. LOCAL NATURE PARTNERSHIPS; A SUCCESSFUL BID

Andy McVeigh, Ecologist, Natural & Historic Environment Team attended the meeting to discuss the proposed establishment of Local Nature Partnerships (LNP) following publication of the Government's Natural Environment White Paper.

He advised that the bid to Defra for capacity building funds to support the creation of a new Partnership for Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes had been successful and that the next step was the development stage. The Forum was advised that the development stage would go into 2012 and said that the new partnership was looking to engage with other sectors including business and health.

Members were informed that there will be two strategic level workshops arranged and that the LAF would be invited to attend.

Mr McVeigh said that during the development stage a strategic vision of the direction of travel of the LNP needs to be formulated, as will an action plan and business plan. It was highlighted that LNPs will need to be self sustaining.

Mr Briggs enquired whether any other sources of funding had been sought. Mr McVeigh advised that funding had been received previously from the Local Authorities (LA) and Natural England. He commented that Natural England may also be able to provide funding for future projects. He said that existing partnerships with the LA are being looked at and that an approach to the Heritage Lottery may be considered.

The Officer was thanked for his update.

7. CHILTERNERS CONVERSATION BOARD : ACCESS PROJECTS

Annette Venters, Chilterns Conversation Board was welcomed to the meeting.

The Officer gave an update on recent access projects within the AONB.

The key points were as follows:

Chiltern Cycleway

Chiltern Cycleway opened approximately 18 months ago. The Chilterns Cycleway is a 173 mile circular cycle route through the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It is mainly a leisure cycle route and just over half of the route is in Buckinghamshire.

£50k was received from LEADER funding for the route and a survey was carried out to see if the route had generated income locally e.g. for Bed and Breakfast accommodation. Members were informed that a guidebook for the route has been produced which includes information on pubs, cafes and attractions along the route.

Ms Venters said that signage along the route was highlighted as an issue and that 650 signs across 4 authorities have been installed. She said that this was an area which needs improving and the Board is looking to improve the signage at heritage areas although the original aim of the project was to have minimal signs. Members were informed that there are 12 ranger volunteers who cycle the route 4 times a year and carry out basic signage repairs.

Feedback from the survey carried out to see whether the Chilterns Cycleway had generated income locally was based on a sample of 52. It was highlighted that feedback forms are included in the guidebooks. The feedback highlighted the following:

- The average stay was 2.3 nights
- The Average spend was £74
- The spend varied from £18-£177pp
- The group sizes varied from 1-17, with most being 3-4
- 24 Accommodation providers say they received cycleway visitors
- There is a high level of satisfaction and poor signage and traffic remains the main issues

Members were informed that it is an ongoing survey and hopefully there will be a bigger sample soon.

Access for All

- Work is ongoing with partners towards developing new routes and still free walks.
- There is a possibility of access improvements at Hodgemoor Woods. Bucks County Council, Disabled Ramblers and the Forestry Commission are involved in this.
- There is an access audit at Penn Wood being carried out for the Woodland Trust.
- The Chilterns AONB website is undergoing a major revamp and there is an improved interactive map.

Chilterns AONB State of Environment Report

There is a section of Understanding and Enjoyment which has 3 indicators:

- Participation in Health Walks
- Area of land with statutory or Voluntary Open Access
- Visitor Satisfaction on rights of way and use of the countryside.

The key findings were:

- There has been a 20% increase in health walk attendance over the previous year.
- 94% of visitors to Bucks County Council owned parks and greenspaces are satisfied with their visitor experience.

Emerging Issues, challenges and Priorities

- Impact of HS2
- Local Authority funding cuts
- Bucks County Council service re-organisation
- Future management of the Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails

Mr Hurworth enquired if the Chilterns Cycleway route had been promoted to schools and the Officer advised that the Chilterns AONB had been careful not to promote the route as family friendly routes due to the number of hills and traffic issues.

The Officer was thanked for the update.

8. PROPOSED LONG DISTANCE PATH AROUND AYLESBURY

Roy Johnson, Aylesbury and District Ramblers was welcomed to the meeting.

Mr Johnson advised that he had developed proposals for a new long distance path creating a new promoted route around Aylesbury. It was highlighted that there are currently two routes around the town: the Aylesbury Ring, which is a long distance path, and the Round Aylesbury walk which is much shorter.

Mr Johnson explained that his proposal was for a longer path than the Aylesbury Ring. The route would be about 50-55 miles long, mostly in Buckinghamshire, extending west of Waddesdon and east of Wendover, all on Public Rights of Way and, in part, using some existing long distance paths.

Mr Johnson then gave a brief presentation on the proposed route. The key following points were:

Background

- Mid 2011 the Aylesbury Ring was surveyed

- It was noted that there was another route to be established outside the ring using the higher ground

Objectives

To create a new route that:

- Visits or holds the high or higher ground outside the Aylesbury Ring
- Showcase the best of the countryside

Key points of proposal:

- Identify a circular route of 50-55 miles
- Keep it outside existing Ring
- Keep it mostly in Buckinghamshire
- Limited to the west of Waddesdon and east of Wendover
- Keep to public Rights of Way or areas where access is pretty much guaranteed rather than permissive routes

Progress so far:

- Route has been identified
- Route being documented for checking
- Series of circular walks being developed
- Starting discussion with other interested parties

Where next:

- Continue to develop circular walks
- Get support from Ramblers Group to test the route and circular walks to refine them as necessary.
- Set up route on website for members to use and comment on
- Agree how route should be way marked and launched
- Consider adding a northern loop to take the route into the north of county.

Mr Pushman enquired if there was a map available. Mr Johnson advised that a map has not been developed yet and that the first question which needs to be addressed is whether the County Council will adopt the route as maintenance will be necessary.

Mr Coombe asked what the target date for launching the route was and Mr Johnson advised that there was not a launch date as yet as support for the route was required first.

Ms Taylor commented that there are currently 2 walks around Aylesbury and that the difficulty for the Council is that there is a high percentage of routes in Buckinghamshire which are promoted and therefore require greater maintenance. This is an increasing pressure on the service. She said that the aim was that all routes be surveyed once every 2 years but that this timeframe had started to slip and said that volunteers are required to help. In relation to the new proposed route Ms Taylor said that if there were any issues which needed to be addressed, this would take officer time and therefore have a cost implication.

Mr Walker said that in principle there was no reason why the Council wouldn't support the route and said that the route could be integrated and promoted with other routes. He also suggested that Parish Councils could be contacted and asked to promote the route off the back of the circular walks.

The Chairman highlighted that there may be practical difficulties and suggested Mr Johnson continue progressing the route and to keep in touch with officers.

The Chairman thanked Mr Johnson for attending.

9. RIGHTS OF WAY GROUP REPORT

Members had received the Rights of Way Group report.

Ms Beevers took Members through the Rights of Way Applications and provided the following updates:

- The public inquiry on 8 November will be held at Flackwell Heath Community Centre.
- The appeal against the decision regarding the application for extinguishment in Whitchurch has been dismissed.
- A village green application in Gerrards Cross will be advertised shortly.

Ms Taylor then took Members through the Rights of Way Operations Update.

The Chairman invited questions.

Mr Coombe enquired what the volunteer hours were meant to show and commented that the Chiltern Society had reported back a figure of 1200hours. Ms Taylor advised that the number of volunteer hours is recorded so that a cost for this time can be assessed to evidence how much money has been saved through the use of volunteers. She said that she is only able to report back on the figures and information which has been provided.

Mr Coombe asked for a definition of a 'village green' and Mr Clark agreed to discuss with Mr Coombe outside the meeting.

Action: Mr Coombe/Mr Clark

The fencing along Footpath No. 59 in Chepping Wycombe may encroach the footpath and the Parish Council have asked the County Council to pursue this.

Mr Pushman enquired about the Kimble Farm diversion. He said that he was aware that there had been an objection and said that if the County Council were concerned about the costs of a public inquiry the applicant would be willing to cover costs. Mr Walker said that there had been 5 objections, one of which was the Parish Council and commented that it was unusual for the County Council to agree to move a path if the Parish Council objected. Mr Walker said that the County Council did not have to make diversion orders. In relation to the issue of an application paying for a public inquiry Mr Walker said that in theory there was nothing wrong with the applicant covering the costs. Mr Hurworth commented that it concerned him that people buy properties aware of Rights of Way and that then after a period of time they want the path diverted.

Mr Clark took Members through the Strategic Access Update and the following updates were provided:

- Mr Walker advised that due to the proposed merger between the Transportation and Planning and Environment Services it is a delicate time for staff. He commented that there are opportunities which could be derived by Rights of Way working closely with Transport.

Mr Thomas advised in relation to point 17 that Watermead Parish Council had applied for landfill tax monies for the proposed bridge in Watermead but had been advised that the application was not likely to be successful.

Mr Elfes enquired if the County Council was still providing match funding for Donate-

a-gate. Mr Clark said that this was being done informally whilst funds were available.

10. LAF MEMBERS REPORT

Members had received the LAF Members' Report.

The following updates were provided:

The Chairman asked that anyone who wished to be a Huddle Champion should contact Jon Clark.

Action: Members

The Chairman said that he was happy to complete Natural England Annual Report and circulate to LAF Members for comment.

Action: John Elfes

11. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Mr Walker said that with changes to services and efficiency savings required there is a question regarding how the level of maintenance of Rights of Ways will be sustained and said that it would be good if the Local Access Forum could lead on this process. He said that this could consider involving landowners more or explore ways of working with Parish Councils etc. He said that Officers would be happy to be involved but that it had to be a 'bottom up' process.

Mr Pushman suggested that there could be greater involvement with the Local Area Forums/ Local Community Partnerships or Bucks Association of Local Councils.

12. DATE OF NEXT AND FUTURE MEETINGS

The next meeting is to be held on 29 February 2012, 10am, Mezzanine Room 2, County Hall, Aylesbury

Chairman