

## **APPENDIX 7. LANDOWNER FOCUS GROUP MINTUES**

### **Land Owners' Focus Group**

Notes from Meeting of 09.02.06 held at Dinton Pastures Country Park

**Present:**

| <b>Wokingham District</b>             | <b>Reading Borough</b>                | <b>West Berks District</b>           |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Emma Tweed - WDC                      | Anna Woodward - RBC                   | Elaine Cox - West Berks Council      |
| Keith French (Wokingham)              | James Lamburn (Wokingham and Reading) | Patrick Todd (West Berks)            |
| Ian Green (West Berks and Wokingham)  |                                       | Ken McDiarmid (West Berks)           |
| Mark Robins (Wokingham)               |                                       | Ian Green (West Berks and Wokingham) |
| James Lamburn (Wokingham and Reading) |                                       |                                      |

**Apologies:**

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### **Introduction and Welcome**

Emma Tweed officially welcomed group. The aim of the meeting was to ascertain future uses and requirements of the PROW network.

It was confirmed that the group would receive the draft minutes for their input before being release published.

#### **1. Using the Network**

a) What type of public access is available on your land (footpaths, bridleways, BOATs, Access Agreement, Countryside Stewardship, Voluntary/permissive Access, Previous legislation eg commons)?

- Between the members of the groups all of the above categories where represented.

b) What do you think in general about the existence of PROWs? Do you think they are important?

- No problem with the existence of PROWs or with open access areas.
  - Main issue is with dogs being out of control or off the lead, and horse riders tearing up path surfaces.
  - Walkers tend to stick to the path, and not wonder too far.
  - Although, interestingly, the population of ground nesting birds increased during F&MD, due to people not walking through the countryside.
- c) Why do you think people like using PROWs to access the countryside?
- Leisure.
  - Sport.
- d) Do you rely on any PROWs in order to transport machinery/ livestock around the land?
- Yes, all parties do use the PROW in some form.

## 2. Conflict

- a) Conflict between different interest groups. How good or bad do you think relations are between landowners and the different types of user on the Rights of Way network?
- Areas close to conurbations can be affected by social problems.
  - Active people / groups can often be uncompromising and difficult, as they believe that they have a right to roam anywhere.
  - Relationships are improving, as landowners are trying to engage with the public.
  - Requires investment and time.
  - It was agreed that there were issues with people who were new to the countryside having brought a home in the countryside they think that they have a right to access – social change.
- b) What could be done to help minimise these conflicts?
- Education – educate people at an early age to understand right from wrong.
  - Consultation – although, this has its own issues as people do not always get involved in the consultation process, but kick off when work starts.
  - A lot of landowners feel threatened, access is being forced upon them, and perhaps handled badly by all parties involved in the process.
  - Promotion of the network – use parish magazines, notice boards, etc.
  - Codes of conduct – should be big, bold and pictorial (as not everyone can read), well distributed.
  - Good signing.

c) On vulnerable unsurfaced byways, do you think there should be any winter controls on motorised recreational vehicles?

- Yes.
- Statutory requirement to keep routes accessible for users – but finding it a problem, especially to see efforts made destroyed.
- Where users acting irresponsible, they should be reported to the Local Authority, vehicle registration given if possible.
- Would like to see byways closed off in bad weather – seasonal traffic regulation orders – needs to be made easier to apply for. Could the local authority help with this?

d) What are the main problems that you face from Public Rights of Way?

- People believing that they have a right to roam anywhere.
- Uncontrolled dogs.
- Horse riders destroying path surfaces.
- Motorised vehicle destroying path surfaces.

e) If the public are trespassing, what do you do? What response do you get?

- In most cases talk to the people concerned, with differing responses.

### **3. Promoting the Network**

a) What type of path information is available on your land eg Signposts, waymarks, information boards

- Problems with signs staying in place.
- Council signs could be more secure, and better positioned.
- Permissive Paths are less know about and used, but have varied usage.

b) Do you think there is sufficient information for users to follow the correct lines of the paths?

- In some cases, although its not always appropriate to have signs everywhere – do not always compliment the surrounding beauty.

c) What do you think is the best way of promoting responsible use of the countryside?

- Education – educate people at an early age to understand right from wrong.
- More information is needed – people don't understand the concept of right to roam.
- Promotion of the network – use parish magazines, notice boards, etc.

- Codes of conduct – should be big, bold and pictorial (as not everyone can read), well distributed. Trial Riders have a code of conduct, which is good.
- Forestry Commission has simple leaflets in their Info Centres.
- Good signing.
- The estates could send a representative out to schools to educate the young.
- Authority could produce literature for the landowners to hand out.
- Although concerns were raised that there will always be some people who don't listen. England Heritage, have run free training courses to help landowners with access issues.
- It was suggested that it have a number on signs/notice boards would be useful.

#### 4. User Needs

a) What would help you in managing PROWs on your land?

- Byelaws can help.
- It would be encouraging if dead paths could be re-routed or taken off, in a less time consuming and costly manner. Especially, where the path goes through a yard or near buildings.
- Rationalisation.
- More funding.

b) Re-instating paths across ploughed fields – why do you think that on occasions, some farmers do not reinstate them? Do you think that farmers are aware of the best method of doing this? Would some guidance be helpful?

- Time.
- Labour shortage.
- Cost.

c) Should the rights of way network consider conservation needs?

- Yes, this happens often now, due to legislation.

d) What other issues do you feel are key, when considering the rights of way in Mid and West Berks?

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e) As a result of the DDA, stiles should gradually be replaced with kissing gates, in order to allow people with mobility problems to access the countryside. Can you envisage problems arising from this?

- Questions were raised about how often people with mobility issues would access the countryside.

- Kissing gates not the right solution to replacing stiles, as sheep have been known to get through them.
- Kissing gates more difficult to install, often installed incorrectly and require more maintenance, gates often become crooked.

## 5. Management of the Network

a) Do you know who (LO/HA) is responsible for :  
 Surface maintenance of paths (HA), Clearance of obstructions (LO), Width of paths eg crossfield path to legal width (LO), Maintenance of stiles (LO), Maintenance of bridges over natural features eg streams (HA), Maintenance of bridges over artificial features eg canals (LO), Signing from metalled road surfaces (HA), Gates (LO), Overgrown Vegetation eg upgrowth/grass (HA), Overgrown Vegetation eg crop/hedges (LO)

- The group were well informed about responsibilities, although it was suggested the guidance in this area is always welcomed.

b) Do you know who to contact at the Highway Authority (Council) if there are any path problems

- Although the group didn't appear to have concerns regarding who to contact at the council, it was agreed that clear guidance is always useful.

c) How satisfied are you by the service provided by the three authorities regarding PROW?

- Group agreed that they were overall satisfied, although agreed that RoW should be prioritised and funded and staffed accordingly.
- It was suggested that economic impact assessments of RoW work should be carried out to prove value for money.

d) What would they like to see done differently in the management of the countryside rights of way network?

- Better liaison with landowners.
- Work to be completed by landowner via grant, as individual owners can complete works cheaper, due to contractors over charging Authorities.
- Increased consultation on applications for developments, ensuring that small/medium enterprises get involved and benefit.
- More support for farmers, this is a depressed sector, and will impact on the maintenance of RoW as farms struggle to survive.

## 6. Future

a) Do you think that there is scope for increasing the PROW network?

- No, better to maintain current network, although with rationalisation it might be possible.
- Riverside and woods are a sensitive issue.
- The problems lie with 'new' sports using public spaces, such as mountain biking.
- Important to initially look at how the current network is served by public transport – joined up thinking, dropping people off on circular routes, etc.

b) Are there any PROWs that you think should be modified/diverted/extinguished/extended? Why?

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c) Would you be prepared to open up a new path if an unused or dead end path was extinguished?

- Depends on the individual cases, comes under rationalisation – there are packages and deals to be made.

d) Would you be happy to see any existing footpaths upgraded to bridleways?

- No, but in individual cases of improving safety it would be considered.
- Main objection was to the damage incurred.
- Should be up to each landowner whether he/she wishes to 'upgrade'.
- Might be accepted if the surface was appropriately improved.

e) What do you think would encourage landowners/managers to create new PROWs across their land?

- Rationalisation – for long distance paths an agreement might be reached, to consider improving links, if 'deadend' paths were taken out or re-routed.
- A modification order acknowledging the existence of PROWs.
- Retaining some control, eg. permissive paths or being able to move them.
- Permits - if people pay for access rights they respect them more and are much keener to "police" them to the benefit of all.

f) Given that the population in this area is set to expand considerably, what improvements do you think we need to be addressing to accommodate future needs?

- More recreational facilities.
- RoW should benefit from development, rather than causing conflict.
- It's about leisure.
- Should be developer lead.
- RoW should be given greater priority within the Authorities.

- Landowners reiterated that its about working together.