

## **Buckinghamshire Local Access Forum - Annual Review** **1<sup>st</sup> April 2020 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021**

### **Virtual meetings**

23<sup>rd</sup> SEPTEMBER 2020 & 3<sup>rd</sup> MARCH 2021

Chairman - Richard Pushman

Vice-chairman - David Briggs

### **Membership**

Elected councillors Alan Turner and Nick Naylor joined as new members following Buckinghamshire's move to a unitary council on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020. Otherwise, membership remained stable.

Total number of LAF members = 14, consisting of members ...

- representing users of public rights of way and access land = 7

*British Horse Society*

*Ramblers*

*British Driving Society [Beds, Bucks & Herts]*

*Cycling UK*

*Disabled Ramblers*

*Trail Rider's Fellowship*

*Chiltern Society*

- representing owners and occupiers of access land = 3

*Country Land & Business Association*

*Buckinghamshire Conservation Trust*

*National Trust*

- representing other interests = 4

*Buckinghamshire council elected members [2]*

*Parish councils*

*Independent*

### **Impact of Covid-19**

Due to Covid-related meeting restrictions, the 15<sup>th</sup> July 2020 meeting was postponed to 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2020 and held a virtual format. With the 4<sup>th</sup> November 2020 meeting following so closely it was cancelled. The 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2021 meeting was also held virtually.

While members found it useful to maintain continuity of LAF business and scrutiny of the council, many felt the virtual format was no substitute for meeting in person, with some unfamiliar with the technology or unable to join the meeting. Normal, pre-Covid arrangements therefore resumed at a new venue in the council's Gateway offices in Aylesbury on 14<sup>th</sup> July 2021.

### **Improving public access: making a difference**

The LAF member for the British Driving Society met regularly with the Ridgeway Delivery Group to support and coordinate improvements along the National Trail.

The LAF member for the Chiltern Society helped design the diversion route for the Chiltern Way through the HS2 works south of Wendover in consultation with the contractor EKFB.

LAF members for cycling, horse riding and disabled users wrote to The Department for Transport in reply to the government's review of The Highway Code to improve road safety for cyclists, pedestrians and horse riders.

The LAF member for the British Horse Society and Regional BHS Officer [who attends LAF meets as a guest], met with HS2 to discuss continued, long-term bridleway provision around Calvert landfill. Discussions were also held regarding bridleway widths and surfaces and alterations to the design of HS2 bridge parapet.

The LAF member for the British Horse Society and Regional BHS Officer lobby Sustrans and the council to ensure equestrian users are accommodated in all new cycleway routes and landowner negotiations, including the proposed new cycleway by HS2 through the Chilterns, between Frith Hill, Great Missenden and Nash Lee Lane, Wendover.

### **The Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2020-2030**

Buckinghamshire's Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) was adopted in April 2020. A priority for 2020/21 was to shape production of the ROWIP Action Plan; one of the LAF's statutory roles. This document translates the aims and objectives of the main ROWIP into a timetabled list of delivery targets. The LAF contributed positively by advising the council on reporting timescales; a list of priorities; and likely delivery partners, including from those organisations represented on the Forum. The council's highways board approved the 2020 and 2030 ROWIP Action Plan in December 2020

### **Scrutiny**

Local Access Forum's comments and advice were sought on the evolving Gardenway Project, part of the Aylesbury Garden Town initiative. The Gardenway will be a circular, 18km-long liner park of connected green spaces around Aylesbury, aiming to encourage play, active travel, healthier lifestyles and outdoor leisure, as well as attracting wildlife. Two LAF members joined the Gardenway advisory group to input on route choice and design. Members stressed that bridleway status should be designated where possible along the Gardenway to accommodate horse riders, which should then inform surface choice and widths.

The LAF commented upon a renewal application for a Public Spaces Protection Order in Desborough Road, High Wycombe and wrote to the council expressing their views following a 6-1 vote in favour of renewing the order.

A standing item for Definitive Map team updates allow members to monitor progress and provide advice on workloads and priorities. This year members were appraised of significant temporary East West Rail and HS2 closures lasting respectively to 2023 and 2025.

The LAF sought reassurances regarding changes following the council becoming a unitary authority, such as the continued support of the LAF and the dissolution of the Rights of Way Committee. The LAF would continue as normal and Officers were confident that delegated powers, which replaced the Rights of Way Committee, would result in greater efficiency in determining Definitive Map Modification Orders. Options and the Service Director would oversee decision-making in many cases.

Concerns were raised regarding the apparent slow turnover in determining Definitive Map Modification Orders and the backlog which included applications from 2016. This was due to staff shortages, but in any case, a new method of tracking progress of applications would be reported at each LAF meeting.

A standing item for Maintenance & Enforcement allows members to oversee capital project delivery such as major bridge construction and surfacing schemes. Results are also presented on the bi-annual 'easy to use' volunteer survey results, undertaken using Best Value Performance Indicator [BVPI] methodology. A maintenance and improvement summary is also presented allowing members to monitor progress on items such as signpost and gate installations and enforcement issues resolved or outstanding.

This year also saw an increase in reported issues following the launch of the new, easier to use, online reporting system, on which the LAF provided useful

feedback. When combined with significant increases rights of way use and loss of volunteers during lockdown, this led to pressures on resources and increases in enforcement related issues..

### **Priorities for the year ahead**

- Oversee the ROWIP Action Plan Year-1 report;
- Provide input on the increased number of proposed cycleways; and
- Continue to maintain partnerships with the outside groups maintaining our access networks

### **Comments from the appointing authority**

There remains a well-balanced and well-informed membership to make good decisions and provide valuable advice to the council. There is broad range of skills and knowledge on countryside matters.

Members hold the council to account, challenging priorities and decision-making. Meeting attendance is generally good and supported by cabinet members and committee staff, but there was an inevitable drop off with members unfamiliar with Microsoft Teams technology.

The LAF have been supportive and positive to the rights of way teams when commenting on the pressures resulting from increased use during Covid and reduced staff and volunteers involved in maintenance.

We continue to enjoy use of a 'speech to text' reporter to support members hard of hearing and ensure accurate minutes.

### **Comments from the Chairman**

This concludes my fourth year as chairman and a great many thanks to members for their continued support. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in virtual meetings and few were comfortable using the technology, but we were pleased to keep the show on the road.

While an increase in number of users on the rights of way network in 2020 was welcome, it had to be balanced against reports of misuse, impacting negatively on those working on the land. The Chiltern Society and Ramblers volunteer effort ceased during the main pandemic restrictions, but we were able to welcome them back in 2021. The result of their absence was a noticeable difference on the ground with lack of maintenance. However, I am

confident ground can be made-up next year due to their excellent work and commitment.

The main work of the Forum this year oversaw the production of the ROWIP 2020-2030 Action Plan, which I'm delighted to say has been published. We look forward in the coming years to overseeing delivery and recommending priorities throughout the 10-year lifetime of the Action Plan.

We enjoy good support within the council's committee structure for administration, and cabinet member attendance is both reassuring and welcome.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard Pushman', with a stylized flourish underneath.

**Richard Pushman (Chairman)**