

The Surrey Countryside Access Forum

Minutes of the meeting of the Surrey Countryside Access Forum Alder Room, Woodhatch Place, Reigate Monday, 22 January 2024

Present:

Members (and their primary interests):

- Elliot Cairnes, Chairman (Walking)
- John Barber (Motorcycles)
- Ian Wilks (Walking)
- Penny Carey (Equestrian)
- Paul Marshall (Mountain Biking)
- Avril Sleeman (Equestrian)
- Pamela Lyman (Landowner)
- Thor Simpson (Walking)
- Pat Lewis (Walking)
- Neil Baker (Commons)
- Yasmin Broome (Surrey Coalition of Disabled People)
- Lawrence Wells (Surrey Leadership Group)

Officers:

- Jonathan Wall, Countryside Access Officer (Secretary)
- Claire Saunders, Countryside Access Manager
- Mary Ann Edwards – Countryside Access Senior Officer (Maintenance and Enforcement)
- Rob Fairbanks – Surrey Hills AONB
- Kathleen Letch-McMillan, Ministry of Defence Liaison Officer
- Dean Howard, Ministry of Defence Security and Public Access Manager
- Sharon Bayne, Blackwood and Bayne, ROWIP consultant

1. Declarations of Interest

1.1 There were no declarations of interest.

2. Apologies

2.1 Gareth Jex (Motor Vehicles), Gail Brownrigg (Equestrian), Sophie Gordon (Cycling)

3. Minutes of Previous Meeting

3.1 The minutes of the meeting held on 16 October 2023 were confirmed.

4. Matters arising / Action points

4.1 Action regarding creation of ROWIP Subgroup – to be subsequently arranged and hosted by Chairman.

4.2 Disabled Access Subgroup – **Action:** review DEFRA presumptions guidance and look to formation of subgroup.

- 4.3 Junction 10 non-motorised users. As of currently unclear if any action has been taken on the Highway red line. **Action:** Reach out to Jonathan Wade/Dave Pearcey to discuss the matter at a future meeting.

5. MoD presentation on Access – Kathleen Letch-Macmillan and Dean Howard

- 5.1 Kathleen introduces Dean Howard, who is Security and Public Access manager for MoD training estates in the southeast, including Aldershot, Barossa, Deepcut, Minley and Hawley, Pirbright, Bramley, Longmoor, Hankley and Bordon; to give a presentation on safe and responsible access to MoD areas.
- 5.2 Training Safety Marshals, Military Police and other units may be present at these sites, members of the public should obey their instructions at all times.
- 5.3 There is a booking on and off procedure with a roll of wardens who are informed of activity ongoing in the training areas. The South East Operations room has a 24/7 contact number for general enquiries and emergencies.
- 5.4 For excavation works, highlighted safety issues – checking for underground pipes, UXO, and deadfall. Some sites are SPA and conservation areas so important to check for Badger sets and restore condition of excavations and leave no ground sign if possible.
- 5.5 Dean iterates that the flying of public drones is prohibited on MoD land.
- 5.6 Wildfires are a particular risk in many of the areas managed by the MoD, especially in the summer months. This is monitored by a Fire severity index that graduates from Green (low) to Red (Very High). No campfires are permitted. In the event of spotting a fire, ring 99 and request Fire and Rescue and inform the regional operations room.
- 5.7 Red flags, red lights and locked gates mean that live firing exercises are taking place. No public access is permitted at this time and incursions will be reported. Access should be responsibly as per the military bylaws, with Horse riders accessing by permit (unless on Bridleways). Public should know the PRoWs they can use.
- 5.8 Antisocial behaviour should be reported to 101 or 99, and the Operations room should be informed. Suspicious activity should be reported but the public should not put themselves at risk in doing so.
- 5.9 Dean explains the warning signage that are commonly displayed on military sites. He gives emphasis to the danger of military debris and the types of ordnance that may be present on military sites. Members of the public should not touch these under any circumstances and should report them.
- 5.10 Kathleen now takes over the presentation to discuss the creation of the Pirbright Military Heritage Trail.
- 5.11 The Trail will run for 15 miles around the Pirbright site, also using existing rights of way. It will begin on Cowshot Common, run over Bisley Common, through Folly Bog, Deepcut, and along the Basingstoke Canal. Way markers will be placed at

junctions and information boards along the route. Breaking ground for the trail is due to take place in May 2024, for an anticipated Summer 2024 opening.

- 5.12 Neil asks about route for reduced mobility users on Thursley Common. Kathleen wants the MoD to look at this further – she points out that funding is required from Natural England to help resolve the drainage issues. This is on the to do list.
- 5.13 Rob mentioned that funding is available from the woodland trust, and there is interest in a commemorative woodland walk. Kathleen asks for some more information and the provision of historical images/information and will investigate further.

6. ROWIP Discussion – Claire Saunders and Sharon Bayne

- 6.1 Claire and Sharon Bayne give an update on the course of the Rights of Way Improvement plan.
- 6.2 The public survey has been made available for members of the public to answer online. As of the meeting date, 2200 public responses had been received.
- 6.3 The ROWIP is now at the drafting stage and statutory consultees are beginning to be contacted.
- 6.4 There is a further discussion on the strategic goals of the ROWIP and how SCAF should respond. Ian has circulated the Kent ROWIP as example of a ROWIP for a non-unitary council, and states that the involvement of borough/district councils is important as they are planning authorities and can distribute SIL funding.
- 6.5 Claire and Sharon explained that the document is tailored to support an approach for funding, and the document is intended to be a showcase for SCA's intention on the network and can be used to go to the holders of SIL funding and local authorities.
- 6.6 The public survey is aimed to be much wider to get a more up to date appraisal of the needs of users, and to reach those who may use the countryside less. All Parish Council clerks have also received a letter and a different questionnaire to the public to respond to.

7. Countryside Access Maintenance and Enforcement Team update – Mary Ann Edwards

- 7.1 Mary Ann gives an update on the work being undertaken by the Maintenance and Enforcement team.
- 7.2 Additional resources have been secured by the team, so in addition to an Area Countryside Access Officer and two Countryside Access Assistants on each side of the county, there is also a Countryside Capital Programme Officer who manages bridge works, an additional Assistant supporting volunteers, and a Countryside Access Apprentice who has been focussed on looking after the Downs Link.
- 7.3 The additional resource allows for tackling routine maintenance issues more quickly and giving more attention to longer standing problems, delivering more surfacing and bridgeworks, increasing volunteer hours and managing Surrey's long distance routes. The Priority statement has been amended so that SCC need only focus on priority 1 and 2 issues. The volume of enquiries is such that not all can be reached,

but the team is better able to priorities issues and deal with some of the smaller problems that impact user experience on the network.

- 7.4 Approximately 500km of surface vegetation clearance was carried out in summer 2023. Well used and utility paths such as the North Downs Way received 2 cuts, less well used 1 cut. At least 20% of the network cut. 24 jobs, almost 14km of path clearance are out with contractors under a Winter Vegetation Clearance programme, a new initiative to clear overgrown paths with dense vegetation that can only be tackled outside of bird nesting season.
- 7.5 Nearly 400 signage installations and repairs across the county since April 2023, with more waiting to go out before the end of the financial year. 2800 issues have been logged between April 2023 and 22 January 2024. Over 3000 older issues have been closed.
- 7.6 Volunteers continue to play an important role in helping to improve the network. Since April 2023, 474 volunteer attendances have contributed 2,240 hours of time, equivalent to 298 staff days. 25 Stiles have been replaced by gates, 10 bridges refurbished, 177 steps have been improved, 55 way markers/fingerposts have been repaired or replaced and over 15km of vegetation clearance undertaken.
- 7.7 Since April 2023, 14 bridges have been replaced, with 3 more to be delivered by the end of March. A new 'hybrid' bridge has been developed, using recycled plastic for the parapets and transoms to improve longevity, but retaining oak decks to ensure they are still resistant to slip – 2 have been installed. One of the most challenging projects, the replacement of Pidgeon House bridge of Footpath 5 (Ockham) can now be progressed.
- 7.8 22 Surfacing schemes have been delivered so far in the financial year under a capital delivery program, with another 10 slated for completion by the end of March. 6 additional schemes were delivered using external funding. Works are underway for significant improvements at Box Hill and the stepping stones, including commissioning of a temporary pontoon bridge to transport machinery and materials across the Mole.

8 History of Rights of Way – Avril Sleeman

- 8.1 Avril gives a presentation outlining the history of the rights of way network and the development of the definitive maps and statements, and how this progressed to the current legislative framework of the network today.
- 8.2 Neil queries about the status of Cycle track orders. Bridleway rights allow for use by cyclists, cycle track orders are placed on footpaths on a case by case basis, for example school areas, with landowner consent.
- 8.3 Avril queried the cut off date for submissions of lost ways. The date only applies for ways on the basis of historic evidence; alleged rights of way claimed by user evidence can still be considered after this date.

9. Surrey AONB – Rob Fairbanks

- 9.1 Rob gives an update on the Surrey Hills AONB. The AONB management plan is to be adopted by local authorities.

- 9.2 The 75th anniversary of the establishment of National Parks in the UK is coming up this year. This has been identified as an opportunity to look back and see the changes in the AONB and the way it is managed, and project this forward to the future with a mind to how to steward the landscape for future generations.
- 9.3 At the moment information gathering is taking place. Looking to gauge the value of nature and source information from communities; to this end looking at engagement events e.g. at Denbies.
- 9.4 Consultation is still ongoing for AONB boundary changes, expecting response soon from Natural England.
- 9.5 Issue of mountain biking is raised. Rob says this can be a difficult issue to manage. Money is incoming from DEFRA to interact with landowners more extensively to survey issues, work with user groups to encourage responsible access. There is an issue where mountain bike use impinges on SSSIs.
- 9.6 Neil raises the point that people often may go off-piste from Bridleways, this is difficult to prevent. Rob is working with the Hurtwood ranger where bike use is concentrated to mitigate. It is pointed out that cycling has a wellbeing benefit, and that most mountain bikers bring a new benefit to an area and the local economy, especially in the AONB.

10. Forward plan

- 10.1 Forward plan discussed.

11. Outstanding consultations

- 11.1 Outstanding consultations were noted.

12 Any other business/ urgent questions

- 12.1 Ian asked about the Witley Cycle path. Witley Parish Council put forward a suggestion but Claire states they are not in control of land which is under private ownership – which requires consent. A cycle path or Bridleway that is established requires additional width.
- 12.2 Noted that waiting for an update on WACT.

The date for the subsequent meeting is as follows:

- Monday 22 April 2024 1:30pm
Merrow Depot, Bourne Room.