

HERTFORDSHIRE LOCAL ACCESS FORUM CONFERENCE
6TH OCTOBER 2007

SUMMARY OF GROUP DISCUSSIONS

ISSUES

1. Difficulty finding and following the correct route.

Way-marking.

Way-marking was often found to be good at the start of a right of way and then less so at a later point. Consistency in way-marking is essential as one misleading or missed sign can ruin a walk or ride.

It was noted that there are some inconsistencies with signs, particularly at points where rights of way leave roads and promoted routes. It was felt that there is a need for more on-route signs, particularly to identify the correct way in woodland and through farmyards. Some thought that they would be 'told off' by a grumpy farmer if they go through the yard. The presence of a simple arrow sign would give path users confidence.

The member for Aldenham said that he had easily been able to obtain supplies of coloured arrow signs from the County Council, to be installed by volunteers at appropriate points on local routes (through PPP).

One group identified that the way marking of BOATS needs to be improved.

Local booklets or maps.

In rural areas people can be unsure about following signs alone. You really need a map too and many people are not confident reading maps. Only 5% of people can read a 1:25000 map. Parish maps and leaflets are good and can be a lot easier to read but of course by definition are only for a small local area.

Pictorial maps can be easier to read and should be available in pubs, libraries, farm shops, butchers etc. It is hard to get feedback on how much these are used but they are probably very popular locally.

Vegetation.

If paths get overgrown they are harder to find.

2. The State of Rights of Way and User Conflicts

It was recognised that 4x4 vehicles, motorbikes and horses all churn up the surface of rights of way. Sometimes there is illegal use. There is an ongoing incompatibility between the different user groups.

One possible way to resolve these issues could be to provide a wider path on diverse-user routes. One example given was that on greenways of up to 7m in width, conflict had been virtually eliminated by having a different section of the path for each user group. In one group's discussion it was pointed out that these measures might be put in place reasonably readily on

bridleways and restricted byways where sufficient space was (or should be) available as of right. It would not answer the problem on footpaths where the statutory width was less and where horses and cyclists are not legally allowed.

One group thought that some form of surfacing over part of the width of a path might prove appropriate although no-one wanted to end up with sealed tarmac. They wanted to see this idea applied on a wide-scale.

The resolution of drainage problems is clearly very important. If the surface is out of repair a notice can be served on the Highway Authorities.

Aside from surface and drainage problems some walkers find horses intimidating at close quarters. Expansion of the space available for footpaths might be an answer but not immediately available as an option.

The misuse of rights of way and the associated attempts to prevent this was identified as a problem. There was often a legitimate need to try to prevent misuse of a right of way but there was agreement that this should not be done in such a way that use for those with limited mobility was made more difficult or impossible.

It was acknowledged that horse riders would use footpaths as links in a fragmented bridleway network and to avoid dangerous roads.

Where rights of way have been severed by a motorway or major road and are now just dead ends it was suggested that some of these could be used to 'trade' with landowners - exchanging the defunct route for a new and more useful one elsewhere on his/her land. This might be combined with ideas mentioned above to create wider routes to cope with diverse users, or to provide safe link-routes for horses so that they were not tempted to use footpaths.

Richard Cuthbert advised that this might indeed be appropriate in some cases but that elsewhere it was feasible to re-establish a link to the original route, thereby restoring a lost way as far as possible.

Providing a proper dedicated site for motorbike scrambling would probably help with the problem of illegal motorbike use in an area.

Some members had experience of the 'Quiet Lanes' initiative, which has been tried out in the Welwyn/Ayots area and wondered whether this was likely to come into wider use. By making the lanes quieter and safer, they would be attractive to a wider range of (non-motorised) users. In particular this could help to persuade horse-riders off footpaths at minimum expense. Andy Hardstaff said that more work was needed on the initiative to make it more effective but that the police were not keen to see speed limits on these roads as they would be so difficult to enforce.

3. Structures.

It is the County Council's policy to replace stiles with Kissing Gates and to remove stiles that are now redundant. Leaving a gap was not popular with landowners as, even where fields are now in

cultivation, use might change to livestock in the future. Also a gap means there is a greater risk of trespass and fly tipping.

If one stile on a route is not replaced it obviously blocks the whole route for someone who cannot climb over a stile.

It was of particular interest to several parishes to hear from Jerry Pearlman about the power Parish Councils have to serve notice of an obstruction on the County Council. The latter is then obliged to remedy the problem within a given time, whereas the repair is discretionary if an individual submits the notification.

The question was put as to who was responsible for repairs and maintenance on permissive ways. Jerry Pearlman and Richard Cuthbert concurred that this would be down to the formal agreement made at the outset with each individual landowner.

4. Public Transport

Some were keen to see public transport better adapted to the needs of walkers. It was pointed out that rural bus services tended to be thin on the ground and those that existed were often scheduled to benefit commuters or shoppers. A reasonable choice of buses was needed, avoiding rush hours and running at weekends and on summer evenings. Those group members who had retired were anxious to make use of their bus passes!
In Bedfordshire there is a small bus 'Hopper' that goes around the villages.

5. Other Barriers to using Rights of Way that came up in discussion

Traffic Speeds, dangerous crossings and inappropriate traffic using rural roads due to Satellite Navigation.

Rights of way that cross arable fields being ploughed and not reinstated.

Fly Tipping

Parochialism

Argumentative Landowners

Livestock on Rights of Way

GOOD PRACTICE

1. Parish Paths Partnership

- This seems to be working very well.
- Helped with way-marking.
- Provides a link between the parish and the local Rights of Way officer
- Improved mucky paths and built bridges
- Put in ramps for horses

2. Volunteers

Looking after the network of paths in a parish usually depends on committed volunteers. Some parishes have a Rights of Way subcommittee of the Parish Council or organise volunteers to report to the Parish Council annually. There was agreement that generally the state of Rights of Ways was best where there was local involvement or responsibility for local paths. This could vary depending on the scale and resources of the parish and could at the highest level include local paid staff, through people acting directly for the parish council to people involved with another voluntary body.

3. Promotion

The promotion of rights of way by producing maps or leaflets or by circulating a questionnaire requesting volunteers to look after the local paths. In Braughing 67% wanted a parish map and out of 450 households the Parish Council got 40 to 50 volunteers to help maintain paths.

4. Seek Funding

- Local Businesses can fund projects
- Could apply for grants from funding bodies.
- The National Lottery
- Parish councils can bid for things that statutory bodies cannot.
- The Groundwork Trust is in touch with local businesses and also carries out the work. It does playgrounds, safe routes to schools, ponds etc and is focused on the local community. It is based in Mill Green and is a national organisation.

5. Communication

Dialogue between various user groups, Herts County Council, farmers and landowners to promote more understanding and cooperation for example via the Local Access Forum which could identify common problems and solutions and look at a larger picture than individual parishes.

6. Rubbish Clearing

Strategies for preventing fly tipping and enabling the prompt removal of rubbish.

KEY POINTS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT
(in no particular order)

1. Parish Paths Partnership is very good and should be extended.
2. Very important to be aware of new developments and to take a very proactive approach to ensure Section 106 monies are used to benefit the Rights of Way network whenever a development is planned.
3. Somehow get more off road rights of way along field edges instead of users having to go on dangerous roads. Perhaps County Council could buy land to make appropriate links where these are missing or widen key footpaths to make provision for diverse users. The idea of wider routes for diverse users might be applied on a wide scale.
4. Develop Quiet Lanes to link Rights of Way and give them legal force.
5. 'Joined up thinking'. Part of this could be more medium to long term planning with regard to improving the rights of way network and information about it as well as co operation and communication between everyone involved in using and maintaining Rights of Way in Hertfordshire. It could also include giving feedback and ideas to national government regarding access and legislation. The ROWIP is a step towards looking at the network on a county-wide basis and targeting improvements in areas of highest population. Much benefit could also be gained by¹ 'joined up thinking' between neighbouring parishes.
6. Public Transport getting to and from the countryside needs to be improved eg a bus service, subsidised if necessary, at times to suit walkers such as summer evenings and weekends.