

LOCAL COUNTRYSIDE ACCESS FORUM
04 APRIL 2006
(7.00 pm – 8.35 pm)

Present: David Bertie, Celia Blay, Chris Gardner, Mike Gates, Councillor Iain McCracken, Richard Mosses, Diana Pidgeon, Derick Stickler and Stuart Tarrant

Apologies for absence were received from:

Councillor Mrs Anne Haydon, Mark Osman, Peter Radband, Caroline Tomalin and James Warne (FWAG)

In attendance: James Dymond, Projects Officer, BFBC
Helen Tranter, Head of Culture & Visual Environment, BFBC
Gill Alker, Thames Valley Energy

Observer: Hugh Fitzwilliams, Rights of Way Ranger, BFBC

72. Welcome

Diana Pidgeon welcomed all members of the Forum to the meeting and also Gill Alker of Thames Valley Energy. The Forum was advised that Heather White, Planning and Projects Manager, had left Bracknell Forest Borough Council. The Forum wished to record its thanks to Heather for all of the support provided and good wishes for the future.

73. Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Forum held on 27 September 2005 were approved as a correct record.

74. Forum Membership

The Forum welcomed Richard Mosses of the South East Berkshire Ramblers Association as a new member, representing countryside users.

75. Gill Alker, Thames Valley Energy

Gill Alker of Thames Valley Energy attended to discuss short rotation coppicing and energy crops, some of the concerns surrounding these issues and the potential for generating energy crops in the locality.

Of the main widely acknowledged concerns raised around energy crops, the Forum was advised:

- Energy crops are carbon neutral because the burning of these materials releases only the carbon already taken out of the atmosphere when the trees were growing. The only long term emissions generated would be that used in the processing of the wood, to fuel chipping machines and haulage. These

emissions could be minimised by using bio-ethanol or bio-diesel and using local crops to fuel local boilers.

- In terms of biodiversity, the Game Conservancy Trust was funded to carry out a five year investigation of the effects of energy crops on local flora and fauna. It found that compared to arable crops, energy crops encouraged greater numbers and varieties of birdlife, with levels of migrant birds similar to those found in hedgerows, apart from the numbers of skylarks and lapwings, which were lower. Overall, energy crops encouraged higher numbers of insects and invertebrates, small mammals, butterflies and species of plant, than arable land.
- The affect on the landscape had also been an issue and the Forum was advised that any proposed new energy crop planting was assessed by the Forestry Commission for landscape impact and also widely consulted upon. There were available many guidelines to help make energy crops more sympathetic to the local landscape and even at maximum demand for energy crops, it was estimated that the land area needed would not be excessive, though the increase on existing energy crop provision to meet the targets set, would be substantial. Current planting of 250 hectares would need increasing to 4,000 hectares within the next 2 – 3 years.

The Forum was advised that there were currently incentives available for farmers to plant energy crops as the use of biomass with coal was being promoted by the government. From 2009 – 2016 all coal powered power stations would be required to burn a proportion of biomass to obtain their “green certificate”. Ideally this would be sourced from a 50 mile radius of the power station, as whilst biomass could be imported, this would negate many of the benefits of local provision. The long term vision was of decentralised power production which used locally produced crops.

The Forum was shown examples of current best practice in the region, which included:

- Buckinghamshire County Council had an 80 kilowatt boiler which used 50-60 tonnes of woodchip per annum to provide energy for a residential education centre
- A primary school in Buckinghamshire in the Diocese of Oxford used a 60kw boiler burning 30 tonnes of woodchip per annum to heat the school
- A horticultural nursery in Wexham had a 600kw boiler, burning 300 tonnes of woodchip per annum
- A farmer in Yorkshire used a 100kw boiler using 60 tonnes of woodchip per annum to provide heat for offices and business units

The Forum was advised that willow was the recommended energy crop to grow. In terms of the economics for farmers considering planting energy crops, there was currently a grant available of £1,000 per hectare planted and it was believed that the income was comparable to that from arable crops.

The Forum discussed the boiler proposed as part of the Bracknell Forest Town Centre Regeneration. It was anticipated that if this part of the project did go ahead, which was uncertain, 13,000 tonnes of woodchip would be needed per annum, which would equate to approximately 1,000 hectares of energy crops. This would provide heat and electrical energy for the town centre with negligible emissions and could use the Councils bio-products, if processed correctly.

The Forum thanked Gill for a very interesting and informative presentation.

76. **Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP)**

The Forum was advised that the ROWIP was now completed and copies were distributed to those at the meeting. Bracknell Forest, having published its ROWIP, was well ahead of many authorities and the recently published Local Transport Plan now also included information about the ROWIP. The Forum was advised that it now needed to consider the proposed actions listed in the “Action Plan” in Section 9 of the ROWIP and decide which to undertake once the current projects were completed. Suggestions made included:

- Raising the profile of “The Cut” and making efforts to improve it further. It was put forward that the Windsor and Maidenhead Quiet Lanes Project could link to this with minimal cost and disruption. It was agreed that James and David Bertie would visit the area in question to see how this could be progressed.
(Action: James Dymond/David Bertie)
- James also agreed to provide a more detailed area map and to see whether the Quiet Lanes Project was included in the Windsor and Maidenhead ROWIP.

(Action: James Dymond)

77. **LCAF Annual Report 2005**

The Forum noted this report.

78. **LCAF Guidance Workshop**

The Forum noted the notes from the Workshop and await the information pack for LCAFs to be published by the Countryside Agency.

79. **National Countryside Access Forum (NCAF)**

The Forum was advised that in terms of the national access picture, basic access provisions had now generally been identified and implemented. Now, access to coastal areas and inland waterways was being considered, as well as whether large public landowners, such as the National Trust and Crown Estate and even local authorities would volunteer dedicated access to their land. Additionally, Ordinance Survey maps were being updated as they were reissued to show all access land and access points, so overall it was a positive and improving picture.

80. **Information and Updates**

- Syngenta Bridleway – the Forum was advised that the new bridleway was now officially in place. The Forum queried whether Syngenta planned to plant trees along the new fencing and it was agreed that James would investigate this.
(Action: James Dymond)

It agreed that it was also necessary to arrange a visit to the new bridleway one evening (6.30 pm start) before the end of May.

(Action: James Dymond/Mark Osman)

- Devils Highway underpass – the Forum was advised that this had been cleared in February 2006 because it had been flooding every winter and there had originally been a drain situated there. One to two feet of sand had been cleared and there was now no mud or flooding. This would need future monitoring and cleaning as necessary.
- Watersplash Lane – the Forum was advised that a method statement had been sent in to the Environment Agency who have given consent for the work. Notice has been issued and work would start in May for approximately one month.

81. **Valley Gardens (Stuart Tarrant)**

The Forum was advised that the Crown Estate was proposing to put in fencing and charge of entrance to approximately 220 acres of Windsor Great Park known as the Valley Gardens. The proposals included more visitor centres, elevated walkways, children's playgrounds and a land train. Also involved, however, was the removal of a central car park, which was felt to raise substantial access issues. Local communities were unhappy with the proposals and had raised a petition and website opposing the changes. The Forum was minded not to become involved with this issue as the land in question was not in Bracknell Forest and it was also not open access land, but permitted access.

82. **Any other business**

- The Forum was advised that the list of members had been updated.
- There was discussion of the effects of Special Protection Areas locally.
- The creation of a new bridleway from Winkfield Way to the boundary with the Royal Berkshire Polo Club was suggested as a possible future project for the Forum. It was agreed that this be put on the Action Plan and investigated further. **(Action James Dymond)**
- Date of next meeting – early October 2006.

CHAIRMAN