



Devon Countryside Access Forum

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Kim Strawbridge
Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust
Rolle Estate Office
Bicton Arena
East Budleigh
Budleigh Salterton, EX9 7BL.

30 October 2019

Dear Ms Strawbridge

Pebblebed Heaths Visitor Access Consultation

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 give 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. The South East Devon Habitat Regulations Partnership is formed from the three district councils in the area and the Forum has a duty to advise district councils.

The DCAF currently has fifteen 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.

A group of members visited the site and these comments have been agreed by the Forum and take into account advice previously developed. The response will be on the agenda at the next meeting in January for formal approval.

The DCAF recognises the importance of safeguarding the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths and protecting species which give it Special Area of Conservation and Special Protection Area status. The increasing population growth in the immediate and wider area, such as Cranbrook, will inevitably increase recreational access on the heaths. The heaths offer significant recreational access opportunities for safe off-road use by a wide range of users including walkers, dog walkers, families, cyclists, horse-riders and disabled users. Open

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.

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access plus the network of public rights of way (footpaths and bridleways) and permissive paths provide many options for informal recreation.

Car parking charges

The DCAF strongly supports the proposal not to charge for parking in the formal car parks on the Pebblebed Heaths. A charge may not be economic to collect, and any charges may displace people onto the roadside verges and passing places. The area is widely used by local residents on a regular basis and such use is important to health and well-being.

Car parking proposals

1. The Forum would welcome more information on the topics and messages that will be included on the interpretation/information boards. In principle these are supported.
2. The provision of additional dog bins, if regularly emptied, will encourage responsible dog walking.
3. Managing vegetation to improve the visibility of car parks should encourage use and deter anti-social behaviour.
4. Closure of the little-used Frying Pans car park would appear appropriate. Similarly use of Uphams for the Royal Marines and educational visits would be sensible, subject to Model Airfields car being enlarged to accommodate cars that would previously have used Uphams.
5. Additional way-marked trails from Four Firs car park to Woodbury Castle would ensure people had confidence to use this route. New gates permitting greater access to Bicton Common by people with disabilities and tramper buggies would be appreciated by this user group.
6. Reducing car parking at Squabmoor and Stowford Woods to minimise tree root damage is appropriate, if informal car parking close by is available.

Matters for further consideration

The Devon Countryside Access Forum is concerned about some of the proposals and the impact on access, as outlined below:

Horse-riders

The proposed closure of car parks and use of height restriction barriers will effectively limit horse box parking. Information from staff at the consultation suggested that Wheathill car park to the south will be available for horses. However, on the website summary, reference is made to a height restriction barrier so it is not at all clear where horse boxes could be parked.

The Pebblebed Heaths are criss-crossed by bridleways and individual horse riders are permitted on open access land by Clinton Devon Estates. Historically, the heaths have been an important horse-riding area and are used extensively today. Significantly reducing the options to park horse boxes will disadvantage this recreational user group for whom road riding is increasingly unsafe. There are very few places, outside the National Parks, where there are good off-road riding opportunities. The Forum advises the South East Devon Habitat Regulations Partnership and Clinton Devon Estates to reassess this aspect

of the proposals, consult closely with the British Horse Society and local horse-riding groups and ensure horse riders can continue to park in some car parks and access the wider area. This impact on horse riders was not brought out sufficiently in the consultation summary, entitled 'Visitor Access Improvements' and the accompanying report. Consequently, equestrian users may not have responded to the consultation.

Disability access and height barriers

Use of height barriers could also disadvantage some disabled users who transport mobility scooters in high vans or in vehicle top containers. It is likely that the increasing sophistication and automation of transportation options could mean more vehicles fall in this category. Consideration should be given to ensuring that access is available in several car parks.

Estuary Entrance/Estuary View and Woodbury Castle car parks

Estuary Entrance/Estuary View and Woodbury Castle. The Estuary View car park has outstanding views. The Forum has reservations about closing this car park as it is used by people enjoying the views or having a picnic, some of whom would be unable to walk far or to use the proposed all-ability trail. The DCAF appreciates the challenges of having to deal with anti-social behaviour but this could be displaced elsewhere if this car park is closed. The all-ability trail is nonetheless an additional route for people who wish to walk to the viewpoint which would be appreciated.

Access to the Estuary Entrance car park is not inviting and improvements to the car park and increased number of spaces would enhance this area. However, the DCAF has concerns if capacity is improved at this site at the expense of the Woodbury Castle car park – proposed for closure/partial closure. Woodbury Castle is a honeypot location on the heaths and also explored by families and young people who would not necessarily walk on the wider common. Access opportunities to walk, cycle and ride are much more limited on the Estuary Entrance car park side of the road. The B3180 is a relatively busy road with restricted views coming out of the Estuary Entrance car park. Focussing parking at Estuary Entrance will mean additional numbers of vulnerable road users – children, dog walkers, disabled and elderly people in particular – would want to cross this road to Woodbury Castle and the heathland beyond. Unless there were significant traffic calming measures this crossing is potentially very unsafe. Restricting car parking to blue badge holders at Woodbury Castle would not necessarily reduce damage to the Scheduled Monument or ease congestion.

Car parks: general improvements and disability access

The DCAF supports changes to the formal car parks which would make them more welcoming to visitors. However, surface improvements should be with local stone, with tarmac kept to the absolute minimum, to minimise urbanisation of the landscape. Compacted local gravel is suitable for disabled users but loose gravel could impede movement.

A couple of members of the DCAF, together with members of the Wheelchair Access Group, visited the Pebblebed Heaths in June 2019. This visit highlighted the requirements of disabled users. These included removing earth bunds to permit access out of car parks

onto trails, providing accessible gates and reducing problems associated with deep gullies and steep cross slopes. Where disabled car parking is allocated, consideration needs to be given to space at the side and rear of vehicles to allow scooters/buggies to be taken out.

Landscape considerations should be borne in mind when putting in additional signage and height restriction barriers to ensure minimal visual intrusion.

Anti-social behaviour

Anti-social behaviour could be reduced by increasing the visibility of car parks, but it could also displace such behaviour to other areas. Improved site maintenance, regular monitoring visits by staff, quick responses to reports of fly-tipping, removal of litter and a welcoming environment should assist. Local community engagement is a major factor in tackling this issue. The information boards should include a telephone number to report problems.

Closing some car parks at night or putting up CCTV signs/equipment could deter inappropriate behaviour but the DCAF recognises that there would be staff and resource implications.

Overall car parking provision

It will be difficult to control and enforce efforts to reduce the number of informal car parking spaces, especially if population increases mean additional numbers of visitors are coming to the Heaths. This is particularly the case as the number of formal car parking spaces is not being increased. The Forum recommends continual monitoring and review to ensure formal car park capacity is sufficient.

Sustainable transport

The focus of the consultation is on car parking provision. The Devon Countryside Access Forum recommends that the partners involved in conservation of the East Devon Pebblebed Heaths seek to encourage access users to visit the area using sustainable transport and the public rights of way network, and to consider whether any improvements would facilitate this.

The Forum would welcome feedback on its comments.

Yours sincerely



Hilary Winter
Forum Officer

Letter sent on behalf of the Devon Countryside Access Forum

*Chair: Sarah Slade
Vice-Chair: Chris Cole*

