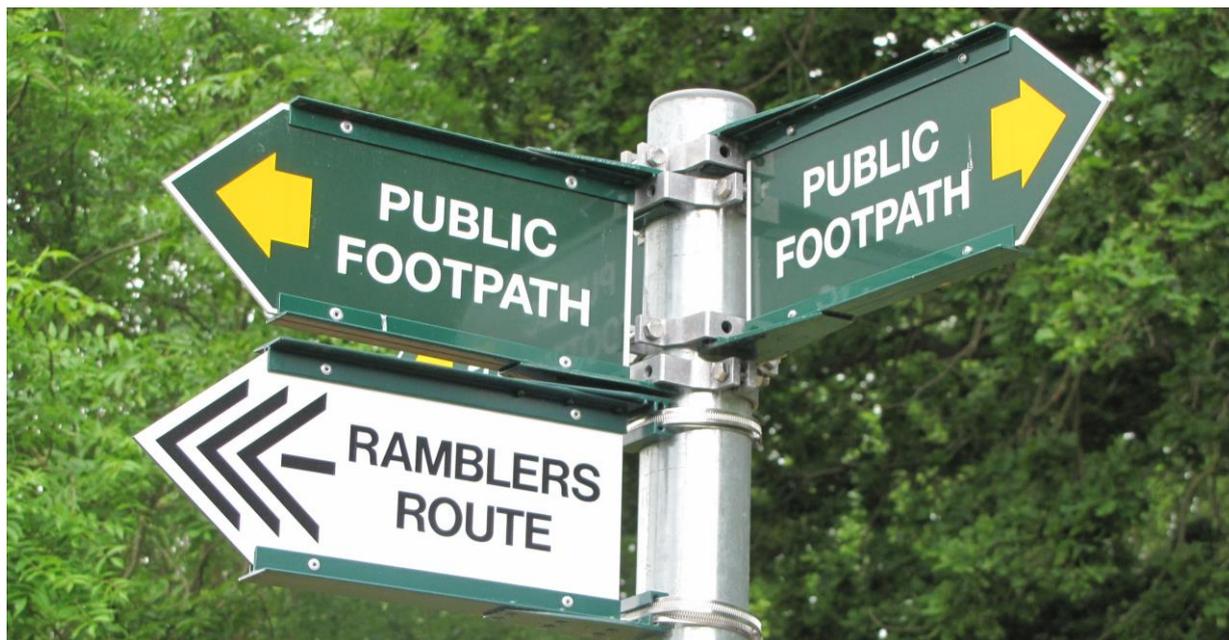


Bracknell Forest Borough, Local Countryside Access Forum, Annual Report 2015



The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW) placed a duty on Bracknell Forest Council to establish and maintain a 'Local Access Forum'. The Bracknell Forest Local Countryside Access Forum is an independent advisory body that aims to improve recreational access to the local countryside for all users, whilst enabling landowners and managers to make the best of their land. Bracknell Forest Council provides officer support to the Forum as well as training and liaison with other neighbouring Forums and organisations.

This document provides a background to the work of the Bracknell Forest Local Access Forum (LCAF), whose work is becoming ever more important due to the localism agenda coming from central government.

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1. Notable events during the year

There were 2 meetings (each lasting approximately 2 hours), a regional conference, 2 meetings of the Berkshire LAF Chairs and a site visit to Jealott's Hill Community Landshare Project.

1.1 Meetings at Easthampstead House, Bracknell

3 March: Attended by 6 LCAF Members, 4 Bracknell Forest Council (BFC) officers and 2 observers.

6 October: Attended by 10 LCAF Members and 3 BFC officers and 1 observer.

Agenda and minutes for LCAF meetings are available on the BFC website under Council meetings, agendas and minutes.

<http://www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/councillorsdemocracyandelections>

1.2 SE Region LAF conference, on 19 May, at Euston Rd, London

Attended by 2 LCAF Members (Hugh Fitzwilliams and Colin Bird) and 1 BFC officer (Graham Pockett).

Hugh's summary notes

20.05.2015

It was an interesting and informative day. There were six presentations. The session on Cattle Attacks on PROWs was cancelled due to the speaker being unable to attend. Of the 40 names on the attendance list approx. 30 were present.

Session 1. The Future of Public Path Orders

Mike Walker, Independent Consultant

The session focused on the impending changes to the 2000 CROW Act relating to Diversion Orders.

Currently there is no defined formal process for diversion applications and this has led to some illogical and inappropriate outcomes to landowners applications to divert paths. Key elements of the changes are:

- The new rights will apply only to 'any land of prescribed description' this in essence will be agricultural land, gardens and private yards, schools, businesses etc.
- The principle of diversion via an alternative acceptable route around gardens, yards schools etc. will be allowable and should be accommodated.
- Objections without sound reason will not be allowable
- There will be no requirement to advertise the application or diversion in the local press
- There will be a right of appeal & SOS will have the power to say Yes or NO
- LA will have to respond to or take initial action on an application within 4 months and progress specific points within an application within 4 months otherwise the applicant can go directly to SOS for a decision.

- The LA will have the option to take a neutral stance.
- Costs will be carried by the applicant.

It is hoped that the changes will allow for much wider more imaginative ‘packaging’ of changes which will encourage updating the relevance of routes and overall improvements to the PROW network.

Session 2. The Ramblers Big Path Project
Helen Mthiyane, Project manager

This was a briefing of the Ramblers Association project to get a wide cross section of individuals and groups whether regular walkers or not to survey the condition of all PROWs marked on the OS 1:25000 maps of Britain. The project is funded by Rambler Holidays Charitable Trust and runs from July 13 to 31 Dec 2015. It is the Ramblers biggest project ever.

The hope is that it will trigger a much wider involvement of society of all ages and types in understanding and making use of the wonderful network of paths within the UK. Problems of access and signage etc. will be coordinated by the Ramblers and fed through to LAs and their own local groups. The survey will not differentiate between FPs, BRs & BWs.

An App download showing a map of the area selected for survey by an individual along with the survey form will be available.

Session 3. Measuring the impact of successful funding bids
Annette Weiss, Chiltern Conservation Board

This was a fascinating report on how the Chilterns Conservation Board had evaluated the payback from a £48,000 Leader grant to create the Chilterns Cycleway.

The Chilterns Cycleway is a 173 mile, on road, signed, long distance route suitable for both serious and leisure cyclists but overall quite challenging. It was opened in 2010. The total cost was £70K

The evaluation included surveys of usage of pubs, accommodation and farm shops. Numbers of guide books sold, reviews on Twitter, Facebook and internet generally. The initial work discovered that users were usually in groups of 2 -4, stayed 2 nights and one new campsite had been created as a direct result of the route. In addition Events organisers were using the route for corporate ‘team build’ days and that local tour operators were offering guided trips along the route.

A Survey in 2012 recorded 55 over night users staying for an average 2.6 nights with an average spend of £71 per person including accommodation and an average group size of between 3 & 4. Day users had numbered 54 with an average group size of 3.9 and spend per person of £8. From these figures they had deduced that the probable annual inflow of revenue generated by the Cycleway route was in the region of £868,000. This added to the health & wellbeing benefits and seemed a very satisfactory return on the original grant of £48K.

Session 4. Coastal access update
Jenny Bowen, Senior Advisor to Natural England

This was an interesting update but not really very relevant to Bracknell! The Marine & Coastal Access Act 2009 is due to deliver for the whole of the England coast line

by Dec 2020. Although a decent start has been made there is still a lot to do. The key points seemed to be:

- It is perhaps as much a continuous coastal path as an access strip to the shore.
- Where access is granted the land owner/ occupier will benefit from reduced liability
- There is a 'fair balance test' on what is or is not to be declared accessible
- The standard path width is 4m
- The principle is to find agreement through discussion & negotiation rather than compulsion
- Privacy of existing landowners/ occupiers must be taken into account
- Where the coast is eroding a principle of 'roll back' is written into all agreements and where necessary the future line of the path will be established in the current negotiations
- In estuaries the path and access will extend upstream to the first pedestrian or ferry crossing
- Work on all stretches of the coast line must be started by 2017.

Session 5. De-registering incorrectly recorded Common Land
Grant McPhee, DEFRA

The Act of 2006 appears to have been very badly worded and to have been full of errors with maps and text declaring privately owned dwellings to be themselves common land along with many other contested issues. To make a sorry story worse there is no finance available to make the necessary corrections.

I found it difficult to hear this speaker, my notes are very thin but luckily to my knowledge Bracknell has little or no Common Land.

Session 6. Natural England Update
Rob Leek and Kevin Haugh, Natural England

The final session.

The overall message was that resources are very tight and that Access Forums could expect nothing more than the bare routine support.

Rob Leek showed a series of slides relating to Access Forum statistics. The number of Forums has increased from 78 in 2011 to 100 in 2015. 85% of Forums submitted their annual report. This % is basically unchanged since 2011. There seems to be a generally positive response from Forums towards NE. 92% of Forums are represented on Huddle. New contributors to Huddle are needed.

Kevin Haugh explained the organisational structure for Access Forums nationally. Bracknell is in Area 10 - Thames Valley- and our area officer is Andrew Smith. The message again was that resources are tight but if we had specific issues on which we needed to involve Andrew at our meetings we were to ask. He encouraged us to explore the concept, within our areas, at joint meetings and perhaps common interest study groups. This seemed to me a sensible and practical way forward.

1.3 LAF Chairs meeting, 5 February, 2 June and 2 September, in Maidenhead

Topics discussed included:

Encouraging joint working with other LAFs, producing a map of cross boundary paths and known issues, developing list of paths that change status across boundaries, sharing information about BFC paths with cross boundary issues and investigating options to obtain consistency amongst authorities with regard to signage and waymarking, for example, making waymarkers more uniform with a contact number and logo. Volunteers were being replied upon more now that some LAFs were losing support from Local Authorities.

The M4 Smart Motorway development was also one of the matters discussed at this meeting, but the work to improve the motorway wouldn't directly impact upon the borough.

1.4 Site visit to Jealott's Hill



Forum members went on an inspirational site visit to Jealott's Hill Community Landshare, a six acre (multi-purpose) garden for community use.

Between Bracknell and Maidenhead off the A330, the gardens are enjoyed by the local community supporting each other on horticultural activities and creating a haven for wildlife for all to enjoy. Sharing skills and produce is at the heart of the project, with local groups and individuals growing fruit, vegetables, other plants and enhancing biodiversity.

The project is a partnership between Bracknell Forest Homes, Bracknell Town Council, Warfield Parish Council and Syngenta. The land is owned by Syngenta and leased for community use.

Members were given a guided tour of the site by David Putt who is the Project Manager. Members got to see and learn about the site features including a 400 tree orchard, half acre vineyard, large polytunnel, three acres of cultivated ground and a half acre sensory garden.

Volunteers, with or without horticultural experience, of all ages and backgrounds are welcomed, as well as groups to enjoy activities such as growing food, maintaining flower beds and supporting local wildlife. The project actively encourages a diverse range of individuals from the community to become involved, including vulnerable people with special needs, mental health problems, physical illness or addiction. School staff and children are always welcome.

Community gardening activities have many therapeutic benefits, increased self esteem, a feeling of belonging, promoting well being, healthy eating and exercise. It also builds environmental awareness and helps support our local wildlife habitats.

Michael Brossard remarked “the project is fortunate in having an inspiring leader in the form of David. It was clear from our various discussions that he is passionate in wanting to help the residents from Bracknell and beyond who are disadvantaged mentally or physically. To this should be added Community Payback where those who have erred can be encouraged to support worthwhile causes.”

The project also does its bit towards promoting environmental sustainability by recycling materials that would have otherwise ended up in landfill:

The many benches removed from our town centre pre. Regeneration

The quality engineering bricks donated by Ringway

The many fruit trees purchased based on the multiple 75p donations from Waitrose staff resulting from their 75 year celebrations

To join, participate, sponsor or donate to the gardens, please contact David Putt, Project Manager, on 07867 695931, jealottshilllandshare@gmail.com or visit www.jealottshilllandshare.org.uk

2. Advice given by LCAF to Section 94 Bodies

2.1 Advice to BFC

Permit arrangements for horse riding on Crown Estate land had changed. An annual permit was now required to ride on land at Windsor Great Park and Swinley Forest, which is payable to The Crown Estate. The horse box parking area had been closed at The Look Out due to pressure on spaces in this car park but there was new horse box provision in Swinley Park. Improvements had been made to the horse riding tracks and car park.

2.2 Feedback to Natural England

LCAF worked with BFC to provide a response (on 8th May 2015) to an online survey of all LAF Chairs and Secretaries covering the period, 2014-15.

The survey had been produced to gather information from LAFs to help Natural England plan support for LAFs in the coming year. It will help them to use their

resources to best effect and will also help us to report to Defra and the Minister on the work of LAFs.

They were asking all LAF Chairs and Secretaries to complete this survey, giving us their view on how well LAFs are supported by Natural England, Defra and their appointing authority. Unless stated, all answers were treated with full confidentiality and they will use the results in a combined way to help give us an overview of LAF operation.

3. Successes

3.1 Example of partnership working

Regular attendance by the Chairman and a BFC officer at LAF Berkshire Chairs meeting enables an exchange of ideas and gives an opportunity to discuss cross-border matters.

3.2 Accessibility improvements to PROW and open spaces

Gate replacement project

Work continues with BFC, the Ramblers Association and the South East Berkshire Ramblers to improve accessibility of Public Footpaths, which meets targets set out in the Bracknell Forest Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP). This involves replacing the older “step over” or “squeeze” stiles with new metal or wooden kissing gates.

BFC had worked with SEBR to carry out the following:

- Two new mobility kissing gate to replace the old squeeze stile and old step over stile on Binfield Footpath 11.
- The narrow gate at Binfield Footpath 16 (off of Peacocks lane) had been replaced with a more accessible gate.
- There had been improvements to the small footbridge on Warfield Footpath 7.
- A new gate had been installed, replacing an old step over stile along Bracknell Footpath 15, at the junction with Easthampstead Park Conference Centre (EPCC) driveway.
- Two new pedestrian gates were installed along Warfield Footpath 6; one replacing the old ‘step-over’ stile at Brockhill farm and the other replacing a ‘squeeze’ stile off Malt Hill Road.
- Old ‘squeeze’ stiles along Winkfield Footpath 10 had been replaced with one new kissing gate and two pedestrian gates. Another ‘squeeze’ stile had been removed with no need to provide a replacement.

These works were funded by the Ramblers Association, with the Borough Council providing and SEBR working together to deliver the improvements. Making PROW more accessible helps meet targets set out in the Bracknell Forest Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP).

S106 funded works

A project was being drawn up to improve access along Winkfield Footpath 6 which experienced seasonal water logging. New interpretation was to be designed for Farley Copse (paths had been improved and ditches cleared). An access and education project was being drawn up for South Hill Park, which would look to provide a new nature-themed sculpture trail and educational balance beam. Works at Bill Hill included new paths, habitat improvements and interpretation. Monoliths (x4) would be installed at the site entrance points and would include a map of the site and some key facts about its history and wildlife. A new lectern would provide some information about the important Bronze Age Barrow.

Suitable Alternative Natural Green Spaces (SANGs)

These are open spaces that are being enhanced to attract more visitors by providing an enjoyable natural environment for recreation as an alternative to the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA).

Examples of access improvement works included:

- A new boardwalk along the eastern edge of Englemere Pond and a new surfaced path which linked around the pond edge.
- Six new gates had been erected at Shepherd Meadows to replace old 'step-over' stiles and provide a more accessible route around the meadows and woodland within.
- A new cycle rack and noticeboard had been installed at Ambarrow Court.
- New site signs would soon be installed on all SANGs sites.
- A new Coxwell gravel surfaced path had been completed at Longhill Park allowing links from the meadow to the older path below. The meadow was also to be seeded with a perennial wildflower mix.
- The bridge at Garth Meadows / Anneforde Place had been repainted, with a new surface to follow. There were 2 new noticeboards and interpretation panels at Garth Meadows. Manor Farm was now owned and managed by Bracknell Forest Council (BFC) and provided additional routes from Garth Meadows.

4. Membership changes

Mrs Sharon Holt stepped down from the forum after having joined LCAF when it was first established in 2008. LCAF members and council officers sent Sharon a letter, recording their thanks for Sharon's valuable input over the years. Sharon has done a huge amount to promote horse riding in the borough through her hard work and commitment and she will be missed by all on the Forum and at the Borough Council, who have also greatly benefitted from her knowledge and expertise.

Mr Colin Bird joined LCAF. Colin is a keen walker of the local area and is enthusiastic about promoting outdoor recreation and greater use of the countryside. Has some knowledge of farming issues having had a career in agricultural research.

Mr David Lindop also joined the forum. David is a Winkfield Parish Councillor, a keen dog walker and has an interest in finding ways to help improve accessibility to the

countryside. He has a background in management consultancy that might prove useful and he's passionate about nature and the environment.

The forum is now back up to 10 members which was the minimum membership as set out in the LAF (England) Regulations 2007 (3.- (1))

The following actions were carried out in order to help boost Forum membership:

- The LCAF web page on the BFC website is kept up-to-date with information about the forum, including terms of reference, a (member) person specification and an application form.
- A recruitment poster had been specially created and included on site notice boards at parks and countryside sites and in town/parish council offices.
- There is the potential for greater use to be made of the new What's on in Bracknell Forest Facebook page to promote the work of the forum.

5. Training and development

There were some tailored training opportunities for Forum members through IPROW for possibly half a day to be held at one of the authorities in the region. The more people who could attend, the lower the cost of the training per head. There would be a good overview of PROW matters but the training would not be too technical. Four or five people on the Forum expressed an interest in attending the training, depending on whether it would be held on a weekday or a weekend. Further details would be circulated to members when available.