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OXFORDSHIRE COUNTRYSIDE ACCESS FORUM

MINUTES OF THE SECOND MEETING OF 2022/23
Thursday 10 November 2022, online Teams® meeting

2022 (2)

Attending: Members

Mathew Judson (Chair)	Dave Cavanagh (DC)	Anne Luttmann-Johnson (ALJ)
Richard Fairhurst (RF)	Ilse Lambert (IL)	Philip Chamberlain (PC)
Cllr Andrew Coles (AC)	Rachel Livingstone (RL)	John Griffin (JG)

Observer

Cllr Dr Pete Sudbury (PS) – OCC Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change Delivery
Angus Ross (AR) – Mid and West Berks LAF Member

Oxfordshire County Council Officers attending to support OCAF:

Paul Harris (PH) - OCAF Secretary/Principal Officer Public Rights of Way Access Strategy
Rebecca McNaught (RM) – Countryside Access Development Officer
Hugh Potter (HP) - Group Manager Countryside Operations and Volunteer Coordination

1. **Welcome, and introductions.** Chair and Secretary opened the meeting and welcomed existing and new members, observers and officers, Brief introductions from attendees were made. Apologies from Gordon and Sarah. No declarations of interest.

2. **Confirm minutes from meeting 52 – 18th May 2022.** Confirmed as correct

3. **Matters arising.**

PC provided OCAF with some financial information following on from the discussion about permissive access at the last meeting. The per metre rate for permissive footpaths paid previously was 45 pence per metre per year. He added he wasn't aware of access payments in the new Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) but there was a payment for £50 a hectare for woodland access only available at the highest tier of agreement. In his view it was a challenge to deal with permissive access as people were still using the routes that hadn't had a payment for ten years or more. This was a hassle, not least when tree maintenance was needed and people objected to be being asked to find an alternate route. This was hardly an incentive to increase access. In response to a question from DC, PC said that some horseriders used footpaths and damaged the surface which farmers were then blamed for not maintaining.

2022(1) Action 1 (*Vice-chair*). PH informed the group that JG had offered to be Vice-chair for remainder of the year. JG clarified that he would only be able to provide cover in case of something happening to Chair and he wasn't looking to rotate into chair position. MJ confirmed that he would be happy to stand for chair in May 2023 but would step down in 2024.

2022(1) Action 2 (*Traffic Regulation Order and restrictions publicity on website*): PH reported that he had emailed members with the new restrictions option on the online countryside access map. IL said that she had used it and it's a step forward but there was a slight confusion as it linked to temporary closures when these closures on the website were the permanent ones.

2022(1) Action 3 (Kissing gate at North Leigh). HP undertook to provide an update with the minutes.

4. **Gleam and Defra note.**

PH referred to the note that had been supplied to the Wiltshire Countryside Access Forum. There were no comments other than waiting to see what Defra would do next as a result of the consultation. AR asked about the term green lanes use in the note and greenways used by the

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authority. PH and others said that term 'green lanes' was used in the document as a description of unsealed or unmetalled highways used by vehicles rather than a specific legal term.

5. S106 access mitigation schemes – update presentation

PH gave a presentation about access strategy and development work. He referred to RM's work so far to start in the new role, survey possible project areas, get out speaking to landowners, and getting a pipeline of schemes in place. PH acknowledged it was a gentle start and one of the challenges was not having a simple system to spend funds and address project management issues, plus the challenges of finding and speaking with farmers. There was a £100k spend target for 22/23 financial year which the team was on track to meet and then a £200k target for each of the next two years with more to be spent if possible. Slides were shown of works completed in Adderbury and forthcoming schemes at Watchfield, Ardley and Witney – the latter two having Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) issues.

RL asked about access to Carterton and especially the byway that dead-ended each side of the A40. There was significant development in that area which should have provided some access benefits. PH referred to transport plans for cycling on the Witney to Brize Norton Road as well as the old railway line. The byway that RL referred to hadn't been looked at, but he undertook to include that going forward and include if possible. PH referred to the current research work on the emerging Strategic Active Travel Network by Phil Jones Associates where public rights of way and greenways may be assessed and form part of delivery plans. AC referred to the Witney Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) which is at its first draft stage and may be relevant. RF suggested that the more or less redundant Curbridge Road which, with the addition of a bollard halfway along, could become an easy win safe route. He accepted there were political choices to be made for this sort of thing.

PS asked about the Ardley and Heyford Park scheme and the probability that the Railfreight decision would not be known for some time. He questioned whether the access scheme should be parked until there was certainty. PH responded that the works which were being planned were the ones that shouldn't be affected by the Railfreight changes to the highway network so the work wouldn't be abortive. Worst-case scenario was a good circular around the incinerator's restored landscape would be created. He added that the team continued to secure developer contributions to help fund access improvement and mitigation schemes around the county. RF stated that high quality traffic free routes are exactly the sort of thing that Sustrans wanted and it would be good to have something connecting to Banbury, including part of the Oxford Canal in the medium to long term.

PC asked about cross-field arable paths shown in the presentation and said it's the first time that diversions have been openly discussed in the context of access improvement schemes. He wished the authority well with securing those and added that this would likely be supported by most landowners and farmers. He highlighted the use of rural roads by farmers and the need to include them in any decision taking about closing roads to vehicles.

PH showed some images of a recent trip to Bruges showing the varied and interconnected range of facilities for cyclists in cities, towns, villages and in the wider countryside, the priority given to cyclists by road users, plus the large number of e-bicycles used by residents and visitors. IL said that she was speaking from Belgium at the moment with a small park down the road where there are segregated walk, cycle and horseriding paths and a good integrated network outside of the parks. PH added some cycle paths and one-way streets also allowed low powered mopeds to use them and IL confirmed that riders could use these at age 14 without a licence.

PH talked more about greenway mapping with Phil Jones Associates and he was hoping that routes outside of settlements could feature. He had cautioned about the use of maps at too large a scale or detailed without first speaking to landowners and farmers as that helped prevent misunderstandings. He showed the emerging map of possible routes including those that had some element of developer funding already. He added that it was important to combine new routes with the existing 4,000km rights of way network and minor roads network to help and encourage active travel modes for recreation and leisure, as well as utility journeys. The Portway

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bridleway at Heyford Park in Cherwell was now open and this currently combined an onsite route upgraded by the developer with works outside the site undertaken by OCC using developer funding. PH said that the route should have been open a good number of years ago, but this was a step towards getting the route on the east side of the flying field opened up, alongside other offsite measures which have been delayed whilst OCC was waiting for the key routes to be opened. The route is also able to be used as an example of the sort of provision that can be made to improve access, reconnect the network and give opportunities to local communities.

PH mentioned other areas of work including working with Natural England on the delayed review of open access land maps, which would no doubt come to OCAF in a future meeting. The Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment had made a presentation to countryside access officers about access assessments and exploring what schemes may come forward. This partnership had been successfully running for almost two decades now and it was great to see it continuing and thriving. OCC was going through a process of restructuring or transformation which had seen the senior management team reorganised and new service structures created. In the new year there were likely to be some team and functional changes, but it wasn't yet clear what this would mean for countryside access. There was a new service called Environment and Circular Economy under a service manager, Teresa Kirkham, and teams were looking forward to working together to increase connections and actions for access and environment matters. PH highlighted the continual learning that the access strategy team were doing with landowners, farmers, contractors, local communities and colleagues to refine and improve the access improvement programme.

PS highlighted the major Didcot Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) road scheme which has cycle facilities on it but that it might need to have other rural roads limited to through traffic, particularly north to south so that most of the road traffic used the HIF route meaning other routes could be made more attractive for walkers, cyclists and equestrians as they'd have less traffic volumes. PH replied that the greenways work is likely to tie in with this HIF and strategic active travel networks to contribute to a more integrated network. Health and wellbeing were intrinsically linked to emissions reductions and transport is a key part of this.

PH explained that the OCC Local Transport & Connectivity Plan had now been adopted. In access terms the inclusion of rights of way policy in a higher-level strategy means there is a revised strategy and policy basis that will underpin the third full Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP). He added that he hoped to bring a scoping document to the next OCAF meeting as he really valued OCAF's full participation in previous iterations and welcomed volunteers to form a RoWIP working group. Questions were invited about the update.

MJ asked about access to the River Thames as some access was hard to find or non-existent. He added that he was speaking to a local councillor about what could be done. He questioned how local the developer funding had to be. PH replied that it depended on the wording in the agreement, but usually it was only able to be spent in the vicinity of the development as that was the basis of how the justification for the funding contribution was made. MJ acknowledged the point and referenced the number and scale of developments in Witney and Carterton and also the missing ferry/bridge at Bablock Hythe which if reinstated would be a huge advantage for people cycling to and from Oxford. PH gave another example from Belgium with a hand operated chain ferry on a non-navigable canal. PS agreed with this and talked about the off-road possibilities between Berlin and Strasbourg to be learnt from as it was strategic networks of cycle routes that were needed, especially with e-bikes increasing range and capability for many more people. JG referenced the Slowways organisation which is trying to join up towns and villages for walkers, cyclists and wheeled users. JG also mentioned the Chilterns "Mend the Gap" project which has funding available to help offset some railway line impacts in the area that might be a useful source. RF mentioned he had cycled from Paris along the River Seine recently which the French had been working on for a number of years, and the Loire cycle routes had thousands of tourists on bikes each year. Europeans welcomed and invested in cycle facilities as a contributor to local economies. He added that we could do the same on the Thames with a few bridleways, traffic calming and surfacing to create a really good bicycle backpacking route which would be a big draw. DC highlighted cycle trails through suburbs and bush alongside the River Yarra in Melbourne, Australia. He is a walker and is sympathetic to cyclists and horseriders for the poor

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networks they have generally. For greenways he considered there is a need for separated paths as it means cyclists can zip along without requiring walkers to have eyes in the back of their heads or for those who may have poor hearing.

6. High Speed Rail Two - changes to public rights of way

PH introduced the note and gave a brief background to this invitation for OCAF to respond. He invited comments and questions by members. ALJ stated that she had thought the acronym WCHAR sounded like it would be wheelchair inclusive but there was nothing about users with wheelchairs and other walking aids. They don't have the same needs as cyclists for example steep slopes are harder to negotiate by lone people plus the surface can be a real barrier. RL commented that mounting blocks would be required each end of the underpass and it was unacceptable to have to dismount with uncertain route conditions like flooding etc. Any user would not want to use a route that flooded part of the year with no alternative. There was also no indication that noise had been considered as trains and other vehicles make a very loud echo that some horses really do not like. HP added that originally two routes were proposed and supported by OCC including one without need to dismount but this option had been withdrawn. Officers were awaiting response about the dismounting issue. RL referred to the Tackley underpass which again may create an unsatisfactory echo or flooding situation. Light, or a lack of it, can be an issue for horses too, if they can't see where the exit is and if there isn't appropriate lighting. PH, with the group's agreement agreed to include the above points and the officer points and combine them into an OCAF response for Chair to sign on the group's behalf. RF referred to the previous proposal for a HS2 cyclepath along the railway using maintenance roads etc and said that this might be a possibility again and would be something to watch out for.

Action 1: Secretary to write to HS2 regarding proposals for changes to public rights of way

7. Space for AOB, future meetings, plans and agendas

PH referred to the email from RF showing the proposed huge new solar park west of Oxford. This would be the biggest in Europe. PH showed some pages from the developer's website including maps. It would affect biodiversity, access and farming as well as landscape but there could be significant opportunities too. As well as the panels themselves, cables would need to be placed along with transformers, security fencing and other infrastructure serving the facility. PH advised that there was a website and local drop-in sessions if people were interested plus an online webinar in December that he had registered for. ALJ expressed the view that it was shocking that farmland was to be taken out of production instead of putting panels on all the old and new buildings in the area, as well as in the new park and ride at Eynsham. RF suggested that the planning application and the opportunities should be separated out. If it goes ahead, it will be important to get something out of it – for example a full-length greenway but there are also quite strong local views about it already. PS said that developers had engaged with him and OCC Leader already. PS had estimated this could supply 20% of Oxfordshire's electricity but he had questioned if battery storage was going to form part of the application. From what he had seen the development was strong on retaining fields, margins, hedgerows and access and they were receptive to the idea of agri-voltaics where productive farming runs alongside solar panels. PS confirmed that solar panels will be used at Eynsham park and ride as well as tree retention and additional planting. This should serve as an example model in other areas. PS referred to an emerging solar strategy for the authority to build renewable energy into local plans for residential and commercial buildings. He stated that climate change is nasty, we are in a great deal of trouble and we can't afford to be too fussy about where things happen. We need to get energy transition to happen fast as without it many people and species are doomed. If we get too concerned about location of solar farms it gives out a message that the climate crisis can't be that critical. In his view PS said that we need to be working with developers and landowners like this much more. RL referred to a smaller scale PV farm near Bladon that she hadn't realised was there and was well shielded by hedges and trees.

PH said that he would look to tweak the OCAF terms of reference to cover virtual meetings as there's so little capacity at County Hall and it is very hard to find accessible venues with hybrid

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capacity. Although Teams might be the only option going forward for OCAF meetings, it may be possible to arrange site visits without the formality of meetings. MJ had suggested contacting parish councils for potential members and this is something that would be followed up.

PH thanked RF for raising the solar farm issue and recommended OCAF members take the same approach and bring items they or OCAF could be interested in providing advice about. OCAF wasn't a place to receive reports but does combine landowner, user and other interests in accessing the countryside and public rights of way to look at access and how it can be improved.

DC and JG expressed a preference for online meetings to reduce travelling and make it easier for people to take part. PS reminded members that we are not yet in a post-Covid period. The virus is still very much with us and active and infecting people in a community near you. He also thanked members for their work on the forum and sharing views on access matters including feedback on the solar development. PC added that although he wasn't a fan of online meetings he can see the necessity and it would be good to have people together now and then. IL added that visit to the Icknield Greenway would be good as it's the first greenway and it would be nice to hear what people thought and how it might be improved.

8. Space for questions none

9. Next meeting dates

PH noted future dates were on the agenda for **Thursday May 18th 2023 and Thursday 16th November 2033 – online**. MJ suggested that July might be best for any site visit and hopefully by May a suggestion could be made along with a date.

Chair ended the meeting and thanked all for participating

Meeting ended 11.35.