



Buckinghamshire County Council

Minutes

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LOCAL ACCESS FORUM HELD ON WEDNESDAY 28 NOVEMBER 2012, IN MEZZANINE ROOM 3, COUNTY HALL, AYLESBURY, COMMENCING AT 10.03 AM AND CONCLUDING AT 11.50 AM.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr J Elfes, in the Chair

Mr D Briggs, Mr P Challis, Mr N Harris, Mr C Hurworth, Mr A T A Lambourne, Mrs V Lynch, Mr R Pushman, Mr J Coombe, Mr Caspersz, Mr G Thomas and Ms J Hanwell

OFFICERS PRESENT

Mr J Clark, Ms J Taylor and Mr M Walker

GUESTS PRESENT

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

Apologies were received from Sandy Kidd.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

3. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 11 July 2012 were confirmed.

4. MATTERS ARISING

Glyn Thomas referred to the fact that Tring was mentioned under Gateway towns in Buckinghamshire.

David Briggs asked for an update on the Chilterns Sustainable Gateways project, particularly with regard to electric bikes, and it was noted that there was nothing further to update. Richard Pushman said the intention of the project was that in the future, various organisations, including shops, would provide bikes for hire, including electric bikes to encourage more people to use cycle paths. Glyn Thomas said he hoped that secure racks would be considered for tethering the bikes, particularly electric bikes.

With regard to the Paths for Communities Grants, Jennifer Hanwell said there were no further updates on the application from the Aylesbury and District Ramblers.

5. RIGHTS OF WAY GROUP REPORT

Definitive Map Update

Mike Walker updated members.

Mike Walker informed members that with the exception of item 3, items 1 – 6 were all outstanding byway applications. These had been placed with the Secretary of State and Mike was currently following these up. It was hoped they would be settled within the next 12 months.

The Stowe and Lillingstone Dayrell application had gone to the Secretary of State and it was possible there may be a Public Inquiry.

With regard to the Whitchurch application the Inspector had confirmed the Order and there were now three footpaths running through the gardens of two houses.

David Briggs said he thought the time limit had run out in relation to BOAT applications but it was noted that as long as an application had been submitted before May 2006 it would be dealt with.

Chris Hurworth asked about the implementation of the BOAT at Kimble. Mike Walker informed the LAF that signs indicating the route should now be in place. Joanne Taylor was monitoring the surface for any damage that might be caused by motor vehicles and there was no sign of this at present. It had been suggested that a TRO could be made, but this would be costly and difficult to enforce.

Mike Walker informed members that items 17 – 28 in the report were going through the process for presentation to the Rights of Way Committee. With regard to Public Path Orders (items 29-52) 20 of the 24 items were being dealt with.

In connection with item 17 West Wycombe/Downley, Richard Pushman stated that it had always been the former Area Highways Manager's opinion that Huntshell Wood and Cookshall Lane could be tarmaced throughout but this had never happened and he hoped it would not be raised again. English Heritage and the National Trust were against this because they considered it would destroy what is a tranquil part of the countryside.

With regard to Public Path Creation Agreements, Mike Walker informed members of the following:

- 53 – Brill. This was County Council owned land which was about to be sold and a path was being created to protect public access.
- 54 – Edgcott. This was part of a bigger project to create access and officers were currently in discussion with WRG regarding the land and access.

There had been some repeat applications in relation to Village Greens and advice was being sought on whether repeat applications can be made.

Richard Pushman congratulated officers on the tremendous piece of work contained in this report and the comprehensive survey list was very helpful.

Strategic Access Update

Jonathan Clark updated members.

With regard to items 64 and 65 Jonathan said there would be a further update on

HS2 later in the meeting. With regard to the consultation in September on a draft construction Code of Practice, the response by the County Council to HS2 had been circulated. Jonathan said they had been asked by HS2 not to give the document to partners and Richard Pushman asked why HS2 had sought to suppress the document. Jonathan stated he did not know the reason for the request. However, he would ask Rosie Brake for further information. Richard said members should be aware if any information was withheld. Mike Walker said there was no decision on when HS2 was going ahead but the County Council would be engaging with them in relation to mitigation. It was not in the public domain because no decision had been made to take this forward. The County Council was doing its utmost to get the best out of the situation.

With regard to the Environmental Impact Assessment the full assessment was due in the Spring of 2012. However, ecologists were concerned this would miss crucial survey seasons, especially for bats. The impact of the HS2 footprint on the rights of way network (para 66) showed the number of path networks affected by the railway and by the new roads that would be built.

A project outline has been prepared for the East-West Rail Consortium, identifying the personnel, timescales and work needed to identify the 'at grade' crossings and reach agreement in principle about which might be closed, diverted or have alternative crossings provided. It was noted this was not a new line, but the re-opening of the old line, which will run from Oxford, through Bletchley and Bicester with a new station at Winslow.

The Table in para 68 compared the number of ROW that will be affected by East West Rail with other lines across Buckinghamshire. It was noted that Network Rail had contacted the County Council with a view to discussing the possible closure of 29 crossings. Whilst there were no formal proposals at present, the Forum will need to consider a response to any that do come forward. The Chairman suggested that alternatives should be looked at, such as bridges. However, Jonathan said there was a need to know how much money had been put aside for path diversions before any proposals could be made. Chris Hurworth stated the Forum should oppose any closures.

In answer to a question about whether the closures were due to health and safety issues, Jonathan Clark stated that whilst most footpaths pre-dated the railways, this was part of a national campaign by Network Rail to reduce the number of 'at grade' crossing wherever it could. Viv Lynch suggested using these discussions as an opportunity to look at network improvements And officers agreed this would be the case.

With regard to paragraph 70 John Elfes asked whether the donate-a-gate work received match-funding and it was noted this work was still being done on an informal basis.

Alan Lambourne said there was no reference to the outer Aylesbury Ring in the report and it was noted that there was an application for funding from Paths for Communities. John Elfes said they have funding from Aylesbury Vale District Council but none from the County Council at present. Joanne Taylor said they had received a request from Roy Johnson for support for way marking.

Jonathan Clark thanked the Forum for its support in relation to the proposed new footpath through the Lane End Industrial Estate, which has been put on hold, pending the submission of a planning application. It was agreed that the Local Access Forum would draft a letter in support of the application.

Action: Chairman/JC

Glyn Thomas referred to the difficulties in trying to meet the criteria for Paths for Communities funding when making applications, particularly in relation to disability. It was noted that Natural England had only completed 6 applications for Paths for Communities. He thanked Jonathan Clark and the team for their hard work in relation to this.

Rights of Way Operations Update

Joanne Taylor updated members on the staffing levels within the team and it was noted that the reported vacancy had now been filled.

There were a number of outstanding maintenance issues due to the extreme weather conditions and because of the cuts to the maintenance budget, Further money was sought to deal with the amount of clearance work needed. This had affected the surfacing programme because teams were not able to get on site and the programme has now been rolled over into next year. Extra teams had been put in place for structure works and the clearance period had been extended from September to November.

The team has not been active on enforcement issues because they had been called to do other work. Therefore the figures were down on resolving issues. Improvements to the network were about the same level as last year. It was noted that the Chiltern Society had put in a lot of the new structures, and the Ramblers Association had put in 945 hours of work. The BVPI outcome was similar to last year. The second stage of this year's BVPI survey was being undertaken, with the Chiltern Society and the Ramblers Association doing much of the work. Joanne said this would be reported at the next meeting of the Forum and it will be interesting to see whether the figures will be further impacted because of the weather.

Alan Lambourne suggested it would be helpful to have direct telephone numbers for officers. It was noted that all complaints must be recorded through the Contact Centre and concern was expressed that whilst the LAF members could have direct lines, this information was not generally given to the public. Rights of Way Officers were often on site and it may be that most callers would receive voice mail. If people wished to contact officers direct they could do so via their email address which is always printed on the letterhead. Richard Pushman stated that officers' work could be interrupted by having to deal with a large amount of telephone calls and email correspondence. Joanne Taylor informed members that the Contact Centre was set up to stream information and record the number of calls across the whole of the County Council. In the Rights of Way Team they have 10 days to acknowledge a report and 28 days to provide a complete response to a customer, which is challenging considering the thousands of hits they get. Alan Lambourne considered this was a retrograde step in meeting targets rather than helping the public.

John Coombe asked how many walks were involved in the 'Simply Walk' programme. In this connection, members were asked to contact Fiona Broadbent.

John Elfes asked whether it was the same people involved in ploughing and cropping breaches each year. Joanne said it probably was. She stated that letters reminding farmers of their obligations were regularly sent which also reminded them of their other responsibilities such as hedge cutting and stile and gate repairs.

Joanne Taylor also presented the Ramblers' report on the impact of funding reductions for rights of way in England as at October 2012. The Ramblers' had obtained financial information under the Freedom of Information requests from all Highways Authorities. Unfortunately there was an error in reporting cuts for Buckinghamshire and the Ramblers' have agreed to amend the figures on their website. The budget reduction figure for Buckinghamshire was approximately 40%,

not 56% as reported.

Joanne confirmed the County Council had identified approximately £40,000 to pump prime Parish works and were putting together a scheme with other partners. However, the price of this funding is a further cut in the maintenance budget. The intention was that the County Council would develop closer working with Parish Councils and local communities, although match funding by parishes may be needed in order to tap into this money.

Glyn Thomas suggested the table of cuts was irrelevant because it only showed cuts, not what staff actually do, and it belittled their work. Mike Walker said that the Ramblers' were simply doing their best to highlight the situation, nationally. Joanne Taylor said the RA report did highlight the amount of work done and the expertise required to ensure its efficient operation and she urged members to look at the report.

6. LAF MEMBERS REPORT

HS2

John Elfes referred to the poor turnout at the HS2 Forums that he had attended, with very few local people present. Various societies had sent representatives but they were not necessarily local to the area. At the Wendover meeting, there were only four local people out of 25 attendees. He felt that the consultation exercises just resulted in people becoming irate and HS2 stonewalling. Viv Lynch said that she had attended two meetings at Stoke Mandeville and also reported on the low numbers of local people. She remained unconvinced that the meetings were informative and that HS2 was just paying lip service.

John Coombe referred to difficulties in attending meetings due to lack of information on dates. John Elfes suggested that he needed to ensure he was registered on the list of recipients for information because virtually all the meetings were by invitation only. Alan Lambourne reported he had attended the Waddesden & Quainton Forum at which there was a lot of local interest. It was noted that because Waddesden and Quainton are within the AONB there would be more interest in that area. Alan also reported that HS2 were not prepared to share information.

John Elfes said the Forum should take up the offer from HS2 for a bilateral meeting but David Briggs stated they should insist that any discussions were made public. It was suggested that whilst HS2 will not publish information, they could not stop others from doing so.

The Forum agreed that it should meet with HS2 to discuss suggestions for mitigation. It was noted that HS2 was offering to meet in December and members were asked to indicate their willingness to attend. Alan Lambourne asked whether there was any benefit in doing so because HS2 has opened a dialogue with the County Council and more information would be forthcoming through them on any proposals. John Elfes expressed the need for the Forum to meet with HS2 even though the County Council was doing the same in the hope that they could influence the Bill. It was suggested that John Elfes, Viv Lynch, Alan Lambourne, Neil Harris and David Briggs should attend the meeting. Viv Lynch suggested this could be used as an opportunity for the Forum to work with HS2 and David Briggs suggested that some of the new roads constructed for works traffic might be retained for public access afterwards. Neil Harris also suggested it could be an ideal opportunity to have nearby routes surfaced as well.

Action: It was agreed that a meeting be set up in December/January to meet with HS2. The following members would attend: Neil Harris, Viv Lynch, David Briggs, John Coombe, Alan Lambourne, John Elfes.

Members considered the AONB in relation to HS2 and whether it deserved a greater influence. The following was noted:

- The AONB would be more significantly harmed economically than other businesses.
- The design of the AONB is similar to National Parks but remains the poor relation. Its scenic value is classified as having greater value than some of North Bucks.
- Buckinghamshire is fighting its corner along with other counties and when details of the extension are published other counties will come on board.
- The Route is also being fought on financial grounds and the accuracy of the business case of passenger use, as was the case with HS1.
- There are 11 paths affected in the AONB, but this equated to only one fifth of the total number of paths affected in the County.
- The impact of HS2 will be noise, visual impact and damage to the countryside.
- Whilst recognising the importance of the AONB there was a need to consider the rest of Buckinghamshire.
- How important is the network of footpaths? Should the whole network be protected? Should we accept any loss of the network?
- This could be an opportunity to link routes, resolve some issues of fragmentation and improve what is already in place. The situation must be used to our advantage. Jonathan Clark asked whether it would add weight to the argument if Gavin Caspersz attended the meeting and Gavin agreed he would attend if it would be helpful. He agreed that the Forum should negotiate better outcomes for rights of way. As an example, David Briggs referred to the reduction in the slope of the embankment on the branch line to Chesham and, that if the Forum had been consulted by Network Rail, path improvements could have been secured as a result.

Agreed: Gary Caspersz also to attend the HS2 meeting

John Elfes agreed to contact the group regarding the date of the meeting and the content of the discussion to be had with HS2.

Action: John Elfes

LAF Conference

One place was available at the National Conference in Sheffield on 27 February 2013 and John Elfes agreed to attend. It was noted that Jonathan Clark would be attending as South East LAF Co-ordinator.

Turville Open Access

Kate Ashbrook of the Open Spaces Society had requested new structures to aid walkers on open access land at Turville. The Wormsley Estate said they would not accept this unless they were legally obliged to do so. Although it is classified as open access land, an old fence on the land has been replaced and, therefore, needs a gate to provide access across the whole area. A plan of the area was included in the report.

Neil Harris asked if there was a way out of the land enclosed in red and it was noted that there was an exit where the path came in from Turville. Jonathan Clark agreed to look into whether the land could also be accessed from the footpath. Neil suggested that local pressure through the Parish Council may be the best way forward and Jonathan Clark agreed to contact them.

Action: Jonathan Clark

Annual Report

The draft annual report attached to the papers covered the period January 2012 to March 2012 and therefore would only report on three months work, because all the data up to the end of 2011 had already been loaded on Huddle. Members were asked to make comments to Jonathan Clark in the next two weeks. Mike Walker suggested including the three months work in next year's report because of the submission had already been made. Jennifer Hanwell agreed it was confusing, but asked whether information on the rest of the year to date could be added. Jonathan Clark said they only needed to report to March 2012. It was decided to include the three months to March 2012 in next years report as the 3-month report was thought too thin.

Correspondence

The response from Anne James regarding the future role of volunteers in relation to the new contract with Ringway Jacobs was attached to the report. It was noted that having volunteers was an advantage and without them much work would not get done.

Joanne Taylor said they were going through the business planning process to show how they will test the service and what will be paid for. Much of it will be target driven and the business plan will need to include what the County Council expects to get for its money. If they miss the target the funding will be reduced, but RJ was not directly getting money in respect of volunteers, they were only helping RJ meet their targets.

Membership

Members discussed a replacement for Diana Bird on the Forum. Mike Walker suggested that the LAF should write to the NFU explaining that the dynamic of the Forum is affected by not having NFU representation. David Briggs suggested contacting Jane Jennings and it was agreed this would be pursued by Jonathan Clark.

Action: Jonathan Clark

7. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Neil Harris referred to plans the National Trust was drawing up regarding proposals to HS2 for a road bridge at Hartwell and Waddesdon. The plans were available on the National Trust website.

8. DATE OF NEXT AND FUTURE MEETINGS

The next meeting of the Local Access Forum will be held on Wednesday 27 March 2013 at 10.00am in Mezzanine Room 1

Dates of future meetings

17 July 2013

20 November 2013

Chairman