



CAERPHILLY LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

MINUTES OF THE REMOTE MEETING HELD VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON FRIDAY, 12TH MARCH 2021 AT 10.00 A.M.

M. Benjamin – Chair

PRESENT:

B. Clarke, K. Donovan, A. Evans, L. Howells, D. Llewellyn, J. Morgan, A. Palmer, M. Pointon, R. Stones, W. Williams, A. Wilson and N. Yates.

Also in Attendance: S. Tindall (Natural Resources Wales (NRW)) and R. Campbell (Natural Resources Wales (NRW))

Together with:

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

RECORDING AND VOTING ARRANGEMENTS

The Chair reminded those present that the meeting was being filmed but would not be live streamed, however a recording would be available following the meeting via the Council's website – [Click Here To View](#).

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs. E. Gwynne, Mr. D. Hale and Mrs. M. Thomas.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

3. MINUTES – 6TH MARCH 2020

The minutes of the meeting held on 6th March 2020 were approved as a correct record.

4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

Following consideration of the Minutes and discussions around the Acronyms used through the document, the Local Access Forum requested a list of Acronyms that regularly appear in the meetings. Officers agreed to this.

5. NATURAL RESOURCES WALES MANAGED LAND (CWMCARN).

The Local Access Forum welcomed Mr R. Campbell and Ms S. Tindall from Natural Resources Wales (NRW) who provided the Forum with an update on the changes within NRW, which include a recent restructure to the organisation and as such, will provide a new way of working, with more open access for the Local Access Forum (LAF) to Officers within NRW.

A detailed update was provided on the works being undertaken at Cwmcarn Scenic Drive. It was noted that the site is still closed and will remain closed until the summer months largely due to the ongoing pandemic and concerns for visitor numbers. However, it was noted that many works are being undertaken at the site to prepare for reopening, which include the implementation of new car parks and playgrounds, as well as works around the Rights of Way within and around the site. The LAF noted that a review is being undertaken on the paths and rights of way, as many do not comply with the legal Definitive Line. Works will also be undertaken to consider the many maps and leaflets on offer with an aim to make this uniform and update the information within.

The Officer provided the Forum with an update on the wider Forestry Operations being undertaken across the Borough and it was noted that, as part of the recent restructure, the Forestry teams, along with Mr Campbell are all managed under the same department and as a result can ensure that, with the help of local communities, Local Authorities and feedback from the public, Public Rights of Way can be cleared more effectively and efficiently and where possible, improvements can be made.

Mr Campbell agreed to forward his contact details to the LAF and requested that he be used as the main point of contact.

The Forum thanked the Officers for their update and discussion ensued.

A Member raised concerns around the tree felling undertaken in the Argoed area, many of which were Larch and some Ash and were planted as part of a school's outdoor learning resources and queried whether any compensation could be sought for the felling, in particular as the school had sourced a grant to develop the site. The Officer explained that the felling has been undertaken as a result of disease, which if left, can jump species, and therefore the felling was felt essential. The Officer requested that the Councillor provide further details on the site and discussions can be undertaken with the dedicated education team to consider what, if any options can be made available.

A Forum Member queried whether all forestry is owned by NRW. Officers explained that there are some privately owned forestry's, but the NRW website provides details of the lands which are owned and maintained by NRW.

Discussions took place around the impact of felling in communities and community groups, as there is little communication before the felling begins. The Forum were assured that the Forestry Team are currently working in plans to mitigate these issues and aim to work with community groups to provide a communications plan and engagement strategy, in order to improve communications in the future.

A Forum Member also sought further information on the plans to mitigate the impact to local birds and wildlife in areas of felling. Officers explained that there is a replanting programme in place and some areas that are protected woodlands and therefore not being felled. It is difficult but NRW work hard to ensure that there is a balance between preserving and maintaining tree species, as well as the ecology and habitats within them.

The Forum thanked the Officer for the detailed presentation and noted the updates provided.

6. ACCESS REFORM BRIEFING.

The Green Space Strategy and Cemeteries Manager provided the Local Access Forum with an update on the Welsh Government (WG) Local Access Reform.

The Forum noted that, as per previous updates, WG have set up an Access Reform Advisory Group to consider the wider changes to Public Access in Wales. As part of this, there were originally 63 proposals for potential changes to access. In order to consider these proposals, 3 expert groups were implemented and upon further consideration, approximately half were dismissed, some were to be considered over the coming years and 7 areas were identified as areas of priority action to be taken forward.

The Officer explained that the update has been taken from the NRW Briefing note from February 2021 and it was noted that the steering groups have been set up. There is an overview group and 3 expert groups set up to consider areas of the priorities. The aim is to improve access for outdoor recreation through the form of public rights of way network and open access land in order to support the Welsh Governments Policies in areas such as Public health and tourism. The reform is intended to give greater access to the outdoors for a wider range of activities and improve the processes which are associated with administering the current rights of way and access land.

Expert Group 1 have a remit to consider possible approaches to increase the range of activities permitted in countryside and rights of way access land; including water bodies mapped under the CROW Act and to create new access land in coastal areas. This work has been split into 2 workstreams; new activities permitted on CROW Access Land where they look to reduce or remove restrictions on land for activities such as cycling, horse-riding and non-mechanical water sports such as kayaking. The second workstream will consider all areas of Coastal access and its improvement.

It was noted that Expert Group 2 has the remit to increase the activities that the public can undertake by right on public footpaths and improve the process to reduce procedural burdens such as managing temporary diversions etc. In order to achieve this, 2 workstreams have been developed, one of which considers how activities such as cycling and horse-riding can be undertaken on public footpaths and the other considers how to reduce the burden and administrative pressures associated with temporary closures and stop control of Rights of Way.

Expert Group 3 are looking to improve the process for creating, storing and communicating Statutory access maps and how these are delivered as well as develop a more integrated approach to planning improvements to access provision. It was noted that a Mapping exercise will be developed to consider what maps should be available for the public. In addition, it is proposed that integrated plans be developed and the Local Authorities and National Park Authorities will be required to develop integrated plans for public recreational access and consider options for support and delivery of these plans on a strategic level, considering cross cutting themes such as access and equalities.

It was noted that there have been several documents published in the 3 years since the groups were set up, outlining their developments at various stages and their plans along the way, but to date there has not been a final report on the findings of the groups. Representations have been made by many interested parties, including the LAF, providing the groups with details of their concerns around the proposals. It is anticipated that the final report will be publicly available in July, and discussions will be undertaken at the next meeting of the LAF following this.

The Forum thanked the Officer for the update and discussions ensued.

Members of the Forum raised several concerns around the proposals, including responsible access to the Countryside. It was noted that there has been an increase in public use of the countryside during the Pandemic, and as a result, there has been an increase in issues of fly-tipping and littering, as well as the use of off-road vehicles such as bikes, quads and 4x4 vehicles.

Concerns were raised around the implications for the natural environment and the eco systems within these areas in which there is an increase of users and clarification was sought on whether consultation has been undertaken with fire services. Officers confirmed that the fire service will have been consulted as part of the earlier process and will have expressed concerns around grass fires and the increased risk.

Discussions took place around the increased issue for littering and dog fouling, and it was noted that placing litter bins within woodlands can lead to an increase in forest fires. NRW explained that they are keen to encourage education of children and young people in these issues, with the aim to nurturing a more responsible and environmentally conscious generation.

The Forum thanked the Officers and noted the update.

7. LOCAL ACCESS FORUM CHANGES PROPOSED.

The Green Space Strategy and Cemeteries Manager provided the Forum with an update from the recent meeting of the LAF chairs, which was undertaken virtually and included representation from chairs of LAF's across Wales.

An update in respect of the Chairs views and response to a document in relation to the All Wales Forum was provided and what legislation proposals are being made in respect of the roles of the LAF. The Chairs agreed that they wanted to respond on 2 elements of the overarching consultation which included those that relate to LAF's and additional matters they would like to have considered.

In respect of the proposals, it was noted that there were 5 identified changes proposed within the legislation which included: -

- A proposal to appoint a deputy LAF representative. This was not supported by the Chairs for several reasons, including the appointment process and the fact that LAF's can invite representatives from organisations, with the consent of the Chair, should this be required.
- Steps be taken to encourage a more representative group of members to the forum, and legislation on where and when the meetings should take place. This was not supported by the Chairs as it was felt that flexibility is vital for Forum Members, due to their personal and work responsibilities.
- The proposal to make it mandatory for online advertising of representatives was supported by the Chairs;
- A proposal for a representative from LAF's to be part of the Public Service Board Meetings (PSB's). Chair's were happy to support this proposal, however there were concerns that a representative on this high-level organisation may not be appropriate.
- There was a proposal to increase the remit of the LAF to 4 years. This proposal was supported by the Chairs.

It was noted that, on a detailed level the Chairs provided a list of 9 more aspirational proposals which included: -

- Additional legislation making it a duty upon NRW to draw up and maintain a protocol for the relationship between NRW, the LAF and Local Authorities;

- Clarifications of the relationship between NRW and the LAF in respect of the CROW Act;
- The relationship between the LAF, Local Authority and Welsh Government be formally clarified;
- Mandatory Community Council involvement in the LAF. This is something that is already in place within the Caerphilly LAF.
- A proposal for legislation that the LAF overview any applications for publicly funded projects in relation to access and for projects to have a regard for the comments and advice of the LAF.
- A regulation be put in place for NRW to maintain a set of Best Practice Procedures, as to how LAF's operate;
- To mandate that the LAF have a statutory involvement throughout the process of developing the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP);
- Consideration of the appointment of Chairs, which may not be an issue for Caerphilly LAF.
- A proposal that the National Chairs Body be recognised as a national body, which WG are not happy to support.

The Local Access Forum thanked the Officer for the report and noted the update.

8. CAERPHILLY'S EXISTING RIGHTS OF WAY AND WHAT HAS BEEN GOING ON IN RIGHTS OF WAY (ROW) DURING LOCKDOWN.

The Countryside and Rights of Way Officer provided the LAF with an update on the recent developments within Countryside and Rights of Way.

The LAF noted that following a recent update WG no longer intend to impose the 2026 deadline in relation to Definitive Map Modification Orders (DMMO's), as previously outlined and therefore applications can continue to be received beyond this date.

The Forum noted the work undertaken on the Countryside and Rights of Way website over the last 12 months in which the site has received a full overhaul in order to make it more accessible on several devices and now contains an electronic Definitive Map. The Forum were asked to note however that this map may not be entirely accurate, and some lines may be slightly out, but members were asked to provide feedback on any discrepancies on the map, should they find any, in order to update.

In addition to the Definitive Map, the website also contains information on any Public Path Orders as well as Rights of Way Consultations.

Discussions took place around Section 147, which is legislation that enables landowners to exchange furniture on their land, such as a stile for a kissing gate in order to make Rights of Way more accessible. There have been several applications for this and all of which are available to be viewed on the website.

The Officer provided an update on the extensive work undertaken across the borough to provide appropriate signage in Country Parks and Rights of Way around the Covid-19 Pandemic and social distancing and face coverings etc.

The Forum thanked the Officer for the update and discussion ensued.

Following consideration and discussion, the LAF thanked the Officers for their extensive work undertaken and particularly around the works on the website and the provision of a Definitive Map and it was agreed that the new website link be circulated to the Forum.

9. GRANTS.

The Local Access Forum were provided with an update on the progress with awarded Grants and additional applications.

It was noted that despite the pandemic, there is still some Grant funding available, some of which will be required to be spent in the short term and mainly around projects supporting Green Infrastructure and Biodiversity rather than access, however there are still some small pots if money available for Access which is being utilised where possible.

It was noted that there is some short-term funding available to support Green Recovery, for which Access plays some part and the grant can be used for tools for maintenance, volunteers or capital investments on paths on the ground. In addition, The Rights of Way Officer has secured a Grant from WG of approximately £40k for Access Improvements.

The Officer highlighted some of the key projects in place such as grant funding which has been secured to support a collaborative project on Mynyddmaen Common, working with Pontypool Parks to rationalise and improve the access for walkers and horse-riders and to address some of the ongoing issues with motorbikes and 4x4s which are causing issues across the Authority. The Forum noted that the Police are taking a more active role on this matter and are having large successes.

The Forum noted that funding has been secured in order to improve the main access track and provide signage on the Upper Mynyddmaen site as well as improve a spur route into Cwmbran and Cwmcarn.

The Forum noted that the Rural Development Programme (RDP) Fund is still being utilised to provide Access improvement projects through schemes such as Rail to Trail, which is a series of routes linking some of the walks with local rail network. In addition, the Forum were pleased to note that Welsh Government has confirmed that there will be a new round of RDP Funding available in 2023, which will be useful for rural businesses but could also provide additional funding or capital projects on the ground, in which access is a legitimate beneficiary.

The Forum were provided an update on the Gwent Green Grid, which is a collaborative project between 5 local authorities in Gwent working on various Green Infrastructure initiatives, including Access. It was noted that an update in an earlier meeting highlighted the plans for an Apprenticeship Scheme which forms part of the Gwent Green Grid. The Forum noted that there has been little progress to date on this initiative due to issues with the approval of the programme, however it is anticipated that this will be approved at the next WG Panel meeting on 23rd March 2021 and the initiative can be launched.

The Officer provided the Forum with an update on Valleys Regional Park. Caerphilly have been in a fortunate position in that 3 of the 11 Gateway sites granted have been located in the Caerphilly County Borough and further funding has been allocated to this scheme, which can be further utilised for projects within the Borough, in particular with link to Active Travel and Access as well as the promotion of Health and Wellbeing through the Green Infrastructure. Further information was provided around Park Penallta, which has been identified as a Sentinel site providing early warnings for any pathogens, and WG have provided funding for the continued use of this site. In addition, the site can be utilised for Education benefits and links with the Valleys Regional Park. It was agreed to invite a speaker from the Valleys Regional Park to a future meeting.

The LAF thanked the Officer for the report and discussion ensued.

Discussions took place around off-roading vehicles and the damage they cause to the environment and ecology, as well as the safety issues they pose to walkers, cyclists and horse-riders on rights of way. It was queried whether there could be designated areas for

these vehicles. Officers, in noting the significant issues reported across the County Borough explained that this has been considered on several occasions, but there are significant risks associated, including insurance, complaints and representations from local residents, the impact to the environment and the risk that users may get bored and seek alternative provision. The LAF were encouraged to contact the Police whenever there is an issue of illegal off-road vehicle use on common lands, as South Wales Police have additional resources in place to deal with any issues and Gwent Police are taking a more active role in penalising culprits.

A LAF Member queried whether there would be scope for an additional post within the Rights of Way Team, as a result of the additional projects. Officers explained that there could be a potential for a Part-Time Administration Post, which would provide support to the Countryside and Rights of Way Officers in terms of administrative tasks.

The LAF thanked the Officer and noted the update.

10. LEAFLETED WALKS.

The Local Access Forum noted the background to the Leafleted Walks and were pleased to note that the information is currently being reviewed. It was noted that the leaflets are to be updated electronically and made available online.

The Forum noted that each leaflet requires updating, some only updating pictures, however others need consideration and revision of the routes before the leaflets can be updated. Work will continue in the area, and the Forum will be updated in due course.

The Local Access Forum thanked the Officer and noted the update.

11. CHALLENGE WALK.

The Local Access Forum noted that the Annual Challenge walk, which was originally scheduled for 8th May 2021, has been rescheduled for 10th July, in the hope that Covid-19 restrictions and Social Distancing regulations may have eased.

The Challenge Walk is scheduled to take place North of the Borough this year, in Rhymney, and a series of walks have been developed. Bookings can be made online with a link from the Green Spaces web page.

The Forum were pleased to learn that the walk is scheduled to go ahead, due to the ongoing Pandemic and the impact walks and the countryside has on health and wellbeing.

The Local Access Forum thanked the Officer and noted the update.

12. PLANNING INSPECTORATE.

The Green Space Strategy and Cemeteries Manager explained that as a result of the ongoing Pandemic, the Planning Inspectorate have not been undertaking face to face meetings and as a result no enquiries or hearings have been undertaken.

It was noted however that alternative options are being considered, around options for virtual hearings. Whilst this is being explored, there are several complications, around access to information, whilst offices are closed. It is anticipated however that the first public enquiry will take place over the summer months.

The Local Access Forum thanked the Officer and noted the update.

13. CAR PARKING CHARGES.

The Local Access Forum were pleased to note a recent Council decision to remove Car Parking Charges at Country Parks, except for Cwmcarn Scenic Drive. The Forum were reminded however that the lockdown rules remain in place and were encouraged not to travel to Country Parks where possible.

The Representative from NRW suggested that contributions be sought on a volunteer basis from users of the Country Parks.

The Forum thanked the Officer and noted the update.

14. COUNTRYSIDE WEBSITE.

The Green Space Strategy and Cemeteries Manager provided the Local Access Forum with an update on the Countryside website.

It was noted that the site has recently undergone several updates, which included a digital Definitive Map. However, the Forum were asked to note that there could be some errors on the Map, for which feedback would be welcomed.

In addition, the site has undergone an overhaul of information, walks and leaflets. Whilst there is still a lot of work to be done, Communications and the Countryside team are looking to provide pilot videos of 4 walks within the borough.

A Forum Member queried whether personal videos of walks would also be considered for inclusion on the site. Officers explained that whilst this suggestion was welcomed, clarifications would need to be sought with the Communications Team.

Discussions took place around the health benefits of spending time in the countryside and Officers agreed that the promotion of Health and Wellbeing, as well as working in partnership with other organisations will be a priority.

The Forum thanked the Officer and noted the update.

15. ANY OTHER BUSINESS.

The Committee noted that an election of the Vice Chair would be required at the next meeting.

Discussions took place around the Caerphilly Landscape Project and it was noted that the Project Officer has moved on to another organisation, however it is anticipated that a short-term employment opportunity will be sought in line with funding restrictions and work will be undertaken in this area, along with the support of the NRW.

The Local Access Forum discussed the Tourism Centre in Caerphilly, with reference to leafleted walks and computer access for tourists. It was noted that the use of the site has altered however, it was suggested that signage be provided to direct users to the local library in which there is Internet access and opportunities for printing.

The Chair highlighted to the Forum that as part of an Active Travel Review, users of footpaths and rights of way are being asked their views and provide feedback on their local routes at www.caerphilly.commonplace.gov.uk.

The Chair thanked all parties present for their attendance and contributions and the meeting

closed at 12.43 pm.