

Access for All Conference 2023

Report to the Devon Countryside Access Forum April 2023 by Gordon Guest.

The Okehampton Conference, held at the Youth Hostel in March was a 2-day conference organised by:

Debbie North [Cabinet Office Disability and Access Ambassador for the Countryside](#)
Making the Inaccessible Accessible

Writer, consultant and keynote speaker

Founder of [Access the Dales](#) and member of the Yorkshire Dales National Park LAF

There was a good video introduction by Tom Pursglove, Minister of State in the Department for Work and Pensions (Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work), followed by many presentations. Presentations were from Dartmoor National Park, Countryside Mobility, Yorkshire Dales National Park, Youth Hostel Association, Countryside Mobility, Ramblers Association, Disabled Ramblers, Allie Mason about Autism, and Debbie North. There was also an excellent video of a song with deaf sign language to the words, and a very moving video from a parent pushing her child in a manual wheelchair in the countryside and this provided a short period of respite for the parent.

There were several discussion groups, all of which had to provide written feedback. This feedback will be sorted and a final version fed back to the Cabinet Office. The videos and presentations are available, along with other information, from Hilary Winter.

There were many delegates present from a wide range of areas. There were some noticeable absences which was a missed opportunity. Other people who had registered did not turn up which was disappointing for those people who were told the conference was fully booked.

An aspect of the conference was the wide-ranging different viewpoints on accessibility from my own perspective of mobility scooters, through a whole range of disabilities: deafness, blindness, autism, and a range of children's illnesses. I, personally, realised access by children was not an issue I considered. Children under the age of 14 are not allowed to drive an electric wheelchair, power chair or mobility scooter. So they have to find alternative means to access the countryside. This often means a variety of off-road manual wheelchairs such as the Paratreker or similar. I had a series of conversations with Gordon McGregor from Scotland about his company and the work they did with schoolchildren. He felt strongly this group was generally missing from accessibility discussions and missing in particular from Devon discussions.

It was particularly interesting to hear different viewpoints from around the country. For me there was just not enough time to meet up with other delegates to explore views. There were delegates from Manchester, Yorkshire, Norfolk, Somerset, National Trust, Quantocks, SW Lakes Trust, Natural England, British Horse Society as well as some organisations from Devon including the National Parks, Stover

Country Park, South West Coast Path Association, South Devon AONB and Tamar Valley AONB.

A positive aspect is that the conference provided a list of delegates with contact details to allow for follow up. Some brief informal discussions were held with Natural England, Exmoor National Park and SW Lakes Trust. Follow up is needed with these groups to promote more accessibility work.

There were a range of off-road mobility scooters on display. The Terrain Hopper is probably the best of the best off-road scooter but it is very expensive. Then there were a range of off-road manual wheelchairs. There were photographs of how these enabled families to access parks such as Stover as a family experience. Whole family experience was something Neil Warren from Countryside Mobility stressed. Many of the users of Trampers at the sixty Countryside Mobility sites were family groups and would not have made use of these locations if there had not been a Trumper to hire which allowed the whole family group to go out together.

There was also a representative from Manchester who demonstrated a clip on electric powered front wheel to his manual wheelchair. This gave him a top speed of 15 mph, but he rarely needed that level of speed. But sometimes such as on the Granite Way it was possible to go really fast just for the enjoyment of going fast and feeling the wind in your face. Again the perspective of sheer enjoyment, regardless of age or disability, of being in the countryside, feeling the fresh air, the wind and views, seemed to be an aspect that needed more prominence in discussions. Health and Wellbeing as a general term was useful but specific advantages were good. To be reminded that the thrill of going 15 mph in a manual wheelchair was fun was important.

The British Horse Society made the point that riding on horseback equally gave fun, and that for some people horses were in reality their wheelchair as they could get to places on horse they could not on foot.

There was some discussion about gate sizes and widths and path surfacing, but this was in groups rather than as a main issue. Informal discussions with Natural England suggested they were sympathetic to making the British Standard a 1.5 m wide bridleway gate. There was evidence that the Centre Wire Radar key gates, whilst a great idea, suffered because locks were not oiled frequently and quickly rusted up. There was discussion about so many man-made barriers that prevented accessibility to all groups. I pointed out that able bodied ramblers regularly walked 6 to 12 miles, yet there were very few footpaths in Devon that allowed mobility scooters to scoot 12 miles, when the range of scooters was 20 to 30 miles. This point will need further follow up in Devon.

The conference was stimulating and refreshing. It was also sobering that so many different groups were still struggling with accessibility for a wide range of disabled groups some 13 years after the Equality Act 2010.