



CAERPHILLY LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH, ON
FRIDAY 6TH MARCH 2020 AT 10.00 A.M.

M. Benjamin – Chair
Cllr N. George – Vice Chair

PRESENT:

B. Clarke, K. Donovan, A. Evans, L. Howells, M. Pointon, R. Stones, M. Thomas, N. Yates
and A. Wilson.

Together with:

P. Griffiths (LAF Secretary/Green Space Strategy and Cemeteries Manager), A. Fleming
(Countryside and Rights of Way Officer) and C. Evans (Committee Services Officer).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from G. Davies, A. Edwards, E. Gwynne, D. Hale, D. Llewellyn, J. Morgan, A. Palmer, Councillor W. Williams and S. Tindall (Natural Resources Wales).

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received at the commencement or during the course of the meeting.

3. MINUTES – 29TH NOVEMBER 2019

The minutes of the meeting held on 29th November 2019 were approved as a correct record.

4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

Minute No. 8 (Presentation on Caerphilly's Existing Rights of Way) – it was noted that, due to Officer illness, it was not possible to provide the Forum with a presentation on the ROW legislation and hypothetical examples, therefore this will be scheduled for a later agenda.

5. ELECTION OF THE CHAIR AND VICE CHAIR

It was moved and seconded that Mr M. Benjamin be appointed as Chair of Caerphilly Local Access Forum for the ensuing year and by a show of hands this was unanimously agreed. The Secretary informed the Forum that Mr Benjamin accepted the role on the basis that it was on a trial basis.

RESOLVED that Mr M. Benjamin be appointed Chair of the Caerphilly Local Access Forum for the ensuing year.

It was moved and seconded that Councillor N. George be appointed as Vice Chair of Caerphilly Local Access Forum for the ensuing year and by a show of hands this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that Councillor G. George be appointed Vice Chair of the Caerphilly Local Access Forum for the ensuing year.

6. NATIONAL ACCESS FORUM FOR WALES

The Green Space Strategy and Cemeteries Manager provided the Forum with an update on some of the topics coming from the National Access Forum for Wales, which was held in Bangor last week and the report was based on notes he had received.

In relation to an Access Forum update, it was noted that 3 expert groups are to be established, with the aim to taking forward the consultation responses and the 7 issues which were raised as a result. One area of focus is around Access Reform and open access, including waterways and the mapping and processes around this. The first reports should be published later this month.

The Forum were provided with an update around the work undertaken under 'Wales for All', a project with the aim to providing a description of the outdoors to people with disabilities and to make the countryside more tactile. The Forum noted that a training session will soon be available and further details will be provided to the Forum in due course.

Discussions took place around a Dementia Friendly Community Project, which is based upon 'Together for a Dementia Friendly Wales' and aims to bring people working together for an inclusive society, incorporating pathways, signage and lighting etc. in order to provide further guidance to people with Dementia intentionally or inadvertently using the countryside.

In discussing the NRW Area Statements, it was noted that these are currently a year behind schedule for South East Wales and the Valleys. It was noted however that there could be some upcoming workshops in which the Forum could be included.

Officers provided an update around what Wales wants from its inland waters and the role of access in this. It was noted that proposals have been made to make more water ways accessible for all, which is greatly supported by a number of associations such as canoeist however there have been a number of concerns raised by anglers and land owners in particular about access across their land. It was however noted that the initial report from Welsh Government would be available at the end of the month.

Finally, Officers wished it noted that there will be a meeting of the Chairs of Local Access Forums within the week and sought agreement from the Forum to send an Officer along to represent Caerphilly. The Forum were in agreement that an Officer attend the next meeting.

The Countryside and Rights of Way Officer agreed to provide the Forum with a report of this meeting.

7. GRANTS UPDATE

The Local Access Forum were provided with an update on current Grants. It was noted that in relation to the ENRaW Grant, an expression of interest has been resubmitted for the Gwent Green Grid and has passed the approval stage. The Forum were informed that it is anticipated that this will be funded for a period of 3 years. Offices explained that the application includes

access proposals and it has provided an opportunity to submit a regional bid, based in Torfaen and including the appointment of 8 trainees to work on the practical Rights of Way. It is anticipated that each LA will have the equivalent of 1 day per week of dedicated support.

Officers provided the Forum with an update on further Grant approvals, including Penallta Park Visitor Centre in which £1.2m has been allocated to design a wooden multiuse centre, dedicated to education and health and will include a Pollinator project as well as wider education. The plans for the Centre will be submitted for planning consent next week.

In respect of the Sustainable Management Scheme it was noted that Caerphilly Landscapes, Uplands and Merthyr and Gelligaer Common Projects are progressing well.

Discussions took place around the Regional Development Plan (RDP) and it was noted that there is still no guidance on the future of this, what it will look like or the levels of funding associated with it, however, the Forum will be provided with an update when the information becomes available.

A Member of the Forum raised concerns around the lack of information available in respect of the sustainability of the projects and future of staff. Officers explained that due to slippage and pressures, it has not been possible to obtain further commitments from Welsh Government in respect of Grants, therefore the projects are proceeding at risk to the tender return stage. However, it is possible that information could be received at the end of the Financial Year.

The Forum were asked to note that since the withdrawal of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP), funding has been steered towards ENRaW but there are no guarantees funding will be awarded. However, Officers are lobbying the Minister for new/replacement funding. The Forum noted that Caerphilly are considering a further ENRaW bid for Green infrastructure but deadlines are tight for the submission. Further grant applications are being sought from the PSB.

The Forum thanked the Officer for the update and noted the item

8. SEARCH AND RESCUE DOGS PRESENTATION

The Forum welcomed Mr M. Gibbings from National Search and Rescue Dogs Association (NSADA) Wales. Mr Gibbings provided the Forum with a presentation on the types of Search Dogs and background into the Organisation.

The Forum were informed that when a person is missing in a rural or mountain environment, a dog team is much more efficient at finding them than a search team made up of people only. If the missing person is ill, injured or vulnerable, this added speed and efficiency can make the difference between life and death. Dog teams can also operate effectively in thick cloud or darkness where people struggle.

It was noted that it takes anywhere between 2-3 years to qualify a Search and Rescue Dog and there are two main types of Search Dogs; Air Scenting Dogs, who search areas looking for human scent particles. Air Scent Dogs do not look for specific people but will look for anyone that is on the area, they do not discriminate different human scents.

Another type of Search and Rescue Dog is Scent Specific Trailing Dogs. These dogs are given an article of clothing and will then hunt for a trail that matches that scent. They will indicate the trail to the handler and then they will follow the trail to the missing person.

The Forum were provided with details on a number of other search dogs, including cadaver (land and water), disaster, war dogs and detection dogs.

Details were provided on the training process for the dogs, which include socialisation and ensuring a dogs is not startled by loud noises such as people and traffic and each animal is

stock tested, to ensure they show no interest in livestock. This is tested on an annual basis in the presence of local land owners.

It was noted that there are a total of 78 fully trained Search and Rescue dogs in the country, and a single search dog and handler can be more effective than 60 human searchers. The dogs are trained in all weathers, and are provided with suitable jackets should this be necessary, for example, in hot weather, regular breaks and water will be provided to the dogs, as well as searches in the early hours to reduce the impact of heat. In addition, a jacket has been designed for cooling the dog. Jackets are worn by the dogs on each Search and Rescue as it makes them more visible and makes landowners aware that they are in fact working and not running rogue across their land.

In respect of access when undertaking searches, it was noted that the dogs and handlers are afforded powers of entry, as subcontractors to the police, however, notify owners for the reasons they are on their land.

A Forum Member queried whether the dogs live with the handlers. The Officer explained that the dogs live at home as pets when they are not working.

The Forum thanked the Officer for the presentation and were keen to meet the dogs,

9. ISSUES AFFECTING THE COUNTRYSIDE AND RESPONSIBLE ACCESS

The Forum were provided with a presentation in 3 parts, considering firstly the general longer term changes in the countryside, secondly, problems within the area which then focusses down onto access and thirdly responsible access.

The Green Space Strategy and Cemeteries Manager asked the Forum for their opinions on the primary issues affecting the Countryside. In turn, the Forum provided a list of issues including fly tipping, arson vandalism, off-roading, irresponsible dog owners – leaving waste, not on a lead and spreading tapeworm to livestock. Other issues identified includes building on Greenfield sites across the borough, and the impacts on wildlife and the natural environment and a lack of funding to maintain Rights of Way.

The Forum noted that over 75% of the Borough is called Countryside, with the largest components made up of farmland 35%, woodlands 18% and grasslands 15%, each of which have their own issues both at a strategic and unique level such as connectivity.

It was noted that at a Strategic Level the main issues both now and on the horizon are on the uncertainty of farming and the implications of changing land use. Brexit could lead to significant changes, in particular because farmers are primarily beef and sheep farming in the borough, and the produce may be adversely effected by trade. The uncertainty could lead to increased farm diversification.

In relation to Environmental issues, it was noted that these will place an increasing pressure on the countryside as it is used to compensate for the urban population, be this through water or pollution management. Carbon off-setting will also be an issue, the most significant measure is wide spread tree planting, and as a result, more land will be used for environmental purposes.

It was added that another major concern is Pathogens (invasives), for the woodland areas, the biggest concerns are phytophthora and Chlara, the effect of which is significant to wooded areas, much as the effect of foot and mouth was to livestock.

It was noted that 4 of the most prevalent areas of concern for 'landscape' crime are Fly-tipping, off-roading, arson and fly-grazing. These are areas being addressed through the Landscape Crime Toolkit, being led by Torfaen CBC. In addition, there is the issue of farm theft, which is

a police matter, but has implications particularly for access and in some cases explains a reluctance for public access. Gwent Police have a wildlife crime team.

The Forum discussed natural events which tend to have the biggest effect on paths and open access land, such as winter flooding and summer fissures. The Forum referred to the recent storm damage, which had a significant impact on many residents as well as the countryside, and caused significant damage to structures such as bridges in Risca and supporting structures in Bargoed.

The Forum were referred to the Countryside code, which is the foundation of responsible access. Discussions took place around land owner conflicts, but the Forum were reminded that whilst there are large amount of urban fringe areas in the Borough which tends to cause conflicts, the code should help reduce their conflicts.

The Forum considered a number of photographs of the damage caused across the borough by the recent storms, to tips, bridges, tree fells, supporting walls and footpaths and land where rivers had burst banks.

The Forum thanked the Officer for the update and photographs.

The Rights of Way Officer added that, where reporting damage caused by the storms, or issues with access to Rights of Way, please could any photographs include grid references, for ease of location of the issue.

10. TRAINING

The Forum were provided with an update on the Disability Awareness Training, which was discussed at the previous meeting. Officers outlined that the meeting, which was anticipated to be held during the summer, may not be scheduled for the autumn, due to clashing commitments.

In addition, the Forum were offered a place on a training course for Pesticide Application. Mr B. Clark and N. Yates expressed an interest in this training should there be availability.

11. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Forum were asked to note that following the new appointments to the Forum, a newly appointed Member has resigned, due to conflicting commitments and personal reasons. The Forum wished him well for the future.

It was noted that the Countryside department may receive additional support in administration, and additional resourcing in an administrative post, further details will be available at a later meeting.

For information, the Forum were asked to note that the Authority will shortly be in the process of developing a Local Development Plan (LDP).

The Chair thanked all parties present for their attendance and contributions and the meeting closed at 12.11 pm.