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OXFORDSHIRE COUNTRYSIDE ACCESS FORUM

MINUTES OF THE FIRST MEETING OF 2022/23
Wednesday 18 May 2022, online Teams® meeting

2022 (1)

Attending: Members

Mathew Judson (Chair) Dave Cavanagh (DC) Anne Luttmann-Johnson (ALJ)
Richard Fairhurst (RF) Ilse Lambert (IL)

Observer

Cllr Dr Pete Sudbury (PS) – OCC Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change Delivery

Oxfordshire County Council Officers attending to support OCAF:

Paul Harris (PH) - OCAF Secretary/Principal Officer Public Rights of Way Access Strategy

Hugh Potter (HP) - Group Manager Countryside Operations and Volunteer Coordination

Rebecca McNaught (RN) – Volunteer Coordinator and soon to be Access Development Officer

1. **Welcome, and introductions.** PH welcomed existing and new members, observers and officers, Brief introductions from attendees were made. Apologies from John, Gordon, Andrew, Philip, Rachel and Sarah.

2. **Chair/Vice-chair annual election/re-election.** MJ reappointed as Chair. No members had stepped forward for appointment as Vice-chair and PH remarked that someone needs to do this in order to provide support to MJ.

Action 1: All OCAF members: To put themselves forward as Vice-chair or to explore nomination of another member

3. **Introductions.** Carried out under agenda item 1

4. **Towards 2025 and the third Rights of Way Improvement Plan.** PH gave a presentation about the five key areas that the countryside access strategy team was leading on and linked cross-team working:

- I. Deliver developer funded projects and increase spend over the life of the programme
 - a. PH introduced Rebecca McNaught who is starting new role as access development office in June focused on working with farmers and land-managers to unlock the ability to spend funds by securing agreements
 - b. A rolling programme of negotiations, agreements and project delivery starting slower and increasing spend over the initial programme years. Starting with £100k this year, £200k next year and around £500k for the next few years with more coming through the pipeline.
 - c. Working with colleagues and 3rd parties to undertake the preliminary work necessary for more complex schemes like ecological and tree surveys
 - d. There was an opportunity to look at internal delivery option again as a way to increase performance
- II. Map 'Greenway' aspirations as part of wider transport and access planning
 - a. Greenways are slower speed leisure commuting and recreation routes for horse riders, cyclists and walkers and are part of emerging Local Transport and Connectivity Plan
 - b. Candidate greenways needed mapping and were probably going to be linked to settlement size, locations, network & community benefit, landscape, climate change resilience and nature recovery opportunity, potential funds and funders

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- c. Icknield Greenway (Wantage to Harwell) is the first achieved, with Ladygrove, Cherwell Valley and/or Saltway Greenways expected by 2025. Mapping to take place before then.
- III. Protect and enhance access in strategic/major developments
 - a. Focus on onsite network enhancement within strategic and major developments as part of Single Response (via Transport Development Control).
 - b. Direct consultee with Minerals and Waste applications and OCC applications (roads and schools)
 - c. Continuing input into local planning policy, area action plans and other strategies/policies in order to influence and inform policy processes
 - d. Continual work to refine planning responses and especially onsite and offsite 'ask' approaches
 - e. Post-determination stages can run for many years and a cross-team approach is required for appropriate inputs at the right time
 - IV. Secure additional resources & partnerships
 - a. Looking at ways to identify and cost greenways and then seek developer contributions from more than one application/site where appropriate
 - b. Work with Natural England, OCC Innovation Team and App developer (and OCAF member) to develop community participation public rights of way App and including access and how to maximise opportunities from this
 - c. Bringing in nature, health, active travel and community partners for co-delivery and co-funding of Greenways and PRow upgrades
 - d. Considering ways in which rights of way can be made 'greener' and more robust through assessments, mapping and exploring procurement and management options
 - V. Cross-team preparation for the third version of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP)
 - a. The second RoWIP was light on policy and action as it reflected budget and management direction at the time
 - b. RoWIP3 needs to build on emerging strategy and policy by 'leapfrogging' using policy development like Local Transport Plan to amend and evolve policy and delivery and then use this in RoWIP3 which may result in better and faster access evolution. As before, learning from successes and challenges is important
 - c. RoWIP3 is a great opportunity to strive for 'green and active' action and legacy within Oxfordshire tied into the administration's ambitions
 - d. All countryside access teams were being brought together under a single director and head of environment and circular economy service lead which should lead to much better working and performance management

Questions and comment after the presentation

PS – asked why spend pattern was low as it could take many years to spend secured funds. PH replied that this programme approach had been delayed by a number of years as a solution for negotiation aspects couldn't be found. Rebecca starting would enable focus and enable techniques to be refined. Upgrades to access normally needed goodwill and cooperation of farmers and landowners if long term success was to be achieved.

DC – asked whether funds were time and path/area limited. PH responded that most had a time limit of up to 10 years after which time the developer could ask for refund. He added that some funds were at or beyond these time limits, but he was working on spend and contingency measures including transfer of funds to parish councils if they were in agreement. Most funds were limited to paths in the vicinity of a development or on specific routes.

DC – asked if officers went on site to check compliance with conditions etc. PH said yes, this mostly was undertaken by Steve Tabbitt's Countryside Access Officers as some developers forgot or misunderstood requirements to keep paths protected and open through construction.

PS – stated that he thought this update and work were great and that this is the sort of ambition that OCC is looking for. He added that OCC is building a coherent climate and environment team

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and program which is good and this administration has said walking, cycling, access to countryside and access to green spaces is important and we intend to make that happen. He thought that this is something the administration would back very strongly and put some elbow into as needed. PH and the Chair thanked him for these supportive comments.

DC – referred to the Icknield Greenway. He said it has been immensely successful. It's been beautifully produced, not least the bridge over the Ginge Brook and it certainly brings lots of people out to enjoy that stretch of countryside, which links to some other good paths that go up towards up onto the downs. PS added that he'd like someone to look at the Oxford to Berinsfield link along the old Roman road. PH suggested that way to bring it forward would be to map it and similar routes as candidate Greenways. PS then left the meeting.

DC - asked if Icknield Greenway used new or dedicated routes and if that involved negotiation with landowners which affected the rate of progress. PH confirmed that the final route wasn't the original target and many months had been spent previously trying to secure another new route. When this was not able to proceed the alternative route was negotiated including a dedication of bridleway along a footpath and a brand-new bridleway being dedicated. PH paid tribute to Joanna Mellon the project manager who somehow managed to bring together officers, landowners, contractors on this scheme and others in the area, dealt with technical and financial challenges to achieve an overall excellent set of improvements.

RF – welcomed the inclusion of the Banbury Saltway as a candidate greenway as it was close to his heart and he was being regularly badgered to get something done on that. He welcomed the opportunity for mapping candidate green ways and suggested that the experience of the Oxfordshire Cycling Network might be valuable. That group of volunteers worked to draw up a map of future cycling routes in the county and held small scale informal meetings with local people with knowledge of their areas. For greenways it would be useful to sit down with physical maps and pick peoples' local knowledge. Combine this with where funds are available then this could be helpful in targeting where the best schemes could go. PH welcomed that approach and also highlighted the rights of way network census work and the comprehensive records that teams held already. PH added that we needed to manage expectations – for example by not publishing detailed maps which could cause conflicts if people then went and started using routes without cycling or riding rights. RF agreed and referred to the Sustrans experience of similar from when the national cycle network was being developed around twenty years ago. PH then highlighted the route of the Wilts and Berks Canal where the overall long-term ambition was for a navigable waterway and that he hoped to have a greenway towpath route created many years before then.

ALJ asked if parishes and user groups would be asked to nominate greenway routes and how these should be put to OCC. In Cassington they were developing their neighbourhood plan which included green infrastructure aspirations. Access to the railway station at Long Hanborough was a key route for the community with some paths that don't go all of the way so she asked if access to public transport was going to feature for greenways. PH replied that the assessments and mapping needed to follow on from the policy adoption and the initial main focus for the team was on negotiating and delivering improvements using s106 funds. The original improvement plan gathered significant database of upgrade needs from communities and users which will be part of the assessment data. He added that access to Long Hanborough station was a key travel aspiration of the nearby Cotswolds Garden Village development with an access route probably using a combination of road and rights of way. He also said that Covid and the green recovery fund had identified even more demand from communities wanting better access for family cycling access.

HP said he wanted to give a bit of background as the new administration had been in place for around 12 months. It was great to have Pete Sudbury attending as there was a real enthusiasm for this kind of access upgrade scheme. Pete is a Green Party councillor, and the council leadership is made up of a coalition of parties which has changed things quite dramatically at the authority.

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HP said he felt that there's a real appetite for just getting on with scheme delivery and working to remove as many barriers as possible. HP added that part of his team included trees and there's been a brand-new trees policy that includes encouraging tree planting, and this had then developed into budget for tree planning on OCC owned land. All of this has happened in just a few months. For access there's been a great deal of work over a number of years to get to this position and we can now be reasonably optimistic that there's political support and the resources and means of delivery to push hard on some of these things and try to overcome barriers to achieving better access.

DC asked what happened to the permissive access that formed a paid part of agri-environment scheme. PH replied that most of these had been stopped now or if kept open they were on a more informal basis. This is the problem with permissive access agreements for ten years as this isn't really a long time. Access land routes had also been affected including the loop at Crowhole Bottom but the access land linking parcels should still be open as were the access points. DC asked if this was going to be reversed as part of post-Brexit agri-environment scheme as there was a push from Ramblers to get improved access. PH said it wasn't yet clear if access was being considered as a public good. DC asked what the previous rates for access were and PH replied that he thought it was hundreds of pounds a year depending on length and type of path and confirmed that access formed a part of wider habitat and landscape works that were also included. DC stated that it was a great shame and seem to be two steps forward and two steps back when it came to access. All this new work was great but previous access gains have been lost when permissive paths closed. PH agreed and said this is why permissive routes were good as a short-term trial but what is needed is permanent new paths and upgrades to ensure long term benefits. He was also worried that some farmers appeared to be removing existing trees and hedges possibly in preparation for making new grant applications.

- 5. New policy in emerging Local Transport and Connectivity Plan.** PH introduced the paper and gave the background to the additional policy that tried to update the current vision and aims in the rights of way improvement plan (RoWIP)– as a kind of policy leapfrogging as this would then feed into the next RoWIP. He invited comments and requested OCAF's endorsement of the new policy. MJ suggested that the extension and improvement could be moved to the first point. PH noted that and made it clear that all the points were of equal value but climate change was the biggest issue for the authority as well as statutory duties so the order would remain as it is.

As Chair, MJ offered the group's endorsement of the proposed policy which was AGREED by members.

- 6. Confirm minutes from meeting 51 – 19th November 2021.** Confirmed as correct

- 7. Matters arising.**

2021(2) Action 1 (*Traffic Regulation Order and restrictions publicity on website*): PH reported that this was not resolved and Steve Tabbitt had told him that it was a work in progress as systems were still not speaking to each other

ALJ asked about the kissing gate issue at the new housing estate development site. HP replied that he understood that there's a kissing gate between a new development and it was across a farmer's land that headed into the village. The issue being that we need the landowner's permission to be able to change that gate. His team was exploring what enforcement action could be taken and he would update the group via the Secretary when he found out more. HP thanked ALJ for pressing this matter as it was important. He acknowledged that the circumstances of this case are unusual and that's why it's come to attention. Normally officers would get some kind of agreement in place to improve access on the back of the development, but this was unsuccessful here.

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Action 2: Steve Tabbitt – to update OCAF when the website is able to publicise restrictions etc

Action 3: Hugh Potter – to update OCAF via Secretary on the kissing gate issue

- 8. Update about path quality monitoring iPhone application – Richard Fairhurst.** RF gave a slideshow presentation showing screenshots from a mobile phone about the work he is doing with partners including OCC, the university, Natural England and various others. What is being done is very 21st century working on an experimental app for a smartphone, which is for path users to record quality and characteristics. It is not about fault reporting, which the Ramblers Pathwatch campaign was all about, but that may be an option in the future. The current work is basic recording of the quality of a path and the characteristics of it which is all the things that aren't shown on a map and seeing what can be done with a reasonably straightforward interface that makes it an accessible and friendly app for people to use, and very much taking in the lessons from projects like Open Street map, which is all about crowd sourcing to contribute what they think about paths rather than thinking people have to be a qualified surveyor to do this. Open street maps and Wikipedia are these great banks of knowledge that are made by regular people and this is very much seeing if we can do the same for paths. He added that rights of way are sometimes seen as something for people of a certain age who have a full collection of Ordnance Survey maps so if we can use an app to encourage more feeling of ownership and stewardship among young people than that's good.

Questions and discussion after the presentation

ALJ welcomed the functionality that enabled the gaps and widths of paths and gates to be measured by the app as this made it of real use for people with disabilities.

PS said that as many people as possible should start using the app and app should be published even if it isn't perfect and he quoted Voltaire 'the best is the enemy of the good'. By getting some real enthusiast involved the app could be improved in real time.

HP asked about the interaction between the app and rights of way management systems and if the app could be used to replace the condition surveys that many authorities used to undertake. He added that the ability to upload photos and measurements would be extremely valuable. RF replied that they group had some in-field testing with West Berkshire access officers and other specialists. It was clear that whatever came out would need to be in a format that was usable by many different types of system rather than directly inputting to a specific format. This would be more of a system that highlighted issues and encouraged follow up action. HP welcomed the development and thanked RF for the presentation for what he thought was a very exciting development in public rights of way.

DC raised the issue about accessibility online. RF suggested that Open Street Map was likely to be the destination as it was a mapping system used by many applications. A key aspect in this work is to ensure all of the data remains open. IL asked if it were possible to include issues relating to motorbikes and cars, especially with regard to byways as some are wide enough for bikes but not wide enough for the car so this could be checked in advance. RF replied that that was a good suggestion and PH added that he understood Natural England is focused on walkers, cyclists and horse-riders and carriage drivers so at the end of the day it will be up to them to decide what is included.

PH noted that he had been privileged to be involved with Richard and the others on the development of this and how it has come from nothing with Richard coding this from scratch. It's been really interesting and there's been a lot of surveys, a lot of discussion, a lot of partnership work, and having Blenheim on board has been really good to get their commercial and estate management take on access.

- 9. Feedback and follow up from the working group.** PH explained that this was just an agenda item if there was any feedback after the informal workshop held back in February where members discussed and put together responses about the government response to the Glover review of protected landscapes, as well as the draft local transport and connectivity plan. In his opinion it worked well and OCAF was able to put two responses together. DC said that sometimes when we have this meeting and we're told to go away and think about something it is not always followed up on, so when a date is arranged for a follow up session it is more likely that this will happen – which

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is a good thing. PH added that this approach went well for helping write the second rights of way improvement plan and officers fully supported this approach.

- 10. Space for other business.** PH reminded members that OCAF isn't a council committee or there to just receive reports from officers. Local Access Forums are meant to be member interest led. The LAF's secretary is there to support members and enable them to talk and formulate advice that they want to give. You may be asked to write a short paper or prepare a short presentation as Richard has done but this is not meant to be onerous. The aim of the group is to improve access to the countryside so there is a wide remit for member involvement.

PS then returned to the meeting and PH summarised the new local transport plan policy and the endorsement by OCAF members. PS welcomed this and suggested the policy was forwarded to Duncan Enright and Andrew Gant in relation to transport strategy and highways.

- 11. Date and time of next meetings**

PH noted future dates were on the agenda and corrected them to **Wednesday November 16th 2022** and **Wednesday May 17th 2023** but members might like some other options especially with regard to getting all interests to the meeting especially farming. He proposed that the dates are fixed at this stage. Some discussion ensued regarding Sutton Farm the new operational base, which might be used for hybrid type meetings but lacked accessibility on the first floor and any kind of accessible facilities. The best option for face to face was County Hall but virtual meetings were more convenient for many people. There was a need to open meetings again to the public and this would be looked at going forward.

Chair ended the meeting and thanked all for participating

Meeting ended 11.35.