

LOCAL COUNTRYSIDE ACCESS FORUM
10 OCTOBER 2023
19:30 – 21:30



Present:

Members:

Colin Bird (Chair)
Nicholas Ballard
Councillor Sheila Collings
Denis Crampton (online)
Richard Elsbury
Michael Brossard
Hugh Fitzwilliams
Sharon Fletcher
Les Langley
Sue McDaid
Geoff Paxton (online)
Councillor Cherise Welch

In attendance:

Stephen Chown, Head of Parks and Countryside
Rose Wicks, Data & Communications Officer
Stuart Russell, Forest Warden at The Crown Estate
Steve Sansom, Age UK Berkshire

Apologies for absence were received from:

Jenny Yung
Heather Brown
Robert Solomon, SANG and Rights of Way Officer

1. Welcome

The meeting began with the host addressing the unique circumstances of this gathering - a hybrid meeting. There was an acknowledgment of the need to operate microphones effectively in order to facilitate communication and ensure that everyone, including members joining online, could hear the proceedings. Additionally, a reminder was given to promptly deactivate the microphones after speaking.

The Chair extended a warm welcome to all attendees, expressing enthusiasm about the first in-person and hybrid meeting of the Access Forum in quite some time. This meeting presented the opportunity to connect with members in person, including those who were meeting face-to-face for the first time. The host introduced a variety of changes and new developments in the meeting.

Attendees were encouraged to provide feedback about the meeting setup at the end of the session.

The meeting logistics and housekeeping were discussed. Fire alarm procedures were addressed, with attendees advised to follow exit signs in case of a fire alarm.

Regarding refreshments, it was clarified that only water was permitted in the meeting room, and any exceptions needed to be reported. A reminder was given to sign out of the building upon departure.

2. **Apologies and changes to membership**

It was noted that Jenny, a long-standing member of the Council, had intended to join the meeting remotely from Cornwall but faced technical issues. Therefore, her absence was recorded as an apology.

David Warren, who had been a member of the forum for some years, representing the interests of trail riders, had stepped down, resulting in a total of 13 members in attendance.

Two new members, Les Langley and Sharon Fletcher, were welcomed. It was noted that both members were introduced to the forum through working parties at South Hill Park and were enthusiastic about contributing their experiences and insights. Two other visitors were also welcomed. Steve Samson from Age UK Berkshire was invited to participate in the meeting to share valuable insights on the accessibility of the countryside for those with dementia. Stuart Russell was invited to give an update on behalf of The Crown Estate. The host proposed a round-robin introduction for the attendees to familiarise everyone with each other.

The Chair noted that the meeting was not being live streamed as in previous Zoom meetings but would be recorded and shared on YouTube for a wider audience to access. It was underlined that previous recordings had garnered attention, including being picked up by the local Bracknell News.

Furthermore, it was queried whether the Members' interest list should be made available online, subject to members' approval. The intention behind this was to give prospective forum members insights into the identity and interests of existing members.

The Chair made the forum aware that there had been no volunteers for the position of Vice-chair and that if it was of interest to anyone to approach at the end of the meeting.

3. **Minutes of Last Meeting and Matters Arising**

The meeting began with a discussion of the approval of the minutes from the previous meeting. The Chair opened the floor for comments or corrections on the minutes.

A member raised a query regarding paragraph 262, specifically the second-to-last paragraph concerning the update about the Watersplash Lane connection. The minutes reference the plan to join up Watersplash Lane with a permissive bridleway through the top end of Larks Hill. The member expressed confusion and asked if there were plans for a permissive bridleway through Lark's Hill. The member was only aware that there was going to be a permissive bridleway across Priory Field, to link up with Hedge Lane, off Priory Lane.

Another member explained that there had been discussions with a member of the planning team over horse riders along Watersplash Lane having access to a

Pegasus crossing across the road and into Priory Field. Plan is to take a bridleway along the bottom of Priory Field into Priory Lane.

To discuss the matter with the planning team. To update members at the next meeting and if/where necessary update this reference in the last meeting minutes.

(Action: Rose Wicks)

The Chair moved on to discuss matters arising from the previous meeting: The Chair mentioned that the action points from the last meeting had been summarised and circulated.

They addressed item 263 regarding the Rights of Way Improvement Plan and noted that the Member's interest list was being updated and would be circulated for further updates.

The Chair talked about the action around the closure of the footbridge at Shepherd Meadows and of Hampshire Footpath 505. QR codes had been added to the posters. They discussed the progress on the new bridge and highlighted the positive feedback received.

Work was underway to secure the budget and experienced contractors were involved in the bridge project. This was a long-term project, and updates would be provided at the next meeting. There was mention of a capital bid to replace the bridge, and planning would commence after confirmation.

Concerns were raised about the illegal closure of West End Lane, The Chair noted that there was confusion about whether it was a highway. They stated that they would follow up with highways and acknowledged that there were concerns about the issue.

(Action: Rose Wicks)

The Chair also discussed a site visit for Members, which had not been arranged but would be in the future.

Invitations were extended to The Crown Estate, and Stuart's presence at the meeting was acknowledged.

The Chair reported on the definitive map consolidation, including the website link for the Council's definitive map. The Chair encouraged Members to use the interactive map, which allows them to explore the borough's rights of way. Members were informed that different maps were available for their use. The Chair offered to resend the link if needed.

There was an update on the Appendix 2, which focused on new rights of way to improve accessibility to the countryside.

An officer pointed out errors in the invite list on the agenda, which would be corrected. The Chair concluded the meeting by confirming that no one had been deleted from the invite list.

4. Update from The Crown Estate

Stuart, representing The Crown Estate, provided an update on several key points. Stuart reported that they are due to install new signage for the Ramblers Route through Swinley Park and Swinley Forest.. The signs have been manufactured and delivered, and we can expect installation to happen soon. The exact timing is still to be confirmed.

Stuart highlighted the significant improvements made to the signage for the mountain bike trails in Swinley Forest. The signs are now more visible and easier to read and follow. Additionally, they feature QR codes that link to the Swinley Forest website and include "what3words" on every post. This technology allows us to pinpoint the location of individuals who need assistance, even if they don't have the "what3words" app.

Stuart discussed the ongoing issue of unauthorised access by electric motorcycles, particularly the Seron model. These electric motorcycles are fast, capable of speeds over 50 miles per hour, and are relatively quiet. This presents a safety concern, especially when riders travel on them in groups. The Crown Estate is in communication with Thames Valley Police and Surrey Police to address this issue, including finding ways to engage with the riders, deter these activities, and potentially take action against them.

Following Stuart's update, members had the opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback. A BFC officer expressed gratitude for the installation of the Rambler Route signs, and it was noted that the associated leaflet would be updated to reflect the new signs' positions and the change in the route direction.

(Action: Rose Wicks)

Another attendee also expressed appreciation for the improved signage, as it had helped prevent them from getting lost in the forest.

Regarding the use of electric motorbikes in the forest, Stuart confirmed that such usage is illegal due to their violation of Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) regulations and the Wildlife and Countryside Act. Most of these motorbikes are not road-legal Serons. It was highlighted that members of the public who spot such activities are encouraged to report them to the police through the 101 reporting system. The more reports received, the more seriously the police will take the issue. The question of whether similar issues are occurring on bridleways and other areas was raised, prompting further consideration.

5. **Access for all**

Update about site visits:

A video call had taken place with Les and Sharon, LCAF Chair and BFC officers. The purpose was to introduce them to the Forum. Discussion was had around suitable places for a site visit. Following suggestions at this meeting, Les and Sharon paid a visit to two local greenspaces.

Bucklers Forest Visit

On August 23rd, Les and Sharon visited Bucklers Forest at 10:00 AM. The visit was on a beautiful sunny morning, and they found a wide parking spot for disabled drivers near the entrance. Clear maps provided information about the area and notable spaces, beneficial for all generations, especially for wheelchair users. Les and Sharon followed the 3.6-kilometer blue route and found it wheelchair-friendly with well-managed displays. Recreational areas with seating and beautiful views provided rest stops and relaxation opportunities. They also appreciated the recycled and reused items in the area. Navigating the slope of the banked curve was a fun challenge, and they encountered friendly visitors.

Cabbage Hill Visit

On August 30th, Sharon and Les visited Cabbage Hill at 1:00 PM. They arrived on a sunny afternoon and found the parking space accommodating. Accessibility was

good at the start, with flat surfaces, but some gateways were tricky for wheelchairs. Different path textures were encountered, including gravel, woodchip, and uneven surfaces. Signage issues were noted, and the group suggested improvements. The visit provided beautiful views and a peaceful atmosphere. Suggestions were made to consider different routes or additional signs for improved accessibility.

Participants raised concerns about overgrown bushes and graffiti on signage. It was suggested that feedback could be sent directly to the Rangers through the website's reporting form. A Parks user survey was mentioned, encouraging residents and visitors to provide feedback about their visit. Discussions included the balance between signage and maintaining the natural feel of the parks. A link to an accessible route was to be shared with Sharon and Les for further exploration.

(Action: Rose Wicks)

Next, Steve Samson and his presentation on dementia-friendly walks and related topics. Members discussed the importance of regular physical activity in reducing depression and anxiety levels, as well as slowing age-related cognitive decline. It was also highlighted that it was World Mental Health Day 2023.

Update from Berkshire Age UK

Steve presented statistics related to dementia in the UK, including the current number of individuals with dementia and projections for the future. He reveals the geographical concentration of dementia in England, particularly in Bournemouth. Steve discussed the significant economic cost of dementia in the UK, which is expected to rise in the coming years. Steve explained his role in the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, which involves making the area dementia-friendly by collaborating with stakeholders and supporting individuals with dementia. Steve provided information about dementia-friendly walks in Bracknell, including their locations and meeting schedule. Steve mentioned the goal of collaborating with care homes and other organisations to support the community.

Forum members asked questions and made comments about Berkshire Age UK, funding, and their experiences with Young People with Dementia (YPWD). The discussion wrapped up with discussion around how BFC officers might use their communication channels, such as a popular e-newsletter, to share news of the walks and promote uptake. The Chair thanked Steve for his informative presentation and there was general reflection by members on the importance of promoting well-being in Bracknell Forest.

BFC officers gave a short update on work being done with AccessAble, to provide new accessibility guides for key parks in the borough.

Rob was absent from the meeting, but an update was given about the many significant improvements carried out to public rights of way, particularly concerning Avery Lane and Quelm Lane. There has been substantial vegetation growth this spring and summer, requiring largescale vegetation clearance to maintain access along these public rights of way. Temporary closures were necessary for the work to take place.

A major footpath improvement was planned for Binfield Footpath 11. This involved resurfacing the lower section of the footpath and some vegetation clearance.

Pockets Copse does not have formal public access; it's informal. The improvements also aim to address the boggy conditions in the area.

6. **Site Visit**

The Chair apologised for not organising a visit to Amen Corner North and Amen Corner South as previously mentioned. The Chair expressed the desire for the next site visit to be accessible to everyone. It was suggested that Amen Corner North and Amen Corner South are not yet accessible for a site visit.

The Chair brought up the possibility of revisiting Frost Folly Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) extension. There was uncertainty about the condition of the paths at Frost Folly. There was mentioned of a previous visit during the week of walks, specifically to SANG three. It was acknowledged the challenge of making everywhere completely accessible. Members expressed the need to find an inclusive location for the next site visit.

There was the proposal to visit the extension to the SANG in Sandhurst. This comprised areas owned by Sandhurst Town Council, which were being improved in conjunction with Bracknell Forest Council. It was suggested that the area in Sandhurst could be less familiar to some members. It was noted that there is a lot to see in the proposed area. Members recalled a previous visit to Bucklers and mentioned doing the circuit described by Sharon and Les. Members proposed scheduling the visit for a Saturday or Sunday to accommodate everyone. It was confirmed about the intention to arrange the visit during the autumn.

(Action: Colin Bird)

7. **Definitive Map consolidation**

This item began by providing an update on the ongoing review of the definitive map and statement of public rights of way in Bracknell Forest.

The definitive map and statement of public rights of way is a legal record of all public rights of way in the borough. It was last reviewed just over 10 years ago, with the last map having the relevant date of January 2013.

The review aims to update and consolidate the legal changes, including modification orders, such as footpath creations and diversions, to ensure the accuracy of the map. The process is currently in progress, with advice being sought from the council's legal team to ensure the process is fully compliant with the appropriate legislation. BFC officers leading the process are also preparing to obtain formal approval from the council's executive director of place, planning and regeneration for the process followed. The process is expected to be completed in 2024, after which updated maps will be published on the council's website, and paper copies will be made available at the council offices at Time Square. Members have previously been consulted about changes and updates to the public rights of way.

A question was raised about whether the legal width of the paths would be published in the definitive statement. It was explained that in some cases, the width is already included in the statement. They are also reviewing older records of the map and statement to ensure relevant information is captured, which might have been missed off from earlier consolidations.

The Forum discussed the proposal to dedicate a public footpath on council land, which is leased to Binfield Football Club. The council has been liaising with Binfield Parish Council and the Football Club to dedicate this well-used track, known as Mosses Path. The legal process for undertaking this dedication has been determined

and officers have put forward the proposal for a decision from the council's executive member for planning and transport.

As part of this proposal, section 106 developer funding is being sought to improve the footpath's surface. The progress is expected to be reported at the next meeting.

Officers also referenced how there was the recommendation to delete a redundant section of bridleway known as Binfield Bridleway 23A (or Mare Lane). This would be a condition for the footpath's creation. The matter is being pushed forward, and further updates will be provided at a later date.

8. PRow and Local Development

Next, a discussion about public rights of way and their connection to local development. The Chair had met with Cllr Gillbe, who currently serves as the executive member for Planning and Transport. Cllr Gillbe expressed a strong interest in walking and expressed a desire to be involved with the Forum. Cllr Gillbe was disappointed to learn that rights of way was under the remit of a different executive member, as it falls under parks and countryside service to deliver. Nevertheless, he remained keenly interested in the topic.

It was noted that Cllr Gillbe had planned to attend the meeting but was unavailable.

The meeting attendees discussed the fact that the public often does not differentiate between a public right of way and a highway, which can lead to issues. Cllr Gillbe had expressed a desire to make the transition between public rights of way and highways more seamless, as highways are within his purview.

The meeting attendees mentioned a question from a previous meeting regarding an access point to Frost Folly from the Northern end of Osborne Lane. This question would require consultation with the highways team, as it might involve parking-related issues. Concerns were raised about the design of Frost Folly, which was originally intended for drivers and not pedestrians, posing safety risks for walkers.

Following this a discussion about the relationship between public rights of way and new development areas within the borough. Planning applications often focus on the specifics of the application rather than considering broader access to the countryside or the rights of way network. The challenges of ensuring that development not only meets its immediate needs but also provides opportunities for broader accessibility were acknowledged. The challenges were particularly notable in cases where developers purchased land for SANGs detached from the areas they were building, without considering how it could be connected.

Concerns were raised about the relatively poor access to the rights of way network in the northern parishes of Warfield and Binfield, with an emphasis on safety. A previous attempt to establish a permissive path with Thames Water dried up, leaving a need for improved access.

The meeting attendees discussed the importance of creating a connection between the Parks and Countryside team, represented by Executive Member Kandy Jefferies, and the Planning and Highways team represented by Councillor Gilby.

Subsequent to the meeting between Cllr Gillbe and the LCAF Chair, the executive member responsibilities for rights of way have been split between two executive members. Cllr Gillbe, Executive Member for Planning and Transport will cover

dedication and investment. Cllr Jefferies Executive Member for Culture, Delivery and Public Protection would be dealing more with maintenance and promotion.

It was noted with enthusiasm about how Cllrs' interests in rights of way is a positive thing and how Cllr Gillbe was hoping to keep engaged in LCAF's work by attending future meetings.

The meeting attendees considered whether there were any additional points to add, with a focus on liaising with the councillors and other relevant teams.

The meeting attendees noted that they should continue to identify opportunities and advocate for progress, especially in cases where development opportunities arose.

Attendees were invited to ask further questions or bring up additional topics, but no further questions were raised.

9. **Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces (SANGs)**

The Chair introduced the next discussion, an update on the SANG (Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space) leaflet pack of walks.

A BFC officer reported how they'd been working to update the leaflet pack to add new SANG sites and update information (where required) for current ones. Copies were distributed to members, officers and guests.

The leaflets provide information on these various natural green spaces within the borough. The pack contained a map of all the SANGs in the area and description cards and maps for each SANG, including details for circular walks.

New site leaflets contained in the pack include Big Wood and Peacock Meadows North, Bucklers Forest, Cabbage Hill, and Peacock Meadows South and Tarman's Copse. Major updates had been made to the Long Hill Park group, which had been changed to Bullbrook Countryside Corridor. Additionally, footpath changes at Ambarrow Court had been updated.

The updated leaflets were intended to provide residents with accessible information to explore these areas, especially those suitable for dog walkers. Plans were also in place to make the information available on the council's website. Black and white print-friendly copies of the leaflets were being produced, and the information would be available for download.

Questions were raised regarding two specific SANGs: Blue Mountain and Amen Corner, these sites had been under discussion for some time, and there was uncertainty about when they would be adopted by Bracknell Forest Council. The complex situation was acknowledged by the officers and mentioned that the council was in discussions with developers and planning agents to find a solution. Binfield Parish Council had also been involved in trying to reach out to relevant parties to improve the sites. The deteriorating condition of the sites due to overgrown vegetation and dying trees was discussed. The lack of a timeline for transferring the sites to the council's ownership and maintenance was a significant concern to members.

Next, followed a brief update on the extension of a SANG to the north of Shepherd Meadows and the improvements associated with this. A more detailed update would be given at the next meeting by Rob Solomon, rights of way and SANG officer. In brief, improvements had been made to access, supported by developer contributions.

Stage one works had begun in September and included the placement of new boardwalk sections and improved culvert crossings. It was suggested that an update between meetings might be beneficial, particularly in preparation for site visits.

10. **Any other business**

The Chair opened the floor for questions and observations.

A concern was raised about access to Buckler's Forest, specifically the need for a gate from the Bracknell side, preferably behind the Golden Retriever pub. It was suggested by one member, about having a gate to allow pedestrians and cyclists to access Bucklers Forest without using roads. The Chair acknowledged the question and emphasised the importance of keeping this issue alive. They also mentioned that the Great Hollands area residents of Bracknell were frustrated due to the lack of an official route and the intervention of Natural England, which led to the creation of an unofficial route. They noted that there were previous plans for an entrance along Nine Mile Ride, slightly west of the Golden Retriever. These plans might be linked to the development at Bucklers Forest. However, they acknowledged that the proposed entrance might not fully meet the accessibility needs of residents in the Great Hollands area, as they would have to travel a significant distance along Nine Mile Ride to access it. The illogicality of not having an entrance closer to the Golden Retriever was raised and it was stressed the importance of a green space connecting Bracknell to Crowthorne. The Chair suggested providing an update on the plans at the next meeting. The Chair added that they wanted to see the SANG Network have its own connectivity from one SANG to another. They explained the importance of protecting the special protection area and the need to limit road crossings close to the Golden Retriever to protect the Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA)

An update on the Hayley Greenwood track was asked for, specifically the track leading from Hayley Green Wood. She mentioned that the track was privately owned, and the owner had restricted access to it.

The BFC officer explained that they had collected evidence from both users and landowners and were waiting for a formal application to proceed with the statutory process. They mentioned this was a highly emotive matter that split public opinion. If a formal application was made to the council, they had a statutory duty to take this forward and there was the strong possibility it would be subject to challenge by the landowner. This could end up going before the Secretary of State for a decision. BFC officers emphasised the need for a balanced viewpoint and a fair process. It was clarified that no formal application had been received, and the council was awaiting one. The officer explained that the residents and landowners were likely expecting an update from the council. They mentioned the need to update residents on the situation and provide information about the application process. The officer stated that they hadn't received a formal application and highlighted the possibility of a resident stepping forward to initiate the application process. They planned to update all parties on the current status and the next steps to be taken.

Finally, and upcoming community walk organised by Winkfield Parish Council was announced

11. **Public question time**

No questions raised – no members of the public in attendance.

12. **Date of Next Meeting**

The next meeting is Tuesday the 6th of February 2024. The meeting will be hybrid, taking place in person in the council chamber and on Teams.