

■ Welcome

Matthew Balfour welcomed delegates and thanked Sue Batstone for all the work she undertook during her tenure as Natural England's South East LAF Co-ordinator. Her replacement is Kevin Haugh, who takes up his post with immediate effect.

■ Forestry Commission Access

David Williamson, FOREST MANAGEMENT
DIRECTOR, SOUTH EAST ENGLAND

The Forestry Commission manages the Public Forest Estate. There is tremendous public support for the Forestry Commission and this is a reflection of the hard working people in the field; to produce timber and to provide access and recreation.

The recent consultation on the future of the estate provoked a public outcry and was withdrawn after 3 weeks. There was also a proposal to sell 15% (40,000 Ha) of public forest estate and this has also been withdrawn until after the independent panel has reported. It should be emphasized that the sale is *postponed*, not cancelled.

An independent Panel for the future of Forest Policy has now been chosen and it should be noted: the FC didn't have any influence on its membership. The Panel, Chaired by the Right Reverend James Jones, Bishop of Liverpool (highly respected – he also did the Hillsborough inquiry), will hopefully report back in the spring of 2012. They will have a wide remit and the terms of reference are shown on the overhead slides. The Panel has already met and there is the possibility of regional road-shows to obtain the public's views.

15% of sales would have raised around £100 million. However, the vast majority of sites in south east England are ancient woodlands and the decision is still to be made on whether these are to be sold.

The amount the Forestry Commission generates in income from its estates, recreation and access is greater than its income from timber; while the income grant from Defra has kept being cut over recent years. Annual savings will need to be in the region of £11 million to 2014/15; with a 27% reduction in staff (when numbers at present are not heavy) equating to a staff loss of 854 to 617 over the next 4 years, with the majority going in 2011/12. There will be cuts before the Panel reports. The FC 2010–11

financial figures and the Annual savings projection by 2014–15 are summarized on the overheads.

The proposal is to transfer the Chilterns, East Sussex and Kent to Thetford and the rest to the New Forest – 9 districts down to 6.

In the south east only c. 50% of Forestry Commission land is dedicated under CROW as 50% of the Forestry Commission Estate is leasehold; with many owners not keen on allowing access. Others allow access via a permit system. The FC in the south east undertake £100K worth of flailing and mowing in the region, but some woods are going to have to be mothballed, which will reduce the amount of access available. They currently employ one person to manage a permission system for events such as motorcycling, mountain biking and orienteering. These are communicated to the beat forester to make sure there are no clashes with forest operations or other events. Annually, the system manages 30,000 people, 600 events and earns the Commission £51,000. Their horse riding permit system is managed through 'TROT', and the cost equates to only £1 per week for each equestrian.

Would more central guidance on access be welcome? Their access policy currently revolves around safety inspections in car parks, along trails, and of course the trees around the recreation facilities. Local managers apply these inspection and recording regimes. The FC also have standards for things like extreme mountain biking and signage; and there is guidance on regular inspections of play equipment. If guidance is helpful and not bureaucratic, then yes, it would be welcomed.

However, the systems seem to work well at the moment. The public, in general, know they will have a safe experience on Forestry Commission land, with no glass, rubbish or needles, etc.

Should horse riders have equal access? The Forestry Commission have allowed cycling clubs to take on the lease of designated areas of land for mountain biking, the cost of which is passed on to their members or is charged at £5 per day. Examples of good equestrian access were shown at Bramshill and Crowthorne Forest, south of Wokingham, located in north Hampshire and Berkshire, where there are forest rides and jumps provided; and Hodgemoor Wood, in Chalfont St Giles, Buckinghamshire, where the local riding club has organised their own permit scheme and raised money to resurface trails within

the SSSI woodland. In addition, the Shipwrights Way is a new long-distance route which will link villages and towns in east Hampshire from Alice Holt Forest near Farnham across the South Downs to Portsmouth.

■ The Future of Local Access Forums

Dave Waterman, DEFRA

Dave stressed that he ‘walks the walk’ as well as ‘talks the talk’, being a keen walker, whose daily route involves nearly all types of access, including public rights of way, HLS permissive paths and a community woodland. He has been doing this job for around 10 years, and while a colleague now deals with Local Access Forums, he is still closely involved in Rights of Way.

Things have changed radically since the new coalition government came into power in 2010, though it has taken a while for the picture to emerge in terms of access. He wanted to stress that access is important to the government, but there has been a change to the picture from this time last year, for two reasons:

- 1 The government is keen to reduce the size of central government and put more emphasis on local civil society; they want to relinquish power to local government and local communities and relinquish powers from Defra; and
- 2 Financial constraints: the reality of having to manage with less money.

The minister, Richard Benyon MP, wants to improve access. Its value is understood, with the increasing need to get away from car use and enjoy the beauty and tranquility of the countryside. There is now increased involvement from the Department for Health, due to both physical and mental health benefits. Access is highly valued by people; their passion for access can be likened to a sleeping giant in that it often is underestimated until awakened by a threat.

Tourism is also a significant factor in access, particularly in farm diversification. It contributes to sustainable transport aims of carbon reduction, and the positive action to care for the natural environment.

An important part of the Government’s policy on access will be to emphasize local access close to where people live. There are many people that still do not engage with the natural environment and Natural England’s *Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment* survey has produced evidence that they would if better access was available on their doorstep. Coastal access will continue, but will progress at a slower pace – it is something which Richard Benyon continues to support.

There will be a Natural Environment White Paper, which will have less emphasis on centralized initiatives. The accent will be on civil society with a trend towards avoiding central government telling local communities how they do things and a shift of emphasis to local decision-making. What will this mean for Local Access Forums? If one were to design an access advisory body it would probably be a Local Access Forum.

There is a continuing and possibly increased role for Local Access Forums to play. They are needed to formulate local solutions to coastal access; implement and review the ROWIP; advise on the Public Forest Estate consultation; the future of our Inland Waterways; and advise what happens to permissive access under HLS when it is discontinued.

Funding is tight in both Natural England and Defra. The value of Local Access Forums is seen as being able to provide local advice; that does not always mean a consensus, but debate and opinion is still important. The Minister is seeking views on these proposals with a view to taking forward the most favoured ones. Natural England will be co-ordinating responses and reporting back to the Minister. Views are sought on:

- 1 a ‘Virtual Forum’ for sharing best practice and exchanging views; a means for Defra and Natural England to provide guidance, training and updates on access, including the possibility of the Minister hosting a ‘hot seat’;
- 2 a memo of understanding to maximize the effectiveness of relationship between Local Access Forums, Defra and Natural England;
- 3 an annual training event, perhaps held regionally rather than nationally; and
- 4 Local Access Forum seat on the ROW Review Committee.

QUESTIONS

- Q1** *Why hit HLS payments when both farmers and users suffer and the treasury saving will be relatively small?*
Because of the way EU funding rules work, the system is 100% Exchequer funded and compared to other uses of HLS funding is not good value for the UK taxpayer. There may well be other ways to maintain these access routes, such as dedication by common law with a one-off payment to the landowner.
- Q2** *Are Local Authorities required to have a Local Access Forum?*
Local Authorities must currently have a Local Access Forum. Defra will argue to retain them.

Q3 *What progress has been made since 'Stepping Forward – working group on unrecorded rights of way: report to Natural England'?*

There will be further investigation of the proposals, together with a cost-benefit analysis. When this work is complete, the findings will be made known, this should be in the summer of 2011 and the Government will share its thinking with the wider stakeholder community. The ROW Review Committee, as a body, will continue.

Q4 *Is one access representative enough on the Independent Forestry Panel?*

The one access member will represent all users (Tom Franklin, Chief Executive of the Ramblers' Association). Tom has undertaken to represent all access interests and groups, other than walkers, and people will be able to feed their views through him.

■ Coastal Access in South East England

Tom Lord, NATURAL ENGLAND

There have been a number of changes in Natural England with around a 33% reduction in staffing levels and a reorganization of the Coastal Access delivery model. Despite this they are entering an exciting phase in the south east.

Natural England advice to Government in 2007 was clear. The legislation should:

- Enable Natural England to align a 'coastal access route' around the coast that people could enjoy with confidence and certainty.
- Allow the route to 'roll back' automatically as erosion occurs.
- Include provision for regular spreading room on areas of beach, dune and headland, where appropriate, allowing people to rest, explore or picnic.

The Marine and Coastal Access Bill received royal assent on 12th November 2009 and Secretary of State approval in March 2010. The first stretch in Weymouth will be ready by Feb 2012 for the Olympic sailing event. Kent is one of 5 lead stretches for coastal access delivery, the others include, Cumbria; Durham, Hartlepool and Sunderland; Somerset, and Norfolk. The route is primarily for pedestrians.

The change of government and economic climate has prompted a review of the previous £50 million model. There will be a revised delivery mechanism, with an ambition to deliver the new right of access over 40% of the coast within 10 years. It is hoped to start work on around 150km of coastal access in each successive year from 2011/12, but activity will be tailored according to available resources.

There are 5 stages in the delivery model:

- **STAGE 1** Data gathering, identifying issues and opportunities – this includes preparation and data collection, such as a landowner database; and investigating heritage assets and environmental designations. This stage also looks at strategic issues, alignment, erosion, land use and the avoidance of sensitive habitats.
- **STAGE 2** Walking the Course – a site meeting with the landowner to walk the route with a 'Trimble' GPS tool, record the spreading room available and any disagreements.
- **STAGE 3** Draft proposals – encompassing a draft report, which includes a 'quality assurance check' ensuring consistency across the country in alignment decisions and projected costs. Pre-consultation checks with the Environment Agency and English Heritage are undertaken in this stage.
- **STAGE 4** Consultation on draft proposals – a 12-week long, primarily web-based consultation. Draft proposals are then amended accordingly.
- **STAGE 5** Final Report published.

All 5 lead stretches in England are at Stage 0/1; while Weymouth is at Stage 4/5.

On reflection, it is thought, there should be an extra stage '0', which internally puts in place a Natural England Delivery Team, establishes a relationship with the access Authority; develops a coastal stretch plan and makes initial contact with stakeholders.

There are principles of alignment: they have the power to create a new access line, either adopting a permissive or de facto walked line or creating a new right of way, with defined 'spreading room'. This is land either side of a path on which the public are allowed to rest or picnic.

In Kent there is already good provision of legal coastal access, with 80% already secure. This is shown as green on their maps; with orange showing existing permissive or *de facto* access; and red with no existing satisfactory access. Kent County Council have agreed the start and end points of their stretch, from Ramsgate Pier in the north to Lower Leas Coastal Park in the south. They took the decision to extend the stretch significantly past the original 30km outline, and are now dealing with over 50km of coast between Ramsgate and Folkestone.

What have we done so far? A non-exhaustive list of Kent stakeholders has been drawn up, including LAFs, who will be consulted at Stage 1. They want to tap into the local knowledge of routes, understand aspirations and hopefully address any concerns. Other

stakeholders to be consulted include the CLA, NFU, Ramblers, BHS, CTC, Sustrans, Environment Agency, English Heritage, Parish Councils, Tourism providers and National Trust.

■ Encouraging people to walk through the 'Walk4Life' Project

Jenny Humphreys,

PROJECT MANAGER, WALK ENGLAND

Walk4Life is a project managed by Walk England, 'a social enterprise dedicated to encouraging more people to walk more often to more places'. All officers work from home on walking related projects with a range of different funding. Walk4Life is part of the 'Change for Life' program, with targets to encourage people to eat more healthily and exercise more, in order to reduce the nation's obesity levels and related illnesses.

They have tried to understand the barriers stopping people walking, such as: perceptions of distance; health ability; safety on the streets; and knowing where to go. Their aim is to counteract these elements.

They have been set the aim by the Department of Health to increase the fitness levels of 30,000 people currently inactive. A website has been set up to inspire people to find or create walks, undertake those walks, challenge themselves, track their own personal progress and join or set up a walking group. The site is free and was demonstrated around the Euston area in London – the conference venue: www.walk4life.info. Their target is to have 1 million website hits and show that people are improving their fitness, as well as to plot 2,012 mile-long routes on the site by 2012. These routes are designed to encourage people new to walking and help them understand how far a mile is to walk.

The site, which has been made as instructive as possible, includes a database of over 9,000 mapped walks (they paid to obtain permission to use the OS map base). All have been user-generated and logged on an OS map base. There are thousands of routes: to school, promoted, rural, urban, in the park, for dog walking, and to the shops, etc. Photos of a walk can be added and walk maps can be printed out on A4.

How can Local Access Forums help? Each member of your LAF is invited to sign-up, contribute one mile long walking routes (or longer), linear or circular and preferably way-marked (waymarks available free through the website). Routes can be, but don't have to be, flat and without barriers. Walks can be designated as suitable for scooters, such as the Trampler. It's possible to walk some routes – mile-long fitness routes – measure your heart rate and time taken, then

plug the figures into the website to track fitness. LAF members are also encouraged to spread the word about the site in order to promote walking in their area and use the 'Event Finder' to publicize other walks and events. Each map will calculate the walk length and you can add links to other websites, attach a download or You-tube video.

They will soon be launching a 'Groups and Challenges' area of the website, showing members events, challenges, discussion boards and fund raising. *NB. Post-Symposium note – this has now been launched.*

What's next? They are developing an 'APP' for an iPhone to be able to use GPS to track your route and to be able to find events. This will be free for users. We are also developing a walk search widget for use on other people's sites (postcode search box which takes the user straight to the walk finder results page on the Walk4Life site).

QUESTIONS

Q1 *Many people don't have internet access – what can they do?*

The site is very easy and intuitive to use, so can be seen as a tool to train people to use the web, perhaps at their local library.

Q2 *Are routes risk assessed?*

No. Walk England don't own the routes and therefore take no responsibility for people's safety. The site has a section to review walks so self-assessment is easy and problems can be highlighted.

Q3 *Will you have to pay for the APP?*

The Walk4Life iPhone APP, when launched, will be free.

Q4 *Do you ask for landowner permission?*

There's no resource to check, so again the user-feedback is important and a route can be deleted if it's not appropriate. Landowner permission is needed if you are putting up waymarkers. Guidance is available on the Walk4Life website.

Q5 *What map scale is used?*

The zoom-in and zoom-out feature was demonstrated.

■ Managing Sustrans Multi-user Routes

Simon Pratt,

REGIONAL DIRECTOR, SUSTRANS SOUTH EAST

The National Cycle Network is aimed at people making short, everyday journeys. They are always talking to landowners looking to create new routes, and in some instances, legislation has been used to secure access, such as the Cycle Tracks Act 1984 and s.16 Highways Act 1980. Sustrans sometimes purchase or lease land in order to allow public access or use a

'license', but this has been found to be a weak method of securing an agreement. It is sometimes not possible to designate a route's status, such as a bridleway, which has been the case on some railway-owned land, where it is held in trust. Some examples:

On the **Phoenix Trail** between Princes Risborough in Buckinghamshire and Thame in Oxfordshire, they bought the land in 1997 for £1, and it is marked on OS maps with orange dots (traffic free cycle routes). It took 4 years to raise money in order to fund resurfacing, which began in February 2001. A 2.5m wide tarmac surface was laid, with grass edges, in Oxfordshire and granite-to-dust in Buckinghamshire. The capital money was spent to build the route, but it does require maintenance of £1.50/linear meter/year to mow the grass verges and clear overgrowing hedgerows. The route is also punctuated with art work and seats. It's a traffic-free route which is very busy in summer where there is some conflict between users.

The **Basingstoke Canal** is a 30-mile traffic-free permissive route providing a 'green lung' through a number of towns in Surrey and Hampshire. The section through Woking was surfaced in July 2009 with 'Fibredeck', a combination of thin bitumen emulsion, chopped glass fibres and aggregate. It's used for both utility and leisure trips along the canal bank, which is a SSSI and part goes through a tree conservation area.

The **Cuckoo Trail** a disused railway line between Eastbourne, Hailsham and Heathfield in East Sussex, which in parts, separates cyclists and horse riders.

QUESTIONS

Q1 *What width of surfaced path do you recommend?*

Sustrans publish guidelines, but 2.5m is their minimum standard, with 3.0m in urban areas.

Q2 *Where do you get your capital funding?*

They go with wherever the funding goes and fill-in the forms – they receive money from supporters, government grants and lottery funding. They use volunteers to sweep up glass or maintain signing.

Q3 *Do Sustrans communicate with Local Access Forums?*

Yes, this is always welcome, and indeed, some Sustrans' Officers sit on Local Access Forums.

Q4 *How are routes maintained?*

It is different between authorities, but they would like to set up a National Agency to maintain the National Cycle Network.

■ Shared use Routes in East Sussex

Patrick Wallace

Patrick enjoys Trail Riding on his motorbike along Byways Open to All traffic.

Highway Authorities have a statutory duty to protect all user rights and maintain the network, including on byway open to all traffic (BOATS). Byway management policies are drawn up to deal with legitimate use, the criminal element being addressed by effective policing, outside the scope of this presentation. The byway management model for vehicles that East Sussex is even-handed for the types of route in the county. A management policy was needed due to the nature of byways in the county, which can be muddy, narrow and easily rutted in wet weather.

In 2004 a muddy route became excessively rutted and muddy and few recreational users were able to pass along it unaided. Repairs were undertaken, then the route was protected with a TRO in 2005, which limited its use to mechanically propelled vehicles (other than motor cycles) to 31st March to 1st October each year, to reduce the heavy weight put upon the surface by 4x4s when wet weather is prevalent. It was a selective and seasonal TRO: selective as to class of vehicle permitted and seasonal in its prohibition period. This byway is now in a much better state and the policy means the route is sustainable, but still allowing use for 4x4s in the summer months.

Attention has been paid to the design of each route and how it's surfaced, for aesthetic and practical reasons. Channels have been cut for drainage and the useable widths have a raised domed centre for water to run-off. Sympathetic surfacing makes routes suitable for wheels, hooves and feet – it is sympathetic to the surroundings and preserves the historic integrity of ancient routes.

Examples were shown of the Old Coach Road, running parallel to the downs and A27, between Comp Barn and New Barn, Berwick, where the East Sussex County Council requested Local Access Forum guidance on a sunken lane section of this ancient road. A member of the Forum undertook a site visit and put forward a rebuttal to the Local Authority suggestion of a TRO and surface upgrade. The member suggested no upgrade and no TRO, in order not to spoil the heritage of that section of the road – there was mud but it wasn't deep and it was solid below the surface with compacted chalk and flint. There was a rooty section (10–15cm high) which would only allow vehicles to pass slowly so no vehicular rat-run was likely. The Forum supported this view and its advice was accepted by the Local Authority cabinet member for transport.

Another route which required Local Access Forum consultation was Hadlow Down Byway No. 24. This contained a narrow section over a culvert, vulnerable to damage by 4x4s and dangerous, which had been rebuilt with concrete-filled sandbags and plastic ducting. The rest of lane repaired to withstand light wheeled traffic. A seasonal, selective TRO was recommended to allow the newly repaired surface to consolidate.

Other examples used from East Sussex included Laughton Byway No. 26, Pevensey Marshes and Colwell Lane, all but one of which were given seasonal selective TROs to prevent damage during the wet season by the passage of heavy 4x4 recreational vehicles.

In summary, blanket TRO's should be seen as a last resort. Seasonal restrictions should be made if the route is passable in summer and consideration given to selective restriction of vehicle class – weight, number of wheels – as not all vehicles cause damage during winter conditions. The Local Access Forum should be consulted in all cases, user input being an important attribute of these statutory consultation bodies. By restricting some vehicular traffic over periods of time, byways can remain open to all vehicular traffic when conditions allow, and maintenance costs can be reduced.

■ Open Floor Discussion

Chaired by Matthew Balfour, KENT COUNTRYSIDE ACCESS FORUM; & MEMBER, TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

PLANNING AND PUBLIC ACCESS

The Planning and Public Access paper was prepared by Surrey Countryside Access Forum and the Local Development Policy Framework (LDF) summarized by Matthew Balfour. The government has stated to the Chief Planner that Local Access Forums must be consulted when LDFs are being compiled. In all 12, out of 18 authorities represented, had replied to their District Council Local Development Framework consultation. Each LDF should have a section relating to access to the environment. MB suggested that if a Local Access Forum hadn't responded, they should get in touch with the District Council Officer responsible for their core strategy and LDF. Unfortunately, Kent Local Access Forum wrote to each District Council, but only one replied. Sarah Manchester (New Forest Access Forum Secretary) invited their officer to the Forum to discuss as it was such a thick document. Surrey are going to have an extraordinary meeting to address the issue.

MB explained that it is an important document. If it is not written down as a policy that access has to be provided from developments into the local access network, when planners give approval to applications, you will have less success in achieving new paths and developments will become insular. It's a mechanism in which developers are required to pay heed to providing for new access.

The issue of district councils consulting rights of way departments on planning applications was discussed. Unfortunately, in Kent, the Highways Department and Rights of Way Department are in different directorates so there is not always good communication on applications and those received by the roads teams that affect rights of way, are not always referred on.

MB suggested the Penfold Review will help get rights of way issues addressed by planning authorities.

RICHARD BENYAN MP LETTER TO LOCAL ACCESS FORUMS

Dave Waterman, representing Defra, was asked about the Minister's recent letter to all Local Access Forums. He said it should be seen as a consultation and that each Forum should forward their ideas and communicate with Defra. They are genuinely passionate about Local Access Forums, which concur with current political thinking on localism and the big society.

ENGLAND ACCESS FORUM

A replacement is being sought for the England Access Forum and it was discussed how this could be replaced or perhaps continue under another guise, in order to maintain communication and lobby Natural England and Defra. Is the England Access Forum, in its current form, the answer? Defra welcome views on the subject.