



Devon Countryside Access Forum

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Devon Countryside Access Forum

Response to the East Devon Forest Plan 2019-2029 West England Forest District

The Devon Countryside Access Forum (DCAF) is a local access forum under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW Act). Its statutory remit is to provide independent advice “as to the improvement of public access to land in the area for the purposes of open-air recreation and the enjoyment of the area...” Section 94(4) of the Act specifies bodies to whom the forum has a statutory function to give advice, one of which is the Forestry Commission.

The DCAF currently has sixteen members, appointed by Devon County Council, who represent the interests of landowners/managers, access users and other relevant areas of expertise such as conservation and tourism.

The Devon Countryside Access Forum has confined its comments to question 4. on the on-line survey. This response will be on the agenda for formal approval at the next Forum meeting on 25 April 2019.

Recreational Access

The Devon Countryside Access Forum welcomes the recreational access opportunities provided in the Forestry Commission woods in East Devon and notes that several of the woodland areas are open access.

The Forum supports the objective of ‘the provision and maintenance of recreation facilities’ and would encourage any improvements where these are compatible with other social, economic and environmental land management objectives. It understands that there is likely to be reduced capacity to achieve this in the woodland areas which are leased.

Plan objectives and vision

A number of other statements in the 50 Year Vision and objectives accord with the Forum’s remit to improve public access to land and the enjoyment thereof, notably:

1. The widening of rides and increased sunlight, together with opening up viewpoints into the forest and out into the landscape;

The Devon Countryside Access Forum is a local access forum. It is required, in accordance with Sections 94 and 95 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000, to provide advice as to the improvement of public access to land for the purposes of open-air recreation and enjoyment.

2. improvements to biodiversity and more mixed woodland species; and
3. maintenance and enhancement of cultural and heritage assets.

The overriding principle for the forest to be a 'popular and safe place to come to exercise, learn and relax in a resilient natural environment' is a key message.

Matters identified for inclusion in the Forest Plan

The Forum has identified several matters which should be mentioned in the Plan and considered as part of its implementation.

- *Access use*

The Plan includes references to open access land and a number of public rights of way. However, it only mentions walking and cycling. It is not clear where horse-riding and cycling are permitted, other than on bridleways, and whether there is potential for improved equestrian use (including carriage-driving) and cycling on other routes within the forest area. The Forum advises the Forestry Commission to consider additional uses on existing paths and especially where rides are being widened. Access users increasingly welcome safe and quiet off-road routes.

Dog walkers are the major recreational access group and it would be helpful for the Plan to refer to this group of users and policies/codes of conduct encouraging responsible dog walking.

There will be an increased range of mobility scooters available in the future and more people using them to access the countryside and forest areas. The Devon Countryside Access Forum's Position Statement on Disability Access is attached.

Maps of each woodland area showing the public rights of way through the wood, or adjacent to it, would be useful.

- *Parking*

There is a reference to improving car park aesthetics. It is not clear from the Plan whether any new car parks are being proposed. The Forum advises that any enhancements should take account of the needs of disabled visitors with wheelchairs, mobility scooters or tramper buggies, and ensure there is easy access from car park areas to paths. Earth bunds, narrow gates, erosion gulleys, large boulders and padlocked barriers are particularly problematic.

- *Neighbouring landholdings*

Where there is potential to improve recreational access provision in association with other landowners, particularly authorities or charities, the Forum advises the Forestry Commission to explore options.

The Forum would welcome feedback on its comments.