



Buckinghamshire County Council

Minutes

LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

AGENDA ITEM

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LOCAL ACCESS FORUM HELD ON WEDNESDAY 7 DECEMBER 2005 IN THE IRELAND ROOM, COUNTY HALL, AYLESBURY, COMMENCING AT 10.06AM AND CONCLUDING AT 12.30PM.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Mr J M Elfes, in the Chair

Mrs C M Aston, Mr I Barham, Mr R Boas, Mr D Briggs, Mr J B Cooper, Mr F Gomme, Mrs B Harris, Mr N Harris, Mr C Hurworth, Mr A Lambourne, Mrs V Lynch, Mr R Pushman and Mr S Pratt.

OFFICERS PRESENT

Mr I Burgess, Mrs M Keyworth, Mrs J Taylor Mr M Walker

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs B Jennings.

2. WELCOME TO NEW MEMBER

The Chairman welcomed Mr I Barham from Aylesbury Vale District Council, to his first meeting of the Forum.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 14 September 2005 were agreed.

5. MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising

6. STRATEGIC ACCESS TEAM UPDATE

Two publications were circulated prior to the update:

- By all reasonable means: inclusive access to the outdoors for disabled people. This will form part of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan.
- On the right track: surface requirements for shared use routes

The latter publication highlighted good practice on byways, particularly using re-cycled asphalt plantings. Members were asked to bring any comments on these publications back to the next meeting of the Forum. FG asked that copies be sent to the Tranquil Action Groups, who were currently looking at this area in tandem with the Local Transport Plan.

IB told the Forum that the Strategic Access Team had now been in place for six months. The final appointment has been made and Claire Tranter joined the Team as Strategic Access Assistant in June 2005.

Iain Burgess gave a verbal update as follows:-

Charter Mark

It was hoped to submit the application by the end of the financial year. The Team has gained extra support for this work from the Change Management Team.

Promotion and Information

The Team was examining how best it could promote access and was considering, in particular, new ways of funding, possibly through sponsorships and working in partnership with magazines such as 'Country Walking'.

Open Access – The Access Management Grant Scheme

The Countryside Agency has informed the Team that it has been awarded £40,000 of funding for this year. It was hoped to appoint a contractor shortly, in order for work to begin, including the erection of a substantial number of kissing gates. Over the next months arrangements will be made for putting up way marks on sites, in conjunction with other organisations such as the National Trust. IB agreed to provide a list of sites where work will be taking place.

JC suggested that farmers may be able to support this work and thus reduce costs. DB agreed that working with farmers was sensible. However, it was noted that because the deadline was tight, negotiations with individual farmers would be very difficult to carry out. It may be that in the next 12 months of the scheme there would be an opportunity to work with farmers in this way.

Open Access – Access Restrictions

The Team has been working with the Countryside Agency at Bledlow with regard to a landowner who wishes to restrict access across an area which will disturb partridges. A bid has been put in through the Access Management Grant Scheme to create a path between the two pieces of open land, with the intention of securing a way mark path through the site with 365 day access, and access for five months a year on the rest of the land. This would provide a valuable link into the Rights of Way network. The other option would be to fence a path at the top of the hill with gates in and out and notice saying what access there is. Research is being carried out into levels of disturbance, which will help inform the CA's decision on 22 December. This will be followed by a 12 week consultation period. It was hoped a response from the Forum could be discussed at the March meeting.

Discussion took place on an issue in Hughenden and IB agreed that in future local members and members of adjoining areas will be informed of any issues in their area.

Ridgeway Improvement Plan

All the kissing gates on the Chequers Estate have been replaced with easy access gates. However, motorised vehicles do present a security problem. The Team is working with the Estate to see if access could be gained to the land towards the A4010

end of the Estate. The Estate is happy to enter into negotiations and it was hoped, subject to English Nature's approval, there will be a route to this chalk downland. Beacon Hill. Apart from putting up a fence along the boundary nothing further needed to be done. Grips have been put in to divert the water coming down the steep section. Works on the Wendover sunken bridleway have been completed. The route is now wide enough for horses to pass. Further work was needed on securing funds to continue these improvements.

Some surfacing work has taken place at Hogtrough Lane, and further work would be carried out on the bridleway at Hale Wood. Work has already been carried out at Princes Risborough on the section of the Ridgeway route used by cars. A metalled surface has had to be put down to satisfy the criterion attached to the CA bid, that maintenance costs were not claimed over the next 10 years. The rest of the work in Princes Risborough will be carried out by rotivating the surfaces.

Bernwood Cycleway

This was launched in September 2005. Work was carried out in conjunction with Transportation Service and 'National Byway'. Joint signing took place with Sustrans where the routes coincided. The launch day was a success. Sustrans were celebrating their 10th year and 10,000 miles of national cycle ways.

Tranquil Project

Although this is a Traffic Management Project, the Team has secured £30,000 of improvement to road crossings along road from Chequers to Great Missenden. SP was also negotiating further funding for a cycle link between Princes Risborough and High Wycombe, which will provide an attractive off road route.

Discussion took place regarding the danger of footpaths discharging between hedgerows straight on to main roads.

Chilterns AONB Sustainable Development Fund

The following projects were being set up under this Fund:

- Walking your Way to Health, involving the setting up of a number of short circular walks in and around towns in Amersham. Leaflets will be provided.
- Chiltern Country Walks leaflet

Work was being carried out with landowners regarding realignment of paths. This was in its early stages but would be a blueprint for how we can involve more people and work together with farming community.

CA reported she was on the steering group looking at the SDF bids and the Minister has confirmed further funding for another two years.

RP mentioned use of narrow poles (squeeze stiles) on footpaths which he had seen in the west country which were very effective and could also be cost effective. IB agreed to look into this.

Green Infrastructure Planning

In view of the large amount of growth that would be taking place in Aylesbury Vale over the next 25 years, there was a need to plan for green infrastructure to support new developments. This work involved IB, Archaeology Service, and the Countryside Initiatives Team and it was hoped it could be used to help and inform District Councils when considering planning applications.

Work will also be carried out with regard to how existing Rights of Way could be realigned to fit in with new developments. Considerable work has been done on the Berryfield development which has resulted in a new bridleway through the whole site with a view to connecting it into the existing network.

LTP

The Team has been asked to supply list of potential capital projects. £100,000 per year has been provided from the LTP for ROW improvements. Capital bid submissions will also be made which will be extra to the funding already given, where there were opportunities to bid for other schemes particularly with regard to targets such as 'Safer Routes to Schools'. IB asked members to contact him if they knew of any potential local schemes that would benefit from rights of way improvements.

Around Aylesbury Walk

£20,000 has been secured from Aylesbury Vale District Council for this project. The Team is working in partnership with the District Council and the Ramblers Association, to improve and promote the route, not only to and from the Town centre, but also out into the wider countryside. This was a good example of partnership working.

It was hoped to improve access between the Round Aylesbury Walk and Aylesbury Ring.

Burnham Beeches Traffic Management Project

Initially this was a Traffic Management Project, but after discussions with Transportation, it was agreed that the Central Chilterns Management Project would also work on this. Work would be carried out on simple improvements to road crossings, so that drivers become aware when they are approaching public Rights of Way. Improvement of access to the crossing points will also be looked at in order to encourage more people to walk. In this connection, Signposts that mimic the old black and white traffic signs had been suggested, as well as painting signs on the road surface. This work will result in real improvement to the ROW network at minimum cost.

Aylesbury Cycle Improvements

Aylesbury has been chosen as one of six cycle towns (nationally), with targets to increase the level of cycling in Aylesbury. £900,000 of funding has been received from Department for Transport, with matched funding from the County Council. Promotion of cycling will be a large part of the costs but it will should real improvement to access in and around Aylesbury.

MW informed members that these schemes were not general ROW work, but were carried out over and above the normal day to day rights of way and maintenance activities. They were also a good example of partnership working in practice. This is the ROW Improvement Plan in action. Although it does slow up progress on the Improvement Plan there was still a need to look at, and take advantage of any opportunities that presented themselves. However, despite funding available to projects such as these, there was no financial impact on the Council's general rights of way budget, used to maintain the network. This was, however, being put under grater pressure due to the raised expectations that schemes such as these inevitably bring for ongoing maintenance.

CA congratulated MW on the amount of work emanating from LTP funding, which has been better than that received in many other Counties. It was noted that some pump priming was also provided by Parish Councils, for example, Great and Little Kimble Parish Council was looking to create a footpath extension and the Team was working with them on putting together a joint funding bid. RP asked whether PCs are aware of

this way of working and it was suggested that they could be informed via Local Area Committees.

GETTING CLOSER TO COMMUNITIES – GC2C

IB informed members that the County Council was working towards delivering services at a local level with local input. In this connection, four pilot areas have been identified:

Settlements west of Wycombe
Taplow, Burnham and Dorney
Buckingham
Haddenham

If the work proves to be successful it will be rolled out across the County in 12 months time. Members noted that Joanne Taylor and her team have won two awards for working in partnership and was pleased that the good work done had been recognised.

Members were pleased with the informative report presented by IB and agreed they would like to see a similar report on a six monthly basis.

6 REGIONAL LAF TRAINING SESSION FEEDBACK

The Chairman and DB attending this training day, and the following points were noted:

- Some LAFs appear to be more involved than others, particularly with regard to the ROW Improvement Plan. Others did not feel involved in any work and felt there was no point in being part of a Forum.
- Some are more involved in strategic access and have flagship projects which publicise the work of the LAF.
- Funds are made available to Parish Councils as a result of which the LAF received publicity.
- Annual targets and detailed annual plans were produced by some LAFs. The Chairman considered that the work of both the Forum and the Strategic Access Team was possibly over-reactive and commented that if the LAF could make a greater contribution it might help the team to achieve more direction and focus.
- Some LAFs were further ahead than others on the ROW Improvement Plan and more involved in local issues.
- Frustration was expressed that the LAFs were advisory bodies only, and their advice did not necessarily need to be taken.

MW stated that the Countryside Agency had had input into the work of the LAF. The Buckinghamshire LAF was probably in the middle of the two extremes. Some unitary authorities had not even formed a LAF even though it was a statutory requirement. Other organisations do have bigger budgets because they are designated AONBs or National Parks and have full time LAF officers, whereas IB carries out this role alongside his other work.

MW informed the Forum that it should not underestimate its value and what it has achieved. Even if it met only four times a year, much was being achieved in terms of networking and profile raising. He asked members for suggestions on what could be done to improve their involvement. Funding has been sought to enable the Forum to have an input on local schemes but, as yet, no decision has been made as to whether the bid will be successful. Further work was being done with regard to networking. The Strategic Access Team was not just reactive but was actively seeking funds in order to carry out projects. An example of this was budget funding from the County Council for

green infrastructure planning to run alongside the growth work and there will be the ability to bind into this for access works. There was a good case for making bids to the LPT and the Forum to could help influence this.

With regard to work with the farming community JC, as a representative of the NFU, offered to attend any meetings with the farmers. DB also offered to do similar work in the south of the County. Officers suggested that any work which the NFU could do to support Joanne Taylor and her team on ploughing and cropping, for example, would be appreciated. Whilst any closer working with farmers was welcomed, the County Council, as Highway Authority, had a statutory duty to maintain paths and carry out enforcement if necessary. Letters to farmer had already contained references to potential loss of revenue through Defra's Single Payments Scheme as a consequence of farmers not undertaking their own responsibilities.

MW said he would welcome a future LAF meeting with the NFU to hear what they could do to improve the situation.

JC offered to discuss the situation with the NFU office in Aylesbury with a view to putting an article in the newsletter regarding ploughing and cropping. It was agreed that IB would draft a letter to go into the NFU newsletter and CA agreed that she would forward a copy of the letter to the CLA for their newsletter.

MW was also looking at ways of working with Rural Payments Agency in carrying out farm inspections on their behalf.

7. COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY AND DEFRA ACTION PLAN FOR SUPPORTING LAFs

IB introduced the report and invited questions and comments from members on the Action Plan. Although Defra have made it known that LAFs should already be advising other bodies such as The Forestry Commission and District Councils, it was hoped to widen the remit further.

The Chairman commented that the Plan was in line with previous discussions that had resulted in a letter being sent to Defra, attached to the minutes of the previous meeting. He made the following comments.

4. Raising the profile of LAFs nationally.

He felt that the Forum could not dictate to appointed Authorities how they should engage with the Forum, as that was up to the particular Authorities. However, the Forum should certainly draw its responsibilities as a statutory advisory body, to the attention of such authorities and invite dialogue. There were already links with a number of bodies through the Strategic Access Team. He felt that the profile of LAFs could be raised, both nationally and locally, by improved publicity and by developing additional resources for use by LAFs.

CH felt that the Group did not seem to have succeeded on items 4e and f. The publications did not seem to have reached the general public. He suggested that the Forum could have an input into newsletters of the many other environmental organisations currently in existence.

JC suggested more use of the County Council's own publications. MW stated that Buckinghamshire times could be (and has been) used for articles from time to time. Articles had also appeared in the Aylesbury Vale District Council magazine.

MW stated that the ability to promote access to the countryside was very limited, but it was hoped that having advertising partnerships could add to promotion of events.

FG commented that as the Forum had been successful in getting articles in the Aylesbury Vale District Council magazine, it may be that use could be made of the Wycombe and Chiltern magazines, particularly if they advertise local successes and initiatives. RP also suggested this would be useful, particularly where grant aid funding was involved.

It was agreed that a report would be brought to the next meeting on any publicity items that had appeared in the three months prior to the next meeting, in order to ascertain the current level of publicity and whether there was more to be done.

It was also agreed that publicity should be a standing item on each agenda, with suggestions on where outlets could be found for publicising good news.

5. Developing additional resources for use by LAFs

Developing additional resources was most important.

6. Improving communication with LAFs

The Chairman commented that this related particularly to the National Countryside Access Forum. Because LAFs exist separately it was suggested that LAFs had input and feedback from decisions of that body in order to be informed of the work they were doing. The NCAF agreed it would continue to invite LAF Chairmen to their meetings, but because of the number of LAFs it will take a long time before it was the turn of the Buckinghamshire LAF.

7. Developing regional liaison arrangements for LAFs

Whilst the plan related to the southern region, JE stated he felt priority should be given to liaison in the local region and networking more with local colleagues. CA informed the Forum that she had been appointed to the South East Rural Affairs Board and could help by being the LAF representative on that body.

The Chairman stated he considered Items 4, 5 and 7 the most important.

8. RIGHTS OF WAY IMPROVEMENT PLAN

IB gave a verbal update on the current position, and reported that work on the Plan was not as far ahead as he had hoped. The Team was still committed to the timetable and since the last meeting of the Forum, he had met with the Cabinet Members for Strategic Planning and Transportation and was in the process of pulling together information from those meetings. A draft plan will be presented at the March meeting for members to make comment. The draft would then go out for public consultation in April.

RP commented that verge walking had not been promoted, along with footpaths which exited on to the road. IB had contacted the Transportation Service's Accident Management Group for views and reported that unless there are figures expressing killed or seriously injured statistics on any particular stretch of road, there would be no priority given to these matters. However, IB felt that since the verges could be used by the public and, if suitable, used as a walking or riding link, then there was a responsibility on the Highway Authority to maintain them. They were already under a duty to provide horse margins if the ROW Team considered them necessary. Further consideration needed to be given on how joint working could be undertaken.

In answer to a question as to whether verges could become rights of way, IB commented that verges were already public highway. VL commented on problems in her area where

verges are contaminated as a result of tipping and also had drainage ditches cut into them, thus making them unsuitable for use by riders wishing to get their horses off the road. In some cases where the road had been re-surfaced the ditches were not useable. IB stated that whole area of road safety needed to be looked at in order to identify ways of improving provision. VL suggested having a working group to bring ideas to the meeting.

AL commented that some Parish Councils felt detached and wanted to be kept informed of progress on the Improvement Plan. It was suggested that a report could go to the Local Area Committees or through the BALC newsletter. MW commented that he did make it clear in the earlier consultation letter that this would be the commencement of a long process and he had not expected the scale of response they had to the Plan. He added that the momentum must continue and the process would commence when the Plan is presented to the County Council's Policy Advisory Groups after Christmas.

MW commented that Parish Councils were ideal for putting pressure on the Authority with regard to the type of problems encountered by VL. However, there was difficulty in maintaining verges, particularly when budgets were tight. There was a need to be clearer on how approaches were made with regard to individual circumstances, in order to succeed. NH suggested key points could be used in order to assert pressure and AL commented that some Parish Councils have already identified these problems and they were part of their individual plans.

MW stated that 64% of Parish Councils had raised the issue of verge maintenance as being something we should address. He suggested the possibility of an annual action plan to deliver certain schemes in that priority. The ROW Plan was the right vehicle to deliver this message.

The Forum was informed that since all information from the survey was digitised, it could be put into a spreadsheet and be made available on the website.

9. REPORT BACK ON CHILTERN AONB ACCESS CONFERENCE

This conference was arranged by the Chilterns AONB because of the launch of Open Access and also because the AONB had now achieved full status as a Conservation Board. Presentations were given by representatives from the four County Councils, including Iain Burgess for Buckinghamshire. David Slater of English Nature gave a talk, as did Mike Furness and the Cycle Touring Club. Discussions followed the presentations as well as a number of workshops.

The conference gave occasion to talk to people from other areas and it was noted that the Buckinghamshire LAF was in better shape than some of the other LAFs. The key point from general discussion was the need to continue networking. Because all Authorities had access to funding and their own agendas on how to spend it, there was a danger that some work could be duplicated. There was a definite need for the County Councils and AONB to work closely together.

David Slater from English Nature stated that English Nature, under the CroW Act, has assessed that over 50% of access land is SSSI. Concern had been expressed that opening up these areas would damage wildlife habitats. The result of their findings was that only about 1% of the land assessed had been adversely affected. It was noted that where there is a defined path it focused people, who tended not to wander at will and therefore any adverse impact was reduced.

IB informed the Forum that the four Authorities met regularly with the AONB through its Recreation and Access Group. They were currently taking overview on access management and producing a leaflet promoting open access within the Chilterns, which is something none of the other authorities are doing at present. It and partners have working closely with the AONB.

With regard to whether there should be a LAF for the AONB, it was noted that Oxfordshire has 3 AONBs and they would find it difficult to service that number of LAFs. If the Chilterns AONB had a LAF, the other AONBs would also need them. The Chilterns has a lot of visitors and the ROW Group manages the access, working very closely with AONB colleagues. The Chilterns AONB will also have input with regard to production of the draft ROW Improvement Plan. The AONB has no interest in taking on the access management role. CA commented on the help the AONB can give with cross border working which must be helpful to the ROW Group. It was important from Chilterns point of view that there is good management across the whole area.

It was agreed this joint event should be held regularly.

10. COMPREHENSIVE PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT

The result of the assessment was that County Council Environment Services were rated good as opposed to excellent or poor, but with promising prospects for improvement. The current perception of the Audit Commission was that the Service was lacking in corporate initiatives rather than service-based ones. However, came very close to excellent and the Commission noted the good work currently going on.

Partnership working was in place to address impact of regional growth. IB and MW talked to the Inspectors regarding the Group's input on green infrastructure planning. Existing waste targets were higher than national average and traffic growth levels had reduced. There were improvements on key bus routes, with an overall increase in the number of passengers. The County Council was pleased with the outcome.

11. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

NH raised the problems with large numbers of walkers walking large groups of dogs and the fact that there had been incidents of deer chasing and deer being attacked and savaged in front of members of the public. There was a need to look at the best way of dealing with this. Coombe Hill and the surrounding land was a particular area of concern. It did not appear to be deliberate coursing but there had been difficulty in getting the dogs under control. Five incidents have been reported so far.

12. Date and Location of Future Meetings

Members discussed the concept of holding the Local Access Forum meetings in different parts of the County with the idea of having a 'local' agenda and inviting local people to speak about work they were doing in their area.

The following dates for future meetings were agreed, with venues to be confirmed:

All meetings commence at 10.00am

15 March 2006

13 September 2006

14 June 2006

6 December 2006

Chairman