



Devon Countryside Access Forum
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**Minutes of the Sixty-Third meeting
of the Devon Countryside Access Forum
held at County Hall, Topsham Road, Exeter EX2 4QD**

Tuesday, 31 January 2023

Attendance

Forum members

Joanna Burgess
Holly Daniels (virtual)
Tim Felton
Lucinda Francis
Gordon Guest
Cllr Linda Hellyer (virtual)
Jo Hooper
Sue Pudduck

Tino Savvas
Robert Sewell (virtual)
Lorna Sherriff
Sarah Slade (Chair)
Bryan Smith
Tim Spray

Devon County Council Officers and others present

Richard Walton, Public Rights of Way and Country Parks Manager, DCC
Hilary Winter, Forum Officer, DCC
Julie Owen, Devon Loves Dogs Coordinator

1. Apologies

Apologies had been received from Andrew Baker, Cllr Richard Chesterton, Chris Cole, Sue Leith and James Nevitt.

2. Declaration of interests

There were no declarations of interest.

3. To approve minutes of the meeting held on 20 October 2022

Minutes of the meeting held on 20 October were approved and signed.

(It was subsequently clarified that the reference to FAB Link (agenda item 5.2) referred to an electrical interconnector project, underwater and underground, between France and Great Britain via the island of Alderney).

4. Matters arising

4.1 Dartmoor Way

It was noted the Dartmoor Way cycling route included a lot of road cycling so would not be suitable as a designated horse-riding route. The route incorporated some off-road trails but not all permit horse use.

4.2 Network Rail

Network Rail had responded to the request for information. Network Rail had currently closed Sandy Lane pedestrian Level Crossing (Rewe) and this is to remain so until Network Rail replace the current layout. This is for two reasons:

Network Rail is not satisfied that the current position of the light units gives enough warning to pedestrian users. Whilst the warning time is correct for this section of the railway, users need to be considerably further back from the gate to see the lights.

Footage had also been submitted to Network Rail by concerned motorcyclists using the crossing, which is both dangerous and not permitted under its legal status. The light units are timed for persons crossing on foot, and with the reduced peripheral vision and hearing of persons riding motorbikes, plus the extra time it takes to cross, means Network Rail feel it is the right decision to take in the interests of safety.

Replacement of the crossing access with a different type of gate as part of its remodelling will prevent this in future. The crossing will be closed until late May 2023 when the work will be completed.

Richard Walton confirmed that the lane either side was public highway but the rights over the crossing were pedestrian only. The Institute of Public Rights of Way Officers had agreed a new code of practice with Network Rail for public rights of way and will be monitoring this to see whether procedures are adhered to.

A presentation at the National Local Access Forum conference in 2017 had focussed on this topic, with experiences from Lincolnshire highlighted.

It was agreed to keep an eye on any proposals affecting level crossings in the County.

4.3 Tamara Landscape Partnership Scheme

Mark Owen, Project Officer, had provided an update. It is hoped to open the route in summer 2023. The route would follow existing public rights of way and permissive paths which, with a few exceptions, are in reasonable condition. No upgrades to routes to make them more accessible were

planned.

During 2023, accessibility audits would be undertaken on about a dozen routes initially, to identify potential improvements and provide detailed accessibility information on the route and nearby facilities. This will enable potential users to judge path suitability before visiting. The initial selection of routes will be focussed on locations where there is parking, a fairly level path and good views or a point of interest.

It is hoped to reinstate the Calstock ferry and ensure it is financially sustainable beyond the life of the project. The aim is to achieve this in summer 2023 so that it can be promoted alongside the Tamara Coast to Coast Way.

Currently liaison is continuing with landowners over waymarking and other path works and keeping the parish councils along the route informed of plans and progress. Work is also underway to write a guidebook for the route and a series of downloadable circular walk guides.

Mark Owen would be asked whether the accessible routes would include mobility scooter users.

Action: Forum Officer

4.4 Riverside Park, Exeter

Devon Wildlife Trust had confirmed that the Salmonpool gate bridge was now disability accessible, following work in November 2022.

Disability accessible gates at Countess Wear car park (Bridge Road) had not been installed due to concerns about cattle escaping onto the road. Devon Wildlife Trust is open to considering improvements to these gates once similar gates on other valley park fields, not adjacent to roads, have been shown to restrict cattle movement and not pose a risk. The canal route provided an alternative for disabled users. Members supported this approach. It was noted there was more pressure on parking spaces for the valley parks at Countess Wear.

The Devon Wildlife Trust (DWLT) is planning to establish a stakeholder forum to enable groups to feedback directly to the Trust and to share experiences. The DCAF would be invited.

Part of the DWLT's work plan focussed on improving information, including access statements, for each of their sites to enable people to view maps, detailed information and possibly videos before visiting.

The Forum Officer had been invited to a meeting at DWLT to meet new staff, along with a DCAF member. Gordon Guest offered to attend or, if unavailable, Tim Felton expressed interest. Gordon offered to accompany Tim Felton on a walk through the parks.

Action: Forum Officer

4.5 Clyst Valley Trail

Following the consultation a report had been published which will inform future development of the route.

4.6 Dog legislation

The draft letter to Defra and accompanying annex were approved and would be submitted. The current dog legislation was piecemeal and complex. It was resolved to wait for the response from Defra before making further decisions on circulating to other LAFs or authorities.

Action: Forum Officer

4.7 A379 bridge

The Senior Engineer at Devon County Council had emailed to state that it is the intention to create a landing along the 1 in 12 slope as per the DCAF advice. However it is likely that this will follow the main works to the area due to programme timings.

In terms of the accessibility audit, the Senior Engineer would find it useful to discuss this further in due course and to involve the DCAF in design of the landing.

5. Correspondence log

The correspondence log was noted. Attention was drawn to the following items:

Number 16. Application for a landfill site at Lower Brenton, Shillingford St George by BT Jenkins

The original planning application had been withdrawn. The Chair and Jo Burgess had looked at revised details, but it was not possible to comment in such a short timescale given insufficient information. Further detail or a planning application is awaited.

Number 18. Request from Sustrans for DCAF involvement in a funded project to remove barriers on the National Cycle Network.

Gordon Guest, Jo Burgess, Tino Savvas and Tim Felton expressed interest in being involved.

Action: Forum Officer

Number 2. Traffic Order

A request was made for an update on the temporary Traffic Order imposed at Braunton on Bridleway No. 19 to allow works on the American Road.

Action: Forum Officer

Number 15. Community Infrastructure Levy rate consultation in Exeter City.

A question was asked as to whether the proposal was to increase rates. The Chair clarified that CIL detail was largely outside the DCAF remit.

6. Meetings attended by DCAF members

6.1 BHS/Ramblers - Restoring the Record workshop

Tim Felton and Sue Pudduck had attended the Ramblers'/British Horse Society workshop on 'Restoring the Record' which examined evidence required to complete claims for public rights of way based on historic evidence. Tim Felton had subsequently linked with the Ramblers' group carrying out research in Devon. If legislation is enacted in relation to the 2026 cut-off date, then many routes will be lodged.

Whilst the system was in place to research and submit claims, the process to determine these can be lengthy.

The position nationally varies. The indication is that there are comparatively fewer Schedule 14 applications in Devon due to the parish-by-parish review which provides opportunity to identify and research claims as part of this process. Other applications submitted after the parish review will be considered once all the parish reviews are complete; although some applications will be determined sooner if directed by the Planning Inspectorate. Devon County Council had also retained its Public Rights of Way Committee to facilitate the process. It was confirmed that the public rights of way team could share details of research carried out through the parish reviews.

Tim Felton had alerted the Ramblers' group to one claimed footpath which had previously been diverted.

The 'Restoring the Record' book was available from the Forum Officer.

7. Public questions

No public questions had been submitted.

8. Minutes of the Public Rights of Way meeting held on 3 November 2022

Minutes of the Public Rights of Way Committee were noted.

9. Public Rights of Way update

Richard Walton, Public Rights of Way and Country Parks Manager, provided the following update:

1) *Restoring Stover Country Park*

National Heritage Lottery Fund grant approval had been confirmed in September and, following legal negotiations, permission to start had now been received. The project involves the purchase of some neighbouring land to enable additional access and restoration of the land. Following a good number of quality applicants, posts for a Project Officer and a Project and Volunteer Administrator for this phase had been successfully recruited for, with new team members due to commence work in March/April.

2) *Recruitment*

There was a pause on Public Rights of Way Warden recruitment, partly linked to temporary DCC wide budget saving measures but progress was now being made, potentially with additional resource.

3) *Online reporting*

Agreement had been reached through the service provider and in-house expertise that the updates proposed by the Public Rights of Way team were viable and these had now been identified in the work plan. A simplified version of ease-of-use categories would be used for online reports which would be visible on the webpage so that people would be able to see items already reported. This would be helpful for Wardens as it may reduce duplications of reports as, currently, a response was required for each report

4) *Sustrans*

Sustrans had received Department of Transport funding, part of which was now confirmed as being available for a number of DCC schemes to remove chicanes, initially on the Exe Estuary trail. 2.5m clearance would be provided around removable bollards. Devon already had safety audits in place which would accelerate progress. Disabled Ramblers' and the DCAF may be contacted about localised issues.

5) *Quiet Lanes*

DCC Transport planners had indicated that Quiet Lanes would be considered in the new Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans. These would also seek to incorporate signage improvements. This could potentially include the suggestions to improve signage at Jacobstowe on the National Cycle Network, as raised by Adventure Okehampton.

6) *England Coast Path*

Work had been completed at Torcross. Richard Walton acknowledged there

had been a shortfall in the establishment grant for Torcross. This was due to a time lag between the scheme being initially designed and costed (through the DCC framework agreement), the subsequent grant bid and confirmation of award, and works taking place. The shortfall had been met in part by the South West Coast Path Association (SWCPA), with the remainder through the PRow capital programme. Thanks were expressed for the SWCPA support.

Contractors were due on site at Downend (North Devon) to complete works by the end of the financial year. Exploratory work was being carried out between Downend and Chesil Cliff House to seek the best route alignment and grant money was available to do this with landowner support.

All stretches of the Kingswear to Lyme Regis stretch had been approved by the Secretary of State. DCC was liaising with the South West Coast Path Association National Trail Officer and others on potential works in those sections. This included improvements to signage along the Exe Estuary where the official route followed the Exe Estuary Trail when the ferry was not operating. A grant bid will be submitted for required works.

Once works are complete the Secretary of State can declare the route open, at which point further negotiations will take place at Kingswear (Lighthouse Beach) to implement the coastal access rights.

7) *Network Rail*

Following an extension of the closure, the Colebrooke crossing had finally opened in January after completion of power supply to the lighted crossing. A letter to Network Rail had been sent on behalf of the Two Moors Way Partnership to emphasise the priority and profile of the crossing, (this including the two National Parks, Devon County Council and the Two Moors Way Association).

8) *Tarka Trail*

There had been some issues associated with a section of the Tarka Trail following hunt use without consent (on a permissive stretch). This could potentially be considered anti-social behaviour, including issues such as loose hounds and quad bikes. A joint letter from Legal Services at Devon County Council and the Police Chief Officer had been sent to clarify the situation.

9) *Finances and projects*

The Public Rights of Way team was on track to spend the capital budget allocation of £1.75m in this financial year, potentially with a marginal underspend.

Improvements to the towpath at the Grand Western Canal Country Park are underway and the water control system, for use at times of flood, had been upgraded.

Work continued on path improvements, including surface and drainage, and legal agreements. A link between Darts Farm and the Exe Estuary has been renegotiated, and boardwalk improvements were being made at Bere Ferrers along a stretch of the Tamar Valley Discovery Trail.

Significant work was being done by the Environment Agency associated with the Lower Otter Restoration Project. A meeting had taken place with Jacobs, contractors, who had been reminded that Public Path Orders had not been finalised by the Environment Agency and East Devon District Council. Work had started on the new bridge. It was not known exactly when the breach to allow flooding of the valley would occur.

10. Devon Countryside Access Forum working group on the Rights of Way Improvement Plan

A working group had met in November to discuss the Rights of Way Improvement Plan review and notes of this meeting were included as an agenda paper. The Chair thanked the group for its work going through the points and Richard Walton said the input had been constructive and helpful.

11. Rights of Way Improvement Plan review

Richard Walton, Public Rights of Way and Country Parks Manager, had summarised the context and process in the agenda paper. A discussion took place on the recommendations for next steps.

The initial Rights of Way Improvement Plan had been a large document. The 2012 review had focussed on management aims and objectives in terms of what the Plan sought to deliver. The proposal was to have a format similar to 2012 to inform action plans but as an enhanced document including examples and good practice. The draft table of themes and changes in the last ten years, compiled following feedback from the DCAF working group, P3 workshops and internally, demonstrated significant aspects of change and where policy needed to be strengthened. The Environment Improvement Plan, recently published, identified enhancing the value of green infrastructure to wider aspects such as health and wellbeing. The Public Rights of Way network could align with these aspirations.

The recommendation is that the draft RoWIP is circulated to partner organisations. A definitive list would be compiled. It was noted the examples listed did not include landowning organisations. Within DCC, it would go through reporting processes and the Public Rights of Way Committee.

A draft RoWIP would be brought to the next DCAF meeting and it was hoped the document would be live in summer 2023.

Members supported the recommendations.

Gordon Guest mentioned new research on ethnicity and access to the countryside which he would email to the Forum Officer and Richard Walton.

Action: Gordon Guest.

Richard Walton confirmed that, following the DCAF support, the draft themes table would go out for consultation shortly.

Mention was made of the importance of education, for example Devon Loves Dogs. This could be more explicit and also linked to enforcement. Richard Walton agreed that a partnership approach with other organisations was a key element.

Given changes in agricultural funding, it was suggested that these opportunities could be included in the funding section.

Richard Walton clarified that the reference to farm vehicles was associated with physical shared space on green lanes (unsurfaced, unclassified County roads) and this had been brought up at the P3 workshops. Farm amalgamation and use of farm contractors had meant larger farm vehicles using such routes.

The RoWIP would go through the equalities process at DCC.

Richard Walton proposed, and it was agreed, that the DCAF working group should go through the draft RoWIP before it came before the next DCAF meeting. Dates would be circulated.

Action: Forum Officer

12. Presentation by Julie Owen, Devon Loves Dogs Coordinator

The Chair welcomed Julie Owen, Devon Loves Dogs Co-ordinator.

Julie explained her role was funded by the South East Devon Habitat Regulations Partnership (SEDHRP). The Partnership included East Devon District Council, Teignbridge District Council, Exeter City Council, Natural England, Clinton Devon Estates, the RSPB, Devon Wildlife Trust and the Exe Estuary Management Partnership.

The SEDHRP was formed to protect three special wildlife sites: the Pebblebed Heaths, Exe Estuary and Dawlish Warren. All sites are Special Protection Areas (SPA) and included a Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Ramsar site and National Nature Reserve (NNR). Funding for the post came through developer contributions within a 10 km zone. Julie Owen agreed to clarify the 10km zone area.

The aims of the project were to:

- Protect the designated sites from increasing levels of disturbance as a result of population growth.
- Encourage responsible dog walking in the countryside.
- Build a community of dog walkers who appreciate and protect their local countryside.
- Promote positive dog ownership in the wider community.

Dog ownership had seen an increase and it was estimated that 25% of households in the SW have at least one dog.

The Devon Loves Dogs project focused on the following:

- Free membership scheme for dogs and their owners
- Pledge to follow the Fours Paws Code
- Welcome pack of goodies
- Invites to regular Waggy Walks
- A photo of their dog added to the members' gallery
- Quarterly e-newsletter

Much time had been devoted to developing the simple messages in the Four Paws Code, namely:

- ✓ Do read and follow signs and notices
- ✓ Do prevent your dog from chasing wildlife or grazing animals
- ✓ Do protect nesting and feeding birds on heaths, dunes and wetlands
- ✓ Do bag it and bin it wherever you are
- ✓ Do keep your dog in sight and think of other visitors
- ✓ Do limit the number of dogs you walk

Devon Loves Dogs attended events, including Woofstock (Powderham) and had pop-up gazebos on the three sites and at popular dog walking spots. Information on dog walking was provided, plus training on how to pick up poo geared primarily at children.

Regular 'waggy walks' were held so that participants feel confident in the countryside and know why the Four Paws Code is important.

The Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust (Clinton Devon Estates) was an active partner and a walk was held monthly. The heaths permitted dogs, horses and cycles and there were codes of conduct for each group. Devon Loves Dogs had worked with the Trust on the dog code.

Key information on the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths included:

- 1400 Hectares of lowland heath
- 73% of people visit with a dog
- Open access for dogs, bikes & horses
- Training ground for Royal Marines
- Presence of Dartford warblers and nightjars
- Internationally important
- Main issues: dog poo, disturbance, interactions with other users.

Devon Loves Dogs programme of work was enhanced by additional signage and information, for example encouraging night or dusk walkers to pick up poo, and special events.

The Pebblebed Heaths Dog Walking Code included:

- ✓ Keep your dog in sight, on the path and have recall. Otherwise use a lead.
- ✓ Always pick up after your dog, take waste home or put it in a bin.
- ✓ Protect your dog from disturbing wildlife or grazing animals.

- ✓ Walk no more than six dogs, ensure you can manage them all at the same time.
- ✓ Read and follow signs and report any problems.
- ✓ Commercial dog walkers need a licence from the land manager.

Key information on the Exe Estuary and Dawlish Warren included:

- Intertidal mud flats, sandbanks, salt marsh and wet meadows.
- Each winter home to more than 20,000 migratory water birds.
- Busy estuary, popular for dog walking, watersports, bird watching and much more.
- Introduction of two Wildlife Refuges at Dawlish Warren and Exmouth.
- Dog walking is a major cause of disturbance

The wildlife refuges were voluntary, with Dawlish Warren mudflats all year round and Exmouth Duck Pond from 15 September to end of December when the migratory birds finish feeding on the eel grass beds.

Again, a dog code of conduct had been developed for the Exe Estuary and Dawlish Warren. Dog owners were a harder group to consult with than specific users associated with other codes.

In terms of legislation, PSPO's replaced Dog Control Orders in 2014 and local authorities must review and consult on changes every three years. There was variation in rules between Exeter City, East Devon and Teignbridge. The PSPO's cover dog exclusion areas, picking up, dogs on leads and in Teignbridge and East Devon a maximum of six dogs walked was specified. In Teignbridge a dog walker must have the means to pick up, but this was not specified in East Devon. East Devon was currently consulting on changes to rules on beaches.

Two wildlife wardens were employed by the Partnership across the protected sites.

Dawlish Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space (SANGS) site, 65 acres, opened in 2017, funded through developer contributions. The aim is to provide dog walking areas away from the sensitive wildlife sites. The site has a free car park, is relatively dog secure, and there are no restrictions or livestock. The site has 18,000 visitors per month.

Ridgetop SANGS on the edge of Exeter was open, 42 acres, but work is being done to complete the car park before fully promoting it. Its final size will be 94 acres.

Devon Loves Dogs was set up following the best practice of Dorset Dogs and there is now collaboration through a wider network SCCAMP – Southern Counties Canine Access Management Partnership. This provided the opportunity to share expertise and good practice.

A discussion followed.

Julie said although some monitoring takes place on wildlife and visitor engagement, it is difficult to monitor behaviour change and what is working.

While specific dog friendly sites where there are no bikes or horses were useful, it was expensive to provide SANGS and land acquisition was difficult. Cranbrook had a dog secure training area.

The importance of working with planning authorities to plan in such areas was mentioned. Although green space was often included, its use was not specific. It was noted that the Environmental Improvement Plan had just been published and stated that everyone should live within 15 minutes of a green space.

Julie said advice is given at the pop-up gazebos on considering what a dog is bred for. For example, spaniels were bred to flush out game.

Dog bins were funded by the Habitat Regulations Partnership on the Pebblebed Heaths and emptying was paid for by Clinton Devon Estates. Devon Loves Dogs talked about different types of bags, including biodegradable ones, and encouraged people not to leave waste in bags. Forestry England had a mixed response to its earlier 'stick and flick' message. The message should be to pick up everywhere. Whereas people cited poo from other animals as being a reason not to pick up, the number of dogs and significantly higher level of bacteria posed issues. If more people acted responsibly sites could accept higher numbers of dog walkers.

Dog walkers needed to be informed about the importance of throwing sticks along the path, rather than off it, to avoid disturbing ground nesting birds. People were often unaware of livestock worrying.

Julie was thanked for her informative talk which demonstrated the importance of education. She would let the Forum know if it could assist in any way.

13. To note and approve responses and any feedback

13.1 DCAF response A379 bridge

The response was noted and approved.

14. Pebblebed Heaths HLF bid

The response was noted and approved.

14.1 Fire Beacon Hill

The response was noted and approved.

14.2 North Devon and Torridge Landscape Character Assessment

The response was noted and approved.

14.3 East Devon draft Local Plan

The response was noted and approved.

15. Current consultations

A consultation on the Teignbridge draft Local Plan had just been issued. A summary would be circulated to Forum members for comment.

Action: Forum Officer

16. Training events 2023

The Chair expressed a wish for training events to take place in 2023 as those planned in 2022 were unfortunately cancelled. The Chair proposed a farm visit after the April meeting, if that was convenient for Andrew Baker, and a Pebblebed Heaths visit in the early summer.

A discussion took place on dates for the visit with a preference expressed for prior to 22 June. Some members unavailability was noted. Potential dates would be circulated following discussions with appropriate officers about availability.

Action: Chair and Forum Officer

17. Any other business

17.1 Access to the Countryside for All Networking Conference 22-23 March 2023

Gordon Guest and the Forum Officer would be attending the Access to the Countryside for All Conference in Okehampton.

Gordon Guest had produced a draft precis about mobility scooters and sought DCAF members views as to whether it would be helpful in that format for wardens and other relevant people or organisations. Members agreed that it was appropriate to include the reference to the DCAF position statement on disability access. Gordon requested views by mid-February so that it could be revised to make available at the March conference. The detail about the scooter sizes and legal requirements was taken as read.

Jo Hooper offered assistance in creating a web version.

Action: Forum members, Gordon Guest and Jo Hooper

Pebblebed Heaths and access

Sarah Slade would be attending a management board meeting of the Pebblebed Heaths. The Board was developing a Masterplan for the site. Improving understanding of under-represented groups and how to connect to different sections of society was one of the considerations and ideas on how to achieve this would be valuable.

Mention was made of research in urban environments which might provide a blueprint for questionnaire and survey work. Such research would have gone

through ethics committees at universities.

Lorna Sherriff, South West Coast Path Officer, mentioned the SWCP Connectors Project which targeted local organisations, and groups working with those people, to bring them out onto the coast path. Names of groups came from health care organisations such as Livewell. Building trust took time.

Other suggestions included the role of influencers, inviting people out with peer groups and finding good delivery partners who already have connections.

It was noted the Woodland Trust had land near the Pebblebed Heaths which would soon open to the public and potentially remove some visitor pressure

17.2 Devon Countryside Access Forum membership

Due to the disruption of CoVID-19, Devon County Council had reappointed members appointed in 2020 for a further three-year term. All had accepted, with the exception of Sue Leith who had moved. Sue Leith was thanked for her contribution.

The Forum would benefit from the appointment of additional landowners/managers and the DCC Selection Panel had agreed a specific approach to relevant organisations.

18. Date of next meeting

The next meeting would be on Monday, 24 April 2023, location to be advised.