

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Local Access Forum held
at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Tuesday, 19th July, 2022 at 2.30
pm

PRESENT: County Councillor Ben Callard
A.Fairey
R. Campbell
S. Hampshire
I.Brooke
S. Lewis
P. Mundell
M. Sweeney
A. Underwood [Chair]

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Paul Keeble	Group Engineer (Highways and Flood Management)
Matthew Lewis (Countryside)	Interim Performance, Evaluation and Programme Development Lead for MonLife
Richard Ray	Paralegal

APOLOGIES:

J. Askew, S. Fowles, M. Storey and S. Tindal

1. Apologies for Absence / Introductions

Apologies were received from members: John Askew, Sylvia Fowles, David Smith and Mark Storey. It was also noted that Ruth Rourke, MCC and Sarah Tindal, NRW have also sent their apologies. **AU** welcomed members to the meeting. Members and observers introduced themselves.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. To confirm and sign the minutes of the Monmouthshire Local Access Forum meeting of 26 April 2022 (Attached).

The minutes of the meeting of 26 April 2022 were accepted (proposed by AU and seconded by IB).

4. Membership update (Secretary)

The secretary explained that following the local elections Cllr Ben Callard had been nominated by the County Council as the appointing authority's representative on the forum. Cllr Callard introduced himself to members.

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5. Improvement Sub-Group membership (Secretary)

Following the decision at the April meeting to establish an improvement sub group to help focus the countryside access teams work with communities, including the new community links officer post, nominations had been sought and so far **SL & PM** had expressed an interest. It was noted further members would be required and agreed that terms of reference be drawn up and circulated.

6. Natural Resources Wales updates (Bob Campbell, Senior Officer Land Management, South East Wales Operations)

RC provided an update of NRW's land management and forest operations. A large programme of ash die back management was underway but despite this every effort was being made to keep rights of way available. The exceptionally hot weather had raised the fire alert level to high and so there were concerns about the possible consequences. **RC** explained the contact methods for issues, including unauthorised off-road vehicle activity, and the importance of logging any incidents as this both helps direct responses and provides the intelligence to inform future planning and prioritisation of fire and police responses.

RC referred to some pilot work being undertaken in Caerphilly to help gather better information and assess rights of way furniture on the forest estate. NRW were keen to work with local residents and local groups to explore different ways of future improvements. A new "natural" playground was being procured at Whitestone, in the Wye Valley, and local consultations being undertaken. There are long term aspirations to look at an education shelter and toilets. Finally **RC** provided information on the forest operations programme primarily focussed on managing tree diseases, including of larch and ash die back. It was noted there was some degree of flexibility depending on contracts let.

Members asked several questions, including the funding available to tackle ash die back, the use of timber from felling and replanting. **RC** explained the prioritisation of urgent tree works on a safety basis, likely impact on roads, rail and rights of way. Most timber was being put into the market in the normal way with some retained for biodiversity reasons. Maps were available of felling areas. Replanting varied from a diverse mix, to some commercial softwood replacement, and allowing natural regeneration. The potential impact on access was noted and **RC** reaffirmed that NRW was very conscious of the potential impact of forest operations.

7. Countryside Access Improvement Grant Projects and Update (Report Attached)

The secretary updated the forum on changes, including the welcome appointment to the new Community Links Officer post and the proposals for Welsh Government's Access Improvement Grant. This would form the basis for a three year programme running to 24/25, as set out in the accompanying report to the forum.

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Two funding conditions; the existence of a functioning local access forum and a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) being in place; come into being from 23/24 but in each case Monmouthshire is compliant.

In addition the Wye Valley AONB unit is accessing Welsh Government's Sustainable Landscapes, Sustainable Places grant scheme which can support complementary access projects.

Members supported the proposed schemes, with particular support for the proposal to allocate a budget across each year to support materials for local community volunteer groups.

8. Gwent Regional Access Group update (meeting on 14 July 2022) (Chair & Members)

AU reported on the recent meeting. It was unfortunately poorly attended by non-officers. It was noted that only Monmouthshire and Brecon Beacons National Park currently have an active local access forum and an updated ROWIP. However the opportunities to develop unified standards and share best practice across Gwent were identified. These would be explored as the regional project develops.

9. Dates of future meetings.

The forum agreed that the Secretary will endeavour to arrange the next meeting in October, with a following meeting in Jan 2023. Prior to the next meeting the secretary will co-ordinate any response deemed appropriate to Welsh Government's consultation on the Sustainable Farming Scheme proposals.

AU thanked members for their attendance.

The meeting ended at 4.00 pm