

Peak District Local Access Forum Access sub-group

On: Friday 26th February, 2021
Video-conference meeting

Attendees

Chair: Bob Berzins

Members: Louise Hawson, Richard Entwistle, Martin Bennett, John Thompson, Geoff Nickolds, Ben Seal, Charlotte Gilbert, Joe Dalton, Alistair Harvey, Edwina Edwards, Jeremy Kenyon, Joe Dalton, Steve Martin

Officers: Mike Rhodes, Sue Smith, Sarah Wilks (part)

Guests/Presenters: Guy Shrubsole, Nick Hayes, Danny Udall

Apologies: Roly Smith, Gill Millward, Jon Stewart

Following Welcomes and Introductions, Presentations followed (copies provided):-

Guy Shrubsole – outlined the current situation on rights of access, explaining that the concern is to extend access beyond existing Right to Roam (RtR) which would also reduce pressures on RtR areas currently covering 8% of England area. Ideally this would include greenbelt land, woodlands and rivers and waterways.

Nick Hayes – had been overwhelmed by the level of enthusiasm and attention since the launch of his and Guy's books and campaign. Litter had become an 'enraging' issue – speaking to a distinct lack of care for the countryside and environment. RtR has to come with responsibilities and solving the litter problem has to be part of this.

Since the CROW Act only £2k per year has been spent by the government on promoting and providing information on the Countryside Code.

RtR is important in increasing the health of the public but while also maintaining the health of the environment and should also be 'valourising' countryside managers.

Lessons may be learned and adopted from initiatives like Trash and Trails and Surfers Against Sewage which have both succeeded in actively engaging people in caring for the countryside and the environment.

The aim should be for increased access to be accompanied by increased care and concern and the mental health benefits that flow from joining initiatives and associated camaraderie.

Lessons are available from the more extensive RtR in Scotland which encourages a dialogue between users and managers and which is subject to a 5-yearly review.

Sarah Wilks – in response agreed on the need for more education and engagement and welcomed the extra resources Natural England have found for the Countryside Code.

Press coverage recently of visitors as hooligans has been shocking, as only a minority of visitors to the National Park behave in this way. Work was ongoing with Visit Peak District to promote more widely the areas outside the National Park; any support is welcome for a challenging year ahead.

Danny Udall – gave a perspective from the Eastern Moors Estate where the issues raised had chimed with his experience.

Visitors were already here and most are not an issue – odd individuals and fly tipping make the headlines but a sense of proportion is important, bearing in mind the proximity to urban conurbations.

What's served best has been a set of guiding management principles, emphasising the importance of enjoying access to nature and setting out to improve access. Most of Eastern Moors is RtR after CROW and their aim accordingly has been to make a better quality of landscape and better quality of experience without urbanisation or at a cost to the environment.

Access improvements have been developed and agreed under the wider Sheffield Moors Partnership and a permissive bridleway network has been created which has largely worked well. The focus has been on assessing and reducing the impacts on nature, rather than on legalities and misbehaviour.

Some visitors are just concerned with self interest however, and damage to the SSSI by a minority of 4x4 drivers is proving a significant issue at present.

Some wild swimming has taken place on a small reservoir – a bit like a seaside resort at times with accompanying litter issues.

Peak district Proud has been a welcome initiative and more visitors do seem to be picking up litter themselves.

The Meeting then opened for comments more widely.

Ben Seal – welcomed the direction of travel, emphasising the need for a focus on the quality of experience, wider connectivity and overall better management of access.

Nick Hayes – provided an example from the Kennet and Avon area where a landowner was seeking designated bathing water status as a means of improving water quality, at the same time benefitting the local community. He had experienced problems with misuse and littering by visitors but was improving the situation by engaging the local people through negotiating a litter picking scheme and making them care more for the site in the process.

Joe Dalton – this was already happening in the Peak District, but locals were feeling overwhelmed by the scale of the littering problem and finding difficulty in organising adequate disposal facilities. **Danny Udall** had volunteers but lacked the staff to manage them effectively. He was encouraging users to be part of the solution by delegating management and litter disposal to the user groups. **Edwina Edwards** works with people with learning disabilities who are picking up large amounts of litter and village groups are also doing the same, although currently inhibited by Covid. She has found the local authorities helpful in picking up bagged litter if they are notified and will collect from designated collection points. Duke of Edinburgh, Scouts and Guides groups nationally are all encouraged to pick up litter. More co-ordinated dates overall would help.

Guy Shrubsole – summarised his thoughts so far, welcoming the update on current issues and actions.

1. National government needs to invest more in reviewing and promoting the Countryside Code, with Natural England responsible for the review and re-launch. Will this be given enough priority compared to other government initiatives? – for instance visitors to the Lake District are all fully aware of Covid advice, but not so of the Countryside Code.
2. Legislation is required, most appropriately through amendments to the CROW act to extend the RtR to other landscape types.
3. There didn't appear to be opportunities for major RtR extension in the Peak District and National Park. Should the focus be on increasing access elsewhere?

Sarah Wilks – had added a comment that the Agriculture Bill has to be a key part of the development of wider access. There is a need to ensure that the ability to access more land is included but in the right way with the right incentives applying in an appropriate way at all levels of the new ELMs scheme.

The importance of National Parks and AONBs should be reflected by funding them properly.

Jeremy Kenyon - access to water is well behind where it should be and while greater general access in the National Park might be welcome the importance of quiet areas for wildlife shouldn't be underestimated. There was a clear need for better awareness and education on the Countryside Code for young people in particular and the rights of way/footpath network should be a key component in better managed access.

Charlotte Gilbert – Commented: -

1. Tier 3 funding should be available to ALL land managers, not just farmers. As such it could enable the creation of better networks.
2. Supported the importance of the path network as a whole as enabling safe access where users are comfortable that they are freely able to go.
3. Supported the Glover report proposal for the creation of a national body of rangers – widespread rangers with this status could help land owners to manage visitors and their impacts.
4. Extension to CROW would help to widen and improve the access network, especially if Rights of Way can be restored to previous historic levels.

Martin Bennett – made the point that as a rambler on his local paths he scarcely meets anybody, when compared to the traditional hotspots like Dovedale. It would be helpful to promote the use of local rights of way to spread the load. And could the contribution of excess packaging to litter problems be included in any campaigning on this issue?

John Thompson (LAF Chair) – expressed his thanks for the presentations and contributions so far and summarised some relevant LAF activities.

1. The LAF has devoted a lot of attention to the Countryside Code review and provided detailed feedback.
2. We have worked closely with the National Park authority on proposals on visitor management and hubs.
3. MPs and other influencers are pressed on implementing the Glover report at every opportunity.
4. Supported suggestion by Jon Stewart that the creation and promotion of better walking and cycling access routes into the National Park should be a priority.

Joe Dalton – commenting on the proposal for greater access to rivers emphasised the difficulties this might pose to barriers within rivers for land management and the impact on the benefit of small rivers to wildlife. He also reiterated his existing concerns over path erosion due to intensive use, control of dogs on access areas and aspects of wild camping.

Bob Berzins – summarised that there was clearly much consensus over access management and behaviour issues. What more should the LAF be doing? For instance, should the LAF be involved in lobbying for more resources for the National Park?

Guy Shrubsole – it had been helpful hearing of the issues so far. So: -

1. Will there be enough funding for the effective re-launch and promotion of the Countryside Code? Government should be pressed to resource this properly.
2. How will the revised Code differ from the effective measures seen in Scotland?
3. Concerned that National Parks seem to be the only places where there is a debate about access. This need to be happening about more general access elsewhere around the country.
4. There is a need to encourage and enable people to be more actively involved in land and environmental management and restoration, building on the concerns for climate change.

Bob Berzins – queried whether LAFs elsewhere had a role or were attempting to influence creating broader access? Has much liaison been taking place?

John Thompson – explained that exchange with other LAFs had been limited and difficult due to the Covid outbreak. We would however be continuing to press with them for the implementation of the Glover report.

Nick Hayes – welcomed the general support and enthusiasm for improved and wider access. One aspect he was keen to address was the abuse of land managers which he felt was rooted in historic enmity to private property. There shouldn't be conflict between land owners/managers and access users and he would welcome more opportunities to listen to land managers about their issues. Access to the outdoors is a national public good that can make a significant contribution to reducing the estimated £72bn cost to the NHS of sedentary lifestyles.

Mike Rhodes – suggested that it was difficult to rationalise issues into effective action. Mountain bike groups were helpful in initiatives to discourage off-network use, but as in other cases this is undermined by a minority of users who are determined to go where they want, regardless. The overall principle needs to be to assess impacts and explore how and where they can be spread.

The meeting continued with some further discussion on: -

- The importance of sustainable travel to get visitors into the countryside.
- The use (and abuse) of barbed wire so extensively in the UK countryside compared to elsewhere.
- The benefits which might accrue from a more openly accessible land registry.
- And finally, the need to promote models of good and positive behaviour, rather than over stressing and publicising the worst.

The Meeting finished at 12.00 noon with thanks to our guests, members involved and to Louise for setting it up online.