



CAERPHILLY LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH, ON
FRIDAY 7TH JUNE 2019 AT 10.00 A.M.

PRESENT:

W. Lindsay - Chair

Councillor N. George (Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Services) - Vice-Chair

M. Benjamin, B. Clarke, G. Davies, K. Donovan, A. Edwards, R. Stones, M. Thomas. N. Yates

Together with:

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

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from E. Gwynne. L. Howells, A. Palmer and S. Rajoo, together with S. Denbury (Countryside and Rights of Way Assistant), S. Tindall (Natural Resources Wales) and C. Deller (Welsh Government).

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

3. MINUTES – 1ST MARCH 2019

The minutes of the meeting held on 1st March 2019 were approved as a correct record.

4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

Minute No. 4 (Matters Arising) – it was noted that the Local Toilet Strategy (The Strategy) has been drafted and is available to view on the Council's website. For clarification, the Forum were advised that the Strategy refers to the current facilities as required by Welsh Government and not a list of closures.

Minute No. 5 (Proposals – Merthyr and Gelligaer Common) – It was noted that at the previous meeting discussions took place around Fly Tipping and updates were to be provided to this meeting, however the Forum were informed that there were no further updates at this time as the relevant Officer was not in attendance.

Minute No. 14 (Any Other Business) - It was noted that a letter has been sent to Canoe Wales, however no response has been received to date.

5. FORESTRY PATH CLOSURES

The Countryside and Rights of Way Officer provided the Forum with a detailed update on the closures of Forestry Paths across the County Borough.

It was noted that there is a temporary closure in place across a section of the Risca Canal due to reinforcement works being undertaken on the banking, which is now complete, however, it was noted that there were some issues due to communication, which have now been resolved and Highways will provide updates to the team in future to minimise disruption.

The Forum discussed Abbey Forestry and the works undertaken to footpath 42 around Ty Coch, for which a 6 month prohibition notice is in place until 3rd November 2019.

Discussions took place around footpath closures in the Markham area due to works being undertaken by Natural Resources Wales (NRW), which is due to expire on 4 July 2019. There has been no request for an extension to this so it is anticipated that the footpaths will be open and useable following this date. The Forum however were encouraged to report any issues with footpaths following re-opening should they not be restored to their previous state. Officers take photographs of the footpaths before and after.

A Forum Member highlighted issues with a footpath in the Forestry in Rudry in which the surface re-laid following works was not as before and not suitable for riders. It was noted that this is currently being looked into and due to the improved working relationships with NRW it is hoping this can be resolved quickly. The Forum however were assured that inspections are conducted regularly and where possible, NRW are encouraged to use Banksman for minor works, in order to keep Rights of Way open, or have minimal closure periods.

A Forum Member raised concerns for a site in Markham which was developed as an outdoor classroom 13 years ago as part of a bid to redevelop the area. It was noted however that recent works by NRW have removed the classroom site. Officers explained that there was a 10 year agreement in place with NRW in relation to the site, and recent works have been undertaken to fell diseased trees, which has subsequently damaged the public facilities. Representation can be made to NRW, however the agreement has now lapsed.

The Forum discussed reporting methods to the Countryside and Rights of Way team and it was noted that there are extensive works being undertaken for all site closures and operations to be made available online, via the Countryside Asset Management System (CAMS), however there is a designated Rights of Way email address and contact number, which are all available on the website. In addition, it was also noted that officers are also looking into the development of an application.

Footpath closures were discussed and further information was sought on the process should NRW not notify the Authority for the requirement of an extension. Officers explained that there is a requirement to advertise the extension request, which requires a 4 week period in order to arrange the advert and provide sufficient notice, should this not be received in the set timescale, there is a possibility that Banksman can be used in order to complete the works.

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

6. NRW AREA STATEMENTS

The Forum noted that the Environment Act sets out a duty for Natural Resources Wales (NRW) to produce area statements which should set out how people can benefit from local Natural Resources. They set out the Natural Resources in each area, address key challenges and opportunities at a local level and provide a common evidence base.

It was noted that the aim is to allow a better understanding of the state and trends of Natural Resources in each local area, the pressures on them and the benefits they provide, whilst ultimately providing information on how to better manage the resource.

Each area statement can identify how key National Priorities can be met, which will require significant partnership working.

The Forum noted that there are 7 area statements across Wales, one of which is Marine. Caerphilly County Borough has been categorised in South East Wales, along with other Gwent Local Authorities. The South East Wales category has been further broken down in 6 local areas: Eastern Valleys (in which Caerphilly County Borough is located), Newport/Cardiff, Gwent Highlands, Wye Valley, Monmouthshire and South East Brecon Beacons.

The Forum were informed that Road Shows have been conducted to identify what is important to each local area, common themes coming out of which include Biodiversity, Landscape, Access/ Recreation, all of which will be plotted into the NRW database. As a result of the event, it was highlighted that things are being undertaken differently within South East Wales Region. It was noted that the process will continue until the end of the summer and work is underway to publish the final statements at the end of the financial year.

The Forum were asked to note that all information around this is available on the NRW website.

The Forum thanked the Officer for the updated and noted the item.

7. GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGY

The Forum noted that the purpose of the Green Infrastructure Strategy (the GI Strategy) incorporates the Environment Act, Wellbeing and Future Generations Act and other Welsh Government Legislations in order to make better and sustainable use of assets and the benefits provided by the local natural resources.

It was noted that there hasn't been a significant amount of progress made since the last meeting, as it was anticipated that the NRW Area Statements would be developed prior to the Green Infrastructure Strategy, thus informing elements of the GI Strategy, however, this has not been possible.

Discussions took place around the access element of the GI Strategy and it was noted that it will be important to identify where corridors not only need protection, but enhancement. Future Grant Schemes to both the Public Sector and landowners may be required to help create the proposed improvements.

The Forum were pleased to note that on the basis of the draft GI Strategy, the Public Services Board (PSB) have identified and agreed funding for a project in Tir-Y-Berth, for which NRW are the lead body for this funding.

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

8. CHAIRMANS UPDATE

The Chair provided the Forum with an update on the latest LAF Chairs meeting, which was undertaken in March in Aberystwyth.

The Forum noted that a demonstration of the NRW's new portal was provided which hosts a number of individual websites and provides a number of data sets, for which the NRW were keen to get feedback on the portal, which is currently a work in progress. It was noted however that digital maps of Rights of Way were not available at present.

The Chairs were informed of a number of consultation exercises undertaken that have been sent to the LAF secretaries, including a consultation on Trunk Road proposals. Officers explained that consultations are sent through to Officers, however, due to the frequency of LAF meetings and timescales of consultations, it is often not possible to provide the LAF with the consultation, however, updates are provided to the Forum where possible.

The Chair explained that discussions took place around the Network Rails Crossing Policy in which Network Rail are looking to close some crossings, and cannot offer alternatives. Discussions took place around Rights of Way implications and it was noted that representations have not been made to the Rights of Way Department in relation to this. The Forum discussed local issues in reference to local cases of noise complaints as a result of trains crossing a Right of Way and the possibility of electrifying lines and it was noted that Network Rail have certain rights over Rights of Way that are not applicable to other authorities.

The Forum discussed the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) and it was noted that other LAF's appear to be further along in meeting their objectives. Officers explained that the plan was designed to be more of a wish list, with difficulties around funding making many of the targets within it ambitious, however, it was also noted that some other LAF's have employed consultants to assist with the preparation of their ROWIP.

The Forum noted that the Chairs were provided with an update from NRW in which it was noted that they are still in transition and anticipate that this will end in July.

Discussions took place around benchmarking and it was noted that a booklet was also produced for ease of reference for Chairs and Secretaries. It was noted that there was a similar feeling across LAF's in relation to difficulties in budget restraints and recruiting volunteers and in particular, was felt that LAF's have little impact as a group of well meaning volunteers with additional pressures being added to meet benchmarks and consider strategies.

The Chair wished it noted that Annual Reports were discussed and Caerphilly has not produced one for a number of years. Officers explained that it was agreed that a report would be produced at the end of the tenure of the Forum, providing details of the achievements during that tenure.

The Forum thanked the Chair for the detailed update and comments were noted.

8. COUNTRYSIDE ACCESS MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The Forum were provided with an update on the Countryside Access Management System, which is being populated and is progressing well. It was noted however that there has been an issue transporting the paper definitive map onto the electronic system, with particular issues around line thickness and the system of measuring, as the definitive map is measured in chains and not the metric system, which GPS etc. usually is.

The Forum discussed at length and it was noted that there would be issues in respect of potential developments, and for users of Rights of Way routes, however, it is still possible to view the hard copies of the maps at the Office, but to date it has not been possible to make electronic versions available.

Further developments are under way within the site, and it is anticipated that walk routes will soon be available on line, thus reducing the number of calls to the office, as routes will be readily available to users.

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

A Forum member queried the definitive map issues and the users in which the line thickness would cause an issue. Officers explained that this would mostly be an issue for developers, solicitors, buyers and for land registry. It would be possible to include a disclaimer online, however it is preferred that the electronic versions be as accurate as possible to mitigate issues.

Officers suggested that the GPS system also be made available for the next site visits in order to demonstrate to the Forum.

9. FUNDING

The Forum were provided with details of the recent funding applications for ENROW, a collaboration across Gwent in which £36million has been allocated as grant funding. Of the 85 applications, 19 have been approved, 2 of which are from Caerphilly County Borough Council.

One of the successful bids was “Gwent Green Grid”, receiving £2million funding over 3 years to look at projects around invasive plant species. The project will be for Gwent access primarily and will require evidence in a Strategic ROWIP across Gwent. It was noted that the Regional ROW team of 4 trainees will be established, working 1 day a week.

Discussions took place around Welsh Government’s drive to encourage better use of the local environment and Valleys Regional Park, as a result, a Health Officer post has been created to promote health and the local environment, as well as Country Parks. There has also been an announcement that 9 sites, 2 of which are in Caerphilly have been identified, and Penallta Park is on the reserve list.

The Forum were asked to note that there are ongoing works at the Adventure Triangle (Mynydd Maen) and work is underway to get RCDF projects up and running. Strategic Management Schemes, including Merthyr and Gelligaer Common issues are part of a small grant programme, to assist to supplement the work of the Rangers.

The Forum were pleased to note the grant prospects and thanked the Officer for the update.

10. WEB PAGE

The Forum noted that the Website was due to be launched prior to the meeting, however, there have been some issues around Domain Name, which are being resolved and the website should be live shortly. Further updates will be provided at the next meeting.

11. OFF-ROADING UPDATE

The Countryside and Rights of Way Officer provided the Forum with an update on issues of Off- Roding across the County Borough. It was noted that he was not in attendance at the last meeting with the Police, however is awaiting minutes from the last meeting.

Discussions took place around some of the illegal actions being undertaken across the Borough to deter people from off-roading activities and fly-tipping on common land. Particular reference was made to a trench, which has appeared on a Common in Llanfabon, close to a Pylon and Water Main pipe. It was noted that the Police are currently looking into this.

It was noted that a meeting was undertaken with the Welsh Fire Service in which it was discussed adding 'Breakers' in large areas of ferns on Commons, in order to mitigate and reduce fire risk. Concerns were raised at the meeting that there would be an increase in the use of 4x4's and bikes for off-roading in the breakers; however there has not been any evidence to date that they are being used.

The Forum were asked to note that there has been projects in which Drones are being trialled in areas of significant issue within Newport, which can pinpoint individuals off-roading illegally and address the issue.

A Forum Member raised concerns for issues in and around Manmoel, on farmland and Rights of Way. Discussions took place around Policing and it was felt that a change in legislation is required in order to give Police Constable Support Officers (PCSO's) more power of arrest, in order to help mitigate issues. Further discussions took place around Rights of Way and the options available to prevent vehicular access on a bridle way in the area. Officers confirmed that it would be against the law to introduce barriers or a post to prevent vehicular access, as the area is a byway, and would prevent use by authorised vehicles. The Forum were asked to note however that the Rights of Way Group are working to campaign to Welsh Government to change legislation.

The Forum thanked the Officer for the report.

12. CHALLENGE WALK

The Forum were pleased to note that the Challenge Walk took place in May and was hosted in Caerphilly. The walk was attended by over 300 walkers and received significant sponsorship. It was noted that the walk was a great success and next years is in the planning process with the walk scheduled to take place in the Upper Rhymney Valley on the 10 Stone Walk and link with the Laurie Walk, at the uplands of the Darren Valley.

13. TENURE OF FORUM/ NEW LAF/ PROCESS

The Forum discussed the tenure of the LAF and it was noted that the term of the current LAF has now come to an end after 3 years. As a result, there is a requirement to conduct an election. Current Members were asked to note that there would be a requirement to express an interest in continuing their tenure for another term and Officers also sought further suggestions for Membership or interested parties.

Discussions took place and it was suggested that Gwent Police, Canoe Wales and possible Angling Clubs be contacted in order to have representation of Water Ways groups. Officers agreed to write to current and suggested individuals in order to determine interest.

14. SITE VISIT ARRANGEMENTS

The Forum were asked to note that following this meeting, site visits have been arranged to 3 sites; Tir-Y-Berth, in which the Forum will see improvements made to access; Merthyr/Gelligaer common in which the Forum will see works undertaken to mitigate fly-tipping on the common and a site at the bottom of the Darren valley to see improvement works there. The Forum were advised that due to the adverse weather and severe weather warnings that have been issued, there will be limited walking.

15. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Officers sought information from the Forum in relation to a number of Benches, which have been placed in areas across the Borough, and whether anyone was aware of where they have come from. The Forum were not able to offer any further information.

The Forum were asked to note that Caerphilly CBC are milling their own timber, which is used for furniture within Countryside parks etc., and a catalogue has recently been launched of the products. It was noted that on 20 June 2019, staff will be available in Penallta House to provide further information on the milling process and demonstrating some of the products, should Forum members be interested in attending.

Finally, the Chair thanked the Forum for their contributions both during the meeting and in the last 3 year tenure and announced that he would not be expressing an interest in being part of the new Forum for the coming years. The Chair offered his personal thanks to Members and Officers past and present and wished the next Forum all the best for the coming years, with particular reference to the opportunities as discussed earlier in the meeting.

The Chair thanked all parties present for their attendance and contributions and the meeting closed at 12.46 pm.