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Devon Countryside Access Forum

Statement and Recommendations

Trail Safety

Introduction

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 and this includes the County Council.

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.

The Devon Countryside Access Forum is providing the following advice on trail safety following discussions at its meetings, site visits and participation by the Chair in a joint meeting with the Exe Estuary Management Partnership and Devon County Council.

The Forum is committed to the principle of multi-use and accessible trails which enable a wide range of users to access the countryside. By multi-use the Forum means accessible to all users: walkers, cyclists, horse-riders and those with mobility scooters or prams. Multi-use offers sustainable transport options, particularly where safe off-road routes are available, and contributes to individual and community health and well-being and to the environment.

What are some of the issues?

1. There is a perception that conflict on trails may be increasing and in particular on the Exe Estuary Trail where there has been a significant rise in the number of users. A few complaints have been received by Devon County Council. Conflict in this context is defined as a situation which usually arises when the behaviour of one user interferes with the safety or perceived safety of the other user.

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.

Conflict can arise within user-type (for example, cyclists or dog walkers) or between different user types (for example, between a dog-walker and cyclist or between a walker and horse-rider).

Usage has further increased significantly since the advent of Coronavirus through additional use of trails for recreation, exercise and commuting.

2. Some trails, for example the Exe Estuary Trail and parts of the Tarka Trail and Drake's Trail are used by both recreational and functional cyclists. Commuting cyclists often prefer a harder, sealed surface and the capacity to cycle at speed. Downhill stretches, harder surfaces and use of Apps, such as Strava, which promotes 'personal best' routes, can encourage cyclists to go faster.

Any improvements can also result in increased usage.

3. The use of electric bikes and improved mobility vehicles means that additional numbers using powered assistance are accessing the trails. These may include other novel electric-assisted vehicles. These are currently designed to assist riders up to 15.5 mph. Although not currently legal, there may be changes to permit use by electric scooters which can travel at a higher speed.
4. Financing for trails often means that a sealed surface is provided to reduce long-term maintenance costs.
5. Existing infrastructure sometimes means that it is not possible to achieve a consistent standard for a route in its entirety.

Recommended pilot schemes and initiatives

Signs

- a) The use of National Cycle Network signs implies that a route is primarily for cyclists. These signs could be supplemented with additional information.
- b) 'Share this space' messages are useful and are supported by the DCAF. However, consideration needs to be given to managing people on the route and slowing people down, where needed.
- c) Other messages could provide a stronger impact for example 'share with care', 'respect other users', 'give space' and 'pass with care'.
- d) Where possible, signs should be pictorial as well to aid understanding. People may not read well or understand English.
- e) Appropriate photographic signs, as being piloted on the Grand Western Canal, could be used where there are specific issues with visibility and to alert people to

other users on the route. These might be applicable at the entrances to tunnels, dimly lit to protect bats, or on sharp bends.

- f) 3D imagery or signs on the ground could have an impact where there are perceived areas of conflict or at entry points to a route. This might be where a trail narrows or along sections where there are greater numbers of users.
- g) Ideally, signs should be varied from time to time to avoid becoming part of the scenery. Equally, too many signs can be intrusive in the landscape, particularly on more rural routes and careful consideration needs to be given to placing these at locations with the greatest impact. Subliminal images such as a smiling face could be effective.

Engineering solutions

- h) Consideration should be given to providing sections that do not have sealed surfaces to allow for a slower route and a more enjoyable recreational experience. This could be achieved by offering parallel routes with different surfaces.
- i) Road commuting should be improved to ensure commuting cyclists have a safer road space.
- j) Rumble strips and other calming measures should be trialled at identified conflict points with an opportunity to feedback on different options. This would provide a learning experience and evidence base.

Partnership approaches

- k) Collaboration with local businesses and sponsorship for signing would be useful to explore.
- l) Some trails include on-road sections. It might be possible to use a Quiet Lanes approach, as permitted under the Transport Act 2000, in consultation with parishes and other stakeholders to educate car users that other recreational users may be using the road. This 'share with care' or 'expect and respect' approach, as used in Gloucestershire and Suffolk, might allow soft landscaping, changes to roads and verges, different surface treatments and the provision of passing bays. Monitoring of usage and behaviour change should be included as part of any trial.
- m) Sustrans' volunteers are out on the trails and engage with users. Liaising with Sustrans might help in getting messages across to trail users.
- n) Friends' groups can sometimes attract funding from charities and other sources not available to councils. It is recommended that a community enabler might explore the capacity to establish Friends' groups for some of the more popular trails. As well as a fundraising role, such groups could raise awareness of local issues.

Publicity and education

- o) Rangers/on site educational and trail management support would be advantageous to encourage responsible trail use. An accompanying awareness campaign could be funded where there are particular issues.
- p) Marketing and social media campaigns around soft messaging could assist alongside upfront website information.

Additional aspects

- q) The provision of car parking, refreshments and toilet facilities are additional aspects which should be considered alongside the trail itself. These may be essential for some users to be able to access or enjoy the trail. The 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act recognised the importance of refreshments on national trails. Similarly, long local trails would benefit from the provision of facilities to encourage users and potentially provide business opportunities.
- r) Solutions need to be sustainable to reduce the financial liability.

Appendix 1, below, provides examples of signs.

APPENDIX 1

Solutions - signs



Devon County Council



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Signs from the Peak District National Park



Grand Western Canal



Norfolk County Council



Suffolk County Council – start and end of Quiet Lane

Solutions – surface signs



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