

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

County Councillor Janet Blake
Buckinghamshire County Council
County Hall
Aylesbury
Buckinghamshire
HP20 1UY

11th August 2013

The Buckinghamshire Local Access Forum is the statutory advisory body on all matters relating to Access to the Countryside

Dear Janet,

Maintenance of the Rights of Way Network

At the July meeting of the Bucks Local Access Forum reports were received on Rights of Way maintenance. Since the Rights of Way network is integral to access to the countryside, we have a keen interest in maintaining its standards, and we were deeply concerned at the statistics presented to us. Interim results for the annual BVPI suggest that the standard maintained over many years has not been met, and that the backlog of problems has grown.

In our view these figures show a marked deterioration in the standard of service and are unacceptable. We urge you to establish the reasons for this unwelcome decline.

We were also informed of changes to the contract with Ringway Jacobs and, although we were not given full details, of a proposal to transfer the council's Rights of Way staff to Ringway Jacobs as part of that contract. This raises a number of concerns.

We are concerned that Rights of Way will be submerged in the wider aspects of Ringway Jacobs activity; that the present close knit and highly skilled Rights of Way team may be dispersed within Ringway Jacobs and the core of expertise which has been so valuable in maintaining standards will be diluted. **What safeguards does the contract give on maintaining expertise?**

Given the scope of Ringway Jacobs' activities we are also concerned that Rights of Way will be low in their priorities, and standards may suffer. **What safeguards are there on maintaining standards?**

Bucks County Council, as Highway Authority has statutory duties in relation to Rights of Way. **How does the contract ensure that the Council's statutory duties are honoured?**

Highway Authorities are required to have a formal Rights of Way Improvement Plan **Will this responsibility be devolved to the contractor?**

Volunteers: a considerable amount of valuable work on Rights of Way is undertaken by volunteers, and we are aware that some volunteers have ethical objections to their effort being used to support a commercial concern. When we first raised this issue your response was that the volunteers would still be dealing directly with BCC Rights of Way staff, and therefore distanced from the contractor. This will, presumably, no longer be the case, and volunteers will be expected to support the contractor's profit-making activities directly.

General concerns

Although not relating to Rights of Way directly, we are also concerned about some general aspects of the contract.

Firstly, we understand that it is to run for seven years. We regard this as far too long for a new, radical and untried system. It carries a level of risk inappropriate to the use of public funds. Ringway Jacobs could fail financially, or could be subject to a takeover bid. Or it could simply fail to deliver to the required standard: **are eventualities of these kinds covered in the contract?**

Although we do not have the details, we understand that the contract may be exclusive, and other contractors cannot be used. This will be a severe inconvenience to Parishes, and indeed we understand that already a scheme to fund them for local path clearance has been delayed because of the contractor's internal bureaucracy. **We consider that the length of the contract and its apparently exclusive nature are not in the public interest.**

Monitoring or supervision of the progress of a contract is vital. **Who within BCC will be responsible for this, and how closely will they be able to supervise?** At what point would they intervene if standards are not maintained?

It may be that you have considered all the concerns we have outlined, and are satisfied that it is safe to proceed, but until we are convinced of that, and since there is already evidence of a lowering of standards **our formal advice is that you should not implement the proposed transfer of Rights of Way staff to the contractor, and should reconsider the length of the contract and its exclusive nature.**

Yours Sincerely,

John Elfes,

Chairman, Buckinghamshire Local Access Forum
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