



CAERPHILLY LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

MINUTES OF THE REMOTE MEETING HELD VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON FRIDAY, 26TH NOVEMBER 2021 AT 10.00 A.M.



PRESENT:

M. Benjamin – Chair

K. Donovan, A. Edwards, A. Evans, A. Palmer, M. Pointon, M. Thomas, W. Williams, N. Yates

By Invitation: B. Campbell, G. Drinkwater and S. Tindall (Natural Resources Wales)

Together with:

Officers: P. Griffiths (Green Space Strategy and Cemeteries Manager), S. Denbury (Countryside and Rights of Way Assistant), A. Fleming (Countryside and Rights of Way Officer), R. Barrett (Committee Services Officer), J. Thomas (Committee Services Officer)

RECORDING AND VOTING ARRANGEMENTS

The Chair reminded those present that the meeting was being filmed and would be available following the meeting via the Council's website – [Click Here to View](#). Members were advised that voting on decisions would take place via a show of hands up.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor N. George (Cabinet Member for Waste, Public Protection and Street Scene), B. Clarke, G. Davies, E. Gwynne, D. Hale, L. Howells, D. Llewellyn, J. Morgan, R. Stones and A. Wilson.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

3. MINUTES – 3RD SEPTEMBER 2021

It was moved and seconded that the minutes of the meeting held on 3rd September 2021 be approved as a correct record and a show of hands up (and in noting there were 7 for, 0 against and 0 abstentions) this was agreed by the majority present.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Caerphilly Local Access Forum held on 3rd September 2021 (minute nos. 1 – 14) be approved as a correct record.

4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

A Member referred to Minute No. 9 (Planning) and asked if there was any further information in relation to the Bedwas Tips reclamation. Mr Griffiths confirmed that this had been a general update to draw the LAF's attention to upcoming planning matters and he had nothing further to report at this time.

Mr Griffiths provided a general overview on matters arising and highlighted the items that would be addressed at today's meeting. In relation to the other points, Mr Griffiths referred to Minute No. 5 (Access Reform Briefing) and explained that the key messages and proposals were considered at the National LAF Chairs meeting on 9th November 2021. The importance of the biodiversity proposals have been noted and taken into account by the National LAF Chairs and other agencies.

In relation to Minute No. 8 (Integrated Impact Assessment in Relation to Rights of Way), Mr Griffiths confirmed that internal discussions have taken place with Officers and that a report will be brought to a future meeting to consider LAF's involvement around the consultation element of these Integrated Impact Assessments.

Mr Griffiths also referred to Minute No. 14 (Any Other Business) where a Member had requested that the Parks Department give a presentation at the next meeting relating to rights of way maintenance. Mr Griffiths confirmed that this would be arranged for the March 2022 meeting.

The Local Access Forum noted the updates provided and there were no other matters arising.

5. TO APPOINT A VICE CHAIR TO THE CAERPHILLY LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

Mr Griffiths introduced the item and sought nominations for a Vice Chair to the Caerphilly Local Access Forum. It was noted that Councillor N. George (Cabinet Member for Waste, Cabinet Member for Waste, Public Protection and Street Scene) was not in attendance at the meeting but had confirmed he would be willing on the role of Vice Chair unless anyone else wished to put their name forward.

It was moved and seconded that Councillor N. George be appointed as Vice Chair of Caerphilly LAF and there were no other nominations received. By a show of Hands Up (and in noting there were 7 for, 0 against and 0 abstentions), this was agreed by the majority present.

RESOLVED that Councillor George be appointed as Vice Chair of the Caerphilly Local Access Forum.

Mr Griffiths confirmed that he would advise Councillor George of the appointment following the meeting.

6. NATIONAL LAF CHAIRS MEETING - 9TH NOV 2021

Mr Griffiths provided an overview of the discussions that took place at this meeting and explained that he and the Chair had not been able to attend due to IT issues. However, first on the agenda was a presentation from Phil Roberts (Welsh Government) on the new Sustainable Farming Scheme. WG are seeking input (particularly from LAFs) around the access elements of how this project is going to be taken forward. The primary issue is that unlike England, there will be no national minimum standards applied to the Scheme in Wales,

which is causing concern amongst the LAFs, and so this is currently under review by WG to determine whether this particular element of legislation will be changed to allow minimum standards in Wales. This matter will be discussed in further detail at the next National LAF Chairs meeting on 1st December 2021, when WG will give a further presentation. LAF were invited to approach the Caerphilly LAF Chair with any specific issues that they wished to raise at that meeting.

The second agenda item involved a presentation from the Visitor Safety Group which looks at how Natural Resources Wales' land is managed for public benefit and public safety. It was noted that a set of guidelines are being prepared around public land safety and Mr Griffiths will forward these to the LAF once received. Some detailed analysis will be required from the LAF on this guidance with potential scope to improve the health and safety of public accessible land, but Caerphilly Council will need to examine this as it could possibly extend to the remit of other departments (such as Tourism locations) in addition to the Countryside department.

The third part of the agenda included updates from various organisations, including the British Horse Society, who raised concerns around Active Travel Plans which are currently being proposed by local authorities and which are viewed as detrimental to horse riders. The Ramblers gave a presentation on a project they are working on in respect of paths and access improvement research. Welsh Water also gave a presentation involving an update in terms of mountain bikes and an open swimming site in West Wales.

One main point that emerged from this meeting was that Natural Resources Wales and WG have confirmed that there is no 2026 cut-off in Wales for claiming rights of way. There are issues around how this is going to be applied across borders, which does not apply to Caerphilly LAF but is however part of the regional work which the Countryside Team carry out with Monmouthshire Council. WG also discussed the research they are carrying out into the effects and ongoing impact of Covid, together with the various staff appointments they have made. The Access Improvement Grants have also been announced for 2022, with £2m in the pot for Wales, and a formula and criteria will be applied to make sure each local authority gets its share. Mr Griffiths also outlined the details of two Rights of Way presentations given at the meeting from Ceredigion and Wrexham Councils

Mr Griffiths also gave an update on the Access Reform Act which is due to be discussed further at the next National LAF Chairs meeting. The findings and recommendations document in relation to the Act has recently been published, which is in the region of 170 pages and contains 15 pages of recommendations. Mr Griffiths is intending to examine the document in detail, but the key takeaway points include recommendations for horse riders and cyclists on CROW open access land, which will have implications in areas where by-laws are in place. The document also includes recommendations around coastal land becoming open access land, but which is of little relevance to Caerphilly LAF.

It was noted that the main topic of discussion around the Access Reform Act is a proposal to apply higher rights to footpaths. Three options were initially considered but have been narrowed down to two, namely (1) a blanket change across all footpaths with the ability for the local authority to exclude certain areas, or alternatively (2) no change at all but where the local authority have the ability to apply higher rights to footpaths where required. Regardless of whichever avenue Welsh Government eventually choose, this will ultimately result in an increased workload for the Countryside Team, due to appeals and requests that could be received from landowners or user groups depending on the option imposed by WG.

It was explained that the Access Reform Act is also looking at some minor changes to the future of LAFs, including their role in suitability assessments when changing the status of paths and reviewing the membership of LAFs. WG and NRW are also intending to produce some further guidance on the operation of LAFs. Mr Griffiths confirmed that the

aforementioned elements would be discussed in further detail at the next LAF Chairs meeting on 1st December.

Mr Griffiths was thanked for his update and a LAF Member sought clarification regarding the classification of green spaces in relation to the proposals around the Access Reform Act. Mr Griffiths explained that ROW Officers and Green Infrastructure Managers have been pushing for a relaxation of the criteria used by WG, and green spaces will effectively become categorized into three elements: (1) statutory rights of way (2) open access land as designated by the CROW Act, and (3) any green space or infrastructure which has public access rights. The Member asked if this would result in increased usage and additional types of users (such as cyclists). Mr Griffiths explained that the Act will allow the local authority to include more urban land on the definitive plan and make improvements to informal routes to accommodate other types of users.

A Member also asked if the criteria would extend to waterways and Mr Griffiths explained that he would look into this and respond to Members following the meeting, although the matter of canoeing and access to water is being looked at as part of the Access Reform Act.

Following discussion the Local Access Forum noted the contents of the update in relation to the National LAF Chairs meeting.

7. GENERAL RIGHTS OF WAY UPDATE

The LAF received an update from Andy Fleming (Countryside and Rights of Way Officer) in relation to the work being undertaken by the Council's Rights of Way team. Mr Fleming confirmed that Caerphilly Council has been allocated some Access Improvement Grants funding to carry out accessibility improvements to routes and to replace older stiles and kissing gates with modern furniture to improve access for people with mobility issues, which is of particular importance given the increased usage during the pandemic.

LAF were also advised that Stefan Denbury (Countryside and Rights of Way Assistant) has compiled an electronic version of the definitive map, which is updated as and when needed. This will mean that the public can access the map and easily bring any accessibility issues to the attention of Officers by using the numbers that reflects the route number of that particular right of way. Other improvements include the removal of steps, promotional materials and improving wheelchair/pushchair access across rights of way and Officers are engaging with local users in this regard. Mr Fleming added that this pot of funding would be available until April 2022, although there is uncertainty around whether the funding will continue after this time.

A Member enquired about the costs of the replacement access furniture and if the costs were being recouped. Mr Fleming explained that he was required to submit a list of jobs and prices to Welsh Government to release the funding and that the price of raw materials had significantly increased over the last 18 months. However, he explained that these costs are being met through the WG funding at the end of the financial year and so the works are not creating any additional costs for the local authority.

Another Member asked if the grant money could be used to install new access furniture if requests are received across individual wards. Mr Fleming explained that a 'like-for-like' replacement model is currently being operated and that the landowner's permission firstly needs to be sought in order to change the type of access structure and Officers then need to go through the relevant consultation avenues and legislation in order to make the change to the definitive statement depending on the rights of way type. It was explained that the Council are aiming to put the most appropriate furniture in place for each location that they feel is most

fitting for users. The Member confirmed he had put a request in for new access furniture for his ward and arranged to discuss this with Mr Fleming following the meeting.

Following consideration of the item, the Local Access Forum noted the contents of the update in relation to General Rights of Way matters.

8. NATURAL RESOURCES WALES UPDATES

Bob Campbell (Recreational Manager - Natural Resources Wales) introduced himself to LAF and outlined his role within Natural Resources Wales as part of the Land Management Team. He explained that one key aim of NRW is to determine what information the LAF would wish NRW to bring to their meetings going forward, and suggested that this could be discussed further at the next LAF meeting.

Mr Campbell shared a spreadsheet which outlined details of the tree felling programmes which are currently being undertaken across the Caerphilly area and beyond. Members noted the details of planned forestry works for West End South (Abercarn), Rhyd y Gwern (near Machen), Llanbradach, The Wyllie South (Pontllanfraith) and Coed Cilonydd (Pantside). Mr Campbell provided an overview of the current status of works in each area and offered to provide a further update at the next meeting. It was noted that the felling programme within the Wyllie will present particular challenges given the number of rights of way and unauthorised trails. LAF were advised that NRW are keen to follow up the tree felling programme in Wyllie with an improvement programme, which will include consultation with stakeholders to determine who is using the area and make the necessary infrastructure improvements to rights of way.

Mr Campbell also referenced the improvement works being carried out at Cwmcarn Forest, which will include items such as replacement way markers, and explained that if this programme of works is successful then it will be rolled out to the rest of the woodlands works going forward. It was also noted that NRW are intending to appoint a contractor to examine woodlands and walk through every rights of way route to identify areas that require change or improvements. It was explained that although NRW will concentrate on reinstatement works at each individual site following the tree-felling programme in order to work through these in a controlled manner, if there is a particular reason why works need to be carried out at another site, NRW will also initiate these works.

LAF were also advised that the Land Management Team are in their Winter Renewal Repair Season for Cwmcarn where staff are not disturbing wildlife and are concentrating on verge flailing, repairing gates and stiles and catching up on general maintenance arising from the summer works.

LAF thanked Mr Campbell for his update, who then handed over to his colleague Ms Geminie Drinkwater to present the proposals in relation to Agenda Item No. 9.

9. TO REVIEW PROPOSED MODIFICATIONS TO PROW AT CWMCARN FOREST

Prior to presentation of this item, it was noted that representations had been received from two LAF Members in relation to the NRW proposals and that these would be outlined to Members during the course of this item.

Ms Geminie Drinkwater (Natural Resources Wales) then introduced the proposed modifications to Public Rights of Way at Cwmcarn Forest, which had been included in the agenda pack and circulated to LAF Members in advance of the meeting. It was explained that

the proposals form part of the second phase of redevelopment works at Cwmcarn Forest Drive following the tree-felling programme, and NRW are currently undertaking a review of what works are required to Public Rights of Way across Cwmcarn Forest Drive and the Abercarn Forest area in order to enhance visitor safety and improve the network for authorised users. NRW were therefore seeking feedback from Caerphilly LAF on the proposed modifications to Public Rights of Way so that the feasibility of these proposals can be considered, prior to applications for modifications being submitted to the local authority.

Ms Drinkwater then shared a presentation which outlined the proposals, and LAF Members discussed and commented on each proposal in turn.

(1). CRSK FP418/45/1 – Footpath 418

This proposal (sited on Torfaen land) related to the footpath between the common and lake in Cwmcarn, and sought to modify the definitive map so that the map reflects the established route on the ground and provide a route that is largely away from the Forest Drive.

A Member stated that she supported this proposal but referred to aggressive use of the trails in this area by mountain bikers and a general reluctance by bikers to use separate trails, and asked if appropriate signage would be put in place. Ms Drinkwater explained that on this particular footpath, NRW will be looking to put chicanes in as a safety measure at every point where authorised MTB trails cross the footpath. They will also be carrying out earthworks to smooth out approaches and reduce steepness in order to create good sight lines for drivers and walkers.

(2). CRSK BR117/1 – Bridleway 117

This proposal related to a bridleway North of Car Park 7 of Cwmcarn Forest Drive following around to Car Parks 5, 6 and 4, and sought to modify the definitive map to reflect the established route on the ground, which will include the creation of a new entrance location to achieve a shallower, safer descent from the Medart. It also proposed to remove an existing steep and narrow entrance section and remove an unauthorised trail section. Ms Drinkwater explained that it was proposed to move the bridleway entrance approximately 150m up the road to create a shallower approach and better access for equestrians, although this depends on the width and gradient that could be achieved and therefore this was a first draft of the proposal. The modifications will also remove an unauthorised section of trail to improve safety on the bridleway itself.

A LAF Member was of the view that overall the new route would be less safe for equestrians but acknowledged that this route is not heavily used by equestrians at the present time. It was noted that this proposal links in to the next proposal (FP118/1).

(3). CRSK FP118/1 – Footpath 118

This proposal related to a footpath which follows the route down to Footpath 119 and sought to modify the definitive map so that the walked route is reflected on the map. It also proposed to alter the angle of the path as it joins Footpath 119 so that a shallower, safer and more user-friendly approach is achieved to and from the Forest Drive. Furthermore, the proposal sought to create a permissive path to link up Footpath 118 with the proposed new entrance of Bridleway to provide a traffic-free, pedestrian route adjacent to the Forest Drive. It was acknowledged that this proposal is currently fluid due to the interactions between the footpath and bridleway and could be improved upon to provide clearer starting and connection points for both types of users. Ms Drinkwater explained that there are complexities as the bridleway also joins the route across a narrow verge and so it is not known yet if this proposal is achievable.

A LAF Member stated that she fully endorsed the Footpath 118 diversion proposal.

Mr Campbell from NRW added that there would only be vehicle access to the Forest Drive in the main summer months and so there will be times of day and during the winter months when the bridleway will be relatively quiet. He acknowledged that although speed limits around the Drive are 15mph, bike riders can achieve speeds of 50mph downhill and so NRW are looking to see how they can address this issue.

(4-5). CRSK FP129/1 and CRSK FP 124/1 - Footpaths 129 and 124

Ms Drinkwater provided some background on these proposals and explained that prior to the re-opening of the Forest Drive, in-depth engagement with the public was carried out in order to ascertain what people wanted from the Drive and the wider Forest once the Drive was reopened. One of the key messages that arose from this exercise was the need for better equestrian provision. Ms Drinkwater highlighted the popularity of the Forest Drive across various types of users and outlined the need to achieve a balancing act to accommodate these different types of users. In terms of equestrians, there is currently little provision for equestrian riders on the Cwmcarn Forest side and it was felt that this could be an opportunity to improve the equestrian route offer from Risca to Cwmcarn.

The proposals sought to divert Footpath 124 following the creation of a new bridleway, and also to upgrade Footpath 129 to a bridleway. A further bridleway would also be created by joining this up with Bridleway 117 at the top end, and would establish the designation of a route linking Green Meadow Bridge in Risca with the bottom end of Footpath 129.

Mr Denbury added that Footpath 129 on the definitive map comes to a stop at the southern point and so there appears to be a missing link between Green Meadow Bridge and the canal. The mapping indicates that this is a maintained highway, which Mr Denbury has discussed with the Highways Team, and they are of the view that some modifications will need to take place when submitting this proposal.

A LAF Member expressed her opposition to the upgrading of this footpath to bridleway status. She explained that she had contacted the BHS representative in the area who had confirmed that even though he would like greater equestrian access in the area, it was his view that responsible equestrians would not use the new bridleway due to historical problems with mountain bikers using the routes and creating unauthorised routes. The LAF Member also voiced concerns from local people and dog walkers in the area, who feel strongly that their safety is being compromised by mountain bikers given the speed at which they come down the hills onto Footpath 129. The Member acknowledged that the area had become somewhat safer since chicanes were put in and that she did not object to the unauthorised trails, but stated that she opposed this particular proposal along with the Ramblers and a number of local people and was of the view that making the footpath into a bridleway would not improve the walking offer and that the use of the path by bikers could put safety at risk.

In response, NRW Officers acknowledged the concerns of the Member and highlighted to LAF that Risca Riders have submitted an application in which is being examined by NRW to see if a formal management agreement can be established for these trails going forward. It was explained that unauthorised trail building is a global issue that has significantly increased since the pandemic and that although NRW follow an established strategy around unauthorised trail building, they do not have the capacity to eliminate these trails completely. The general strategy is that if a group is willing to take on responsibility for these trails, then there may be an advantage in working with this particular group. LAF were provided with a detailed overview of how this process is carried out, which entails detailed consideration by

NRW in consultation with other stakeholders and in conjunction with relevant Planning process.

Another LAF Member observed that there is no-one available to police inappropriate rights of way use and asked how such situations could be mitigated. Ms Drinkwater outlined the signage, social media messages and physical measures that can be put in place but emphasised that this is a continual battle and that NRW are limited in what they can do. She thanked Members for their comments on this proposal and confirmed that the views and concerns of LAF and other stakeholders would be taken on board when submitting the modification application.

(6). RBW 418/43/1 – Restricted Byway 418

This proposal sought to reinstate Restricted Byway 418 (situated on Torfaen land) and bring it back into use so that the definitive route is reflected on the ground, and to modify the upper part of the byway so that it follows the established track on the ground.

A LAF Member stated that she supported this proposal.

(7). CRSK FP119/1 – Footpath 119

This proposal sought a modification to alter the angle of the route at the top end of the footpath which approaches the Forest Drive and Car Park 4, which will achieve a shallower and safer approach to and from the forest road, and improve the line of sight for approaching drivers and walkers.

A LAF Member observed the benefits of this proposal in that it would also slow down cyclists on the approach.

(8). CRSK FP126/1 – Footpath 126

This proposal proposed the modification of the definitive map so that Footpath 126 reflects the route which is walked on the ground. At the moment there is a stile where walkers are walking up through the field and bracken to join the path further up.

A LAF Member stated that she fully supported this proposal.

Following presentation of these proposals, Ms Drinkwater thanked Members for their views and comments and confirmed that these would be used to inform any applications that NRW make in respect of formal modification orders.

The Chair thanked Ms Drinkwater for her detailed presentation and also thanked LAF Members for their comments.

It was noted that Mr Denbury had some examples of new PROW signage to hand which NRW were looking to implement at Cwmcarn and roll out further afield, and photographs of these were shared on screen to the LAF. The LAF were shown examples of waymark signs relating to public bridleway, public footpath and restricted byways, which contained directional arrows and symbols showing who can and cannot access these paths. These signs will also contain the reference number for the path which can be used by the public when reporting an issue and it is hoped that the grid reference number can also be put on the signs for use by emergency services. The signs will also incorporate bilingual QR codes which will link to the Public Rights of Way page on the Caerphilly Council website.

A Member asked if the arrows on the signage would be directional. It was confirmed that in order to avoid confusion, there will be multiple waymark posts at T junctions which will be placed a number of meters apart and that other points will have a waymark post sited in the correct direction. Mr Denbury also responded to general queries in relation to grid references and the affixment of the signage.

In rounding off the discussion on this item, Mr Griffiths highlighted a representation from a LAF Member not in attendance at the meeting in relation to Proposal No. 4 (CRSK FP129/1 - Footpath 129). It was explained that the Member objected to the proposal to upgrade this to a bridleway and had asked that her views be relayed to the LAF. In summary, the Member felt that it was not helpful to redesignate this footpath as a bridleway on the basis of misuse and that it would lead to conflict with existing users.

Mr Griffiths also referred to the earlier presentation from Mr Bob Campbell relating to future NRW updates and it was suggested that Members could contact Mr Griffiths with items they would wish to see on future agendas, and NRW could then produce presentations around those requests or discuss requests further at the next meeting. LAF were asked to be mindful that this is separate to the work being carried out by Ms Drinkwater and should be limited to Land Management issues and those items that are in the public domain.

In closing the debate around the PROW modification proposals, Mr Griffiths explained that he had received some comments stating that the NRW proposals are “anti-horse” and he sought confirmation from NRW that it is not their intention to preclude horse riders from the Cwmcarn site. NRW Officers explained that they want to ensure fair representation of all users at Cwmcarn and increase equestrian access where they can, and improve a wider access offer available for all users. Mr Griffiths also reminded the LAF that a statutory process needs to be followed to amend any route, and assured Members that there will be further consultation on the process, with the possible exception of Restricted Byway 418 as this relates to Torfaen Council, although he would pass these views onto Torfaen Officers.

Having provided their views and comments on the PROW modification proposals, the LAF noted the contents of the presentation and the information provided by Officers.

10. PLANNING

Mr Griffiths gave an update on Planning matters and advised the LAF that preparations on the 2nd Replacement Local Development Plan and call for Candidate Sites are continuing to progress. As part of the work on the Replacement LDP, the Countryside Team and Rights of Way Team are examining elements of the Candidate Sites in relation to landscape, ecology, rights of way, and natural resource management. The team are using a traffic light system to score and identify potential any rights of way implications and Officers also have the opportunity to state whether or not they would support the inclusion of each Candidate site in the final LDP. Although this work is an Officer function and not part of LAF's role, it was explained that the draft LDP will go out for consultation at a future date and LAF Members will have the opportunity to respond as individuals and groups on the proposed Candidate Sites for inclusion in the LDP and the shape of the Council's landscape over the next 15 years. Mr Griffiths also confirmed that he would schedule a presentation on the draft LDP as an agenda item for Members' information when the document is available.

There were no questions received and the Local Access Forum noted the contents of the Planning update from Mr Griffiths.

11. TRANSPORT FOR WALES LEVEL CROSSINGS IN THE RHYMNEY VALLEY

Mr Stefan Denbury gave an update in relation to the South Wales Metro Scheme and the electrification proposals for the Cardiff-Rhydney railway line. It was noted that there are 5 level crossing locations across the county borough which could be impacted by these proposals. These have been inspected by Officers and Transport for Wales staff, and consultants are conducting a risk assessment for each of these crossings in relation to risk/speed and frequency of these newer types of trains. A report will be presented to the LAF at a future date to outline how these risks will be mitigated and to allow the LAF to respond and offer comment on rights of way diversions where needed.

There were no questions received and the Local Access Forum noted the update from Mr Denbury.

12. GRANTS/FUNDING

Mr Griffiths explained that there was little information to report in this respect, other than the announcement from WG in relation to Access Improvement Grants funding for 2022. Caerphilly Council have not yet submitted any further grants bids for public rights of way or access improvements at this time. LAF were advised that the 4 countryside apprenticeship posts and the Countryside Ranger Co-ordinator post administered through the Gwent Green Grid partnership have now been filled, and these staff will be instrumental in Rights of Way work across the Gwent area.

There were no questions received and the Local Access Forum noted the update from Mr Griffiths.

13. DATES AND FORMAT OF LAF MEETINGS FOR 2022

Mr Griffiths highlighted the meeting dates for 2022, namely Friday 4th March 2022, Friday 17th June 2022, Friday 16th September 2022 and Friday 25th November 2022.

It was noted that one LAF meeting per year normally includes a site inspection of works that have taken place and Mr Griffiths sought LAF's views on this, subject to the lifting of Covid restrictions. It was suggested that the site visit could possibly be arranged to look at the works that have been carried out by Countryside and Rights of Way Officers in recent months. Members indicated that they would be agreeable to holding this site visit in June 2022, subject to the restrictions around site visits being lifted in the meantime.

Mr Griffiths also drew LAF's attention to the format in which the meetings are held. He explained that Caerphilly Council are currently holding all their committee meetings remotely on Microsoft Teams due to the restrictions in place around the Covid-19 pandemic, and this includes LAF meetings. However, this is at odds with the separate legislation in place from Welsh Government in relation to Local Access Forums which requires those meetings to be held in person. This is currently a topic of discussion within Welsh Government as they are not initially minded to change this legislation.

Mr Griffiths explained that in order to address this issue, Welsh Government have written to the LAF secretaries asking for the views of LAFs on how they wish to hold their meetings going forward into 2022 and what each local authority can do to accommodate this. Mr Griffiths therefore sought LAF's view on whether they wished to continue with virtual meeting arrangements for the time being or whether they wished to explore a return to face-to-face meetings. Members acknowledged the fluidity of the situation given the uncertainty around

Covid-19 restrictions. One Member expressed their preference for virtual meetings but acknowledged that there are some LAF representatives who may not be technologically minded or have access to IT equipment which may prevent them from attending the virtual meetings. Mr Griffiths confirmed that the majority of LAF Members have attended at least one virtual meeting. The LAF also discussed hybrid meeting routes that have been trialled across other organisations and the challenges around holding these types of meetings.

Following discussion between the LAF, Mr Griffiths confirmed that he would respond to Welsh Government to state that Caerphilly LAF's preference is to continue with their virtual meeting arrangements for the first LAF meeting in March 2022, and then review the position at that time regarding those meetings scheduled for later in 2022. Members indicated that they were in favour of this suggestion, and the update from Mr Griffiths was noted.

14. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

A LAF Member, on behalf of the Gwent Ornithological Society, asked if a request could be relayed to members of the Ramblers Association relating to dog control on leads and access to sensitive sites such as nature reserves, particularly during the breeding season.

Mr Bob Campbell from NRW also sought advice from LAF in relation to the removal of Covid-19 safety signage on NRW land, as many of the plastic signs have fallen down and are now littering the landscape. One LAF Member with a background in workplace health and safety advised Mr Campbell that the onus is the employer in relation to Covid risk assessments, and that it would be a matter for the employer to determine whether the signage is of benefit or if it should be taken down, given that the government messages around Covid are now well-known and communicated through other avenues. However, any signage with indoor spaces (such as toilets) should remain. Mr Griffiths stated however that he favoured the reiteration and reinforcement of Covid safety messages. Mr Campbell confirmed that he would feed this back to NRW at a national level.

There were no other items raised and the Local Access Forum noted the updates received.

The Chair thanked all parties present for their attendance and contributions and the meeting closed at 12.24 p.m.

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 4th March 2021.

CHAIR