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MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**Minutes of the meeting of Local Access Forum held
at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Monday, 6th December, 2021 at 2.00 pm**

PRESENT: Irene Brooke (Deputy Chair)
David Farnsworth
Sylvia Fowles
Sheila Hampshire
Tracy Hook
Shan Lewis
Phil Mundell
Martin Sweeney
Anne 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
Ruth Rourke	Principal Officer - Countryside Access

1. Apologies for Absence / Introductions.

Apologies were received from members: Jenny Crockitt, Anthea Fairey, David Smith, Mark Storey, County Councillor Ann Webb and from John Askew

AU welcomed members to the meeting which was being held virtually in accordance with the provisions of The Countryside Access (Local Access Forum) (Wales) (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020.

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 22 July 2021

The minutes of the meeting of 22 July 2021 were approved as a correct record.

The Secretary provided members with an update on the following actions from the minutes:

(a) The Council's cabinet has approved the active travel maps following completion of the consultation period for submission to Welsh Government by the statutory deadline of December 2021

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Local Access Forum held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Monday, 6th December, 2021 at 2.00 pm

(b) Regarding NRW forest operations plans, NRW sought member's assistance in identifying suitable consultees to assist in the development of a new Forest Resource Plan.

ST explained that the forest resource plan for NRW's woodlands in the Wye Valley South area is a high level 25 year management plan, and will set out the objectives and the social, economic, and environmental benefits from future forest management. The plan will be subject to consultation in the New Year and at this stage the forum's input to identify local consultees was sought. It was agreed that the Secretary will circulate the relevant information to members and co-ordinate a response back to NRW. NRW will consult the LAF on the plan at a future meeting.

RC outlined the extent of NRW's normal Land Management winter program, largely driven by ash die back clearance work. To minimise disruption work is planned around keeping roads and rights of way open with the use of traffic management and banksman, if necessary to maintain safety. **RC** also outlined future work to survey rights of way within NRW woodland and offered to be a point of contact with any future enquiries. Members enquired about a number of related matters including larch disease management and the use of plastic tree guards and possible alternative approaches.

(c) Discussions were underway with IPROW to attempt to reinstate member's access to the IPROW magazine as requested.

4. Membership update (Secretary)

The Secretary explained that following the forum's recognition that it lacked any representation of motorised user interests John Askew, a previous LAF member with good connections with the responsible motorised user organisations, including GLASS UK, had agreed to apply to re-join the LAF. He had been invited to attend this meeting as an observer but unfortunately had to send his apologies. The appointing authority was in the process of ratifying his appointment.

5. Partnership working

The Secretary outlined the current situation regarding partnership working as set out in his report, including;

(a) The access proposals connected with The **Gwent Green Grid Partnership** a collaborative project funded through Welsh Government's RDP ENRaW programme running to March 2023. The programme has five strands, including access.

A Regional Countryside Access Officer, hosted by MCC, will shortly be appointed to co-ordinate the delivery of the access outputs and the forum will be invited to be represented on a Gwent Access Forum to help develop a regional access plan. Torfaen CBC are hosting a Trainee Ranger Coordinator and five training spaces are being funded across Gwent as part of the scheme.

(b) The **Living Levels** NLHF funded core programme draws to a close in terms of implementation at end of March 2022. The core partners are committed to maintaining the partnership and have commissioned the development of a legacy plan. The Gwent

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Local Access Forum held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Monday, 6th December, 2021 at 2.00 pm

Levels Working Group organised by Welsh Government has also identified continuation / a successor to the partnerships as one of its priorities.

The current programme has delivered considerable access improvements and much improved visitor infrastructure across the Gwent Levels with more to be completed by March 2022. The final transition plan and draft legacy plan are due to be considered by the Living Levels Partner Board and after that partner's formal commitment will be sought to a 18 month transition phase to seek longer term sustainable funding and continue to engage with local communities and stakeholders.

(c) In the **Wye Valley** the use and condition of the countryside access network within the AONB, in particular the unclassified county road (UCR) network, remains a cause of community concern. These issues are complex and relate both to the condition of these routes, generally in very poor condition often linked to water erosion /run off issues from surrounding land, and their use including legal motorised use.

The recent "Wye Villages Study" consultation had highlighted the value of recreational routes within the Wye Valley and public concerns over maintenance and access for people of all ages and abilities.

The Countryside Access Improvement Plan includes relevant statements of action and recent discussions with the AONB unit have reaffirmed that a more comprehensive approach would be desirable. Such an approach would look at the UCR's and the linked public rights of way network, to undertake a prioritisation exercise and a facilitated stakeholder consultation, including users, landowners communities and other stakeholders, to develop an inclusive user-strategy for all lower Wye UCRs.

This approach would require dedicated resources, which are not currently in place.

At this stage the forum's support in principle was sought, as that would aid the process of identifying resources to carry it out. Members discussed the proposal. **IB** asked about the approach to traffic regulation orders and raised the difficulties of just addressing one route at a time. **DF** indicated his support for a strategic and prioritised approach. **PM** asked for clarity around the request to the LAF.

Agreed The LAF supports in principle the proposed approach to develop an inclusive user-strategy for all lower Wye UCRs and linked public rights of way.

6. General Updates

(a) Staffing, CAIP delivery and issues: **RR** outlined the changes to staffing and responsibilities within the countryside access team and progress on grant delivery, including the countryside access improvement grant, which is funded by Welsh Government.

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Local Access Forum held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Monday, 6th December, 2021 at 2.00 pm

RR also referred to a temporary order at Llantillio Crossenny on Offa's Dyke Path National Trail necessary due to the deterioration of a bridge over the River Trothy; to the launch of a Ramblers Cymru "Paths to Well Being Project" in Grosmont, and the potential for further groups.

The continuing pressure of increased usage and reported issues and the extent to which they are able to be addressed was noted. **IB** asked about the extent to which landowners issues could be identified from the overall totals.

(b) Access Reform Briefing: **AU** introduced the access reform briefing, the report of the expert groups to Welsh Government for information. Members had found the format of the long report difficult to follow and there was some discussion about the relative merits of the proposals including those relating to cycling on footpaths. **AU** summarised that the next stage was to see the response from Welsh Government to the recommendations of the expert groups, the proposed timescales and resources implications.

(c) LAF Chairs Meeting 2 December 2021: **AU** referred to an interesting presentation from Welsh Government on the sustainable farming scheme expected to start in 2025. The future powers of LAFs was also discussed and no changes to primary legislation are proposed, with LAFs remaining as advisory bodies. In addition the temporary regulations enabling online LAF meetings were discussed and the meeting resolved to ask NRW to make representations to Welsh Government that these powers should be extended given current circumstances.

7. Consultations

(a) Temporary LAF regulations: **AU** asked members for their views on the need to extend the temporary regulations to continue to allow online meetings and the view was unanimously expressed that the regulations should be extended and that the forum did not feel able to meet face to face in current circumstances. To do so would appear to be contrary to current advice to limit contacts. It was also noted that there are elements of the temporary regulations, namely the provisions for the electronic distribution of papers and annual reports on website which should be permanently retained.

Agreed To respond to NRW as requested to allow a coordinated response to Welsh Government, to confirm the forum wishes the temporary regulations to be extended.

(b) Brecon Beacons Management Plan; The current consultation running to 24th February 2022 on Future Beacons: The Management Plan for the Brecon Beacons National Park 2022-2027 was noted for information.

8. Dates of Future Meetings

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Local Access Forum held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Monday, 6th December, 2021 at 2.00 pm

The forum agreed that subject to confirmation of the extension of the temporary regulations the Secretary will endeavour to arrange the next meeting in Feb/March 2022, to be followed by meetings in June/July, Sept/Oct and Dec 2022/Jan 2023 in the next year of the forum's business. It was agreed that should the temporary regulations not be extended a decision would be taken closer to the time as to whether the forum could return to face to face meetings or instead hold an informal online briefing session in lieu of a formal meeting.

AU thanked members for their continued perseverance with virtual access and the meeting closed at 16:44 pm.

The meeting ended at 4.44 pm

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