

LOWER WYE TRACKS AND TRAILS STRATEGY

Purpose

To receive and endorse the Lower Wye Tracks and Trails Strategy, an Integrated Recreational Access Strategy for the Monmouthshire part of the Wye Valley National Landscape, and the associated Action Plan.

Recommendations

That the JAC:

- A. Welcomes the Lower Wye Tracks and Trails Strategy, as an Integrated Recreational Access Strategy for the Monmouthshire part of the Wye Valley National Landscape.
- B. Endorses the Lower Wye Tracks and Trails Strategy, including the Action Plan as an iterative document to be overseen by a sub-group of the Monmouthshire Local Access Forum, with regular reports back to the JAC.

Key Issues

- The Monmouthshire part of the Wye Valley is home to an extensive network of tracks and trails that allow residents and visitors wide-ranging access to explore the natural beauty and Special Qualities of the National Landscape.
- The tracks & trails network, forming part of Monmouthshire's Highways and Public Rights of Way, are an evolution of historic transport routes in the lower Wye Valley.
- The Lower Wye Tracks & Trails Strategy and Action Plan is appended and was commissioned by the Wye Valley National Landscape Team, with the support of Monmouthshire County Council, Natural Resources Wales and a range of other stakeholders and interested parties.
- The preparation of the Strategy included in-depth research on the extent and type of tracks and trails and the nature of visitor and users, backed up with a widespread consultation of both public and professional interests.
- The vision is for the Lower Wye Valley's Tracks & Trails to be a resilient, well managed and welcoming network for all responsible users, with the Strategy and Action Plan outlining how these routes should be looked after, enhanced for a wider audience and conserved for the longer term.
- Generally the Strategy recognises that for the vast majority of the Tracks and Trails the appropriate response is to maintain the status quo on how they are managed, whilst

recognising that certain routes need more intensive management and new solutions putting in place.

- The associated Action Plan will be an evolving document overseen by a sub-group of the Monmouthshire Local Access Forum, with subsequent iterations and updates reported back to the JAC, and other groups as appropriate.

Reasons

The aim of this initiative was to produce a widely supported Integrated Recreational Access Strategy for the Tracks & Trails of the Lower Wye Valley. The Terms of Reference were to:

- better understand the benefits, pressures and issues relating to the network;
- provide a means for people to have their say on key issues and opportunities;
- strengthen working relationships between partners;
- design solutions to resolve current conflicts and help the network to thrive; and,
- provide a clear plan of action to address the key issues identified.

This was facilitated by commissioning consultants, Tomorrow's Tourism and bringing together stakeholders through an inclusive consultation that prioritised recreation access issues and sought ideas and solutions to include in the Action Plan.

A public consultation ran from 8th November 2023 to 12th January 2024 and included two open drop-in events. The questionnaire provided for the consultation generated 356 responses. Concerns from respondents to the survey included; conflicts between different users and/or residents; the behaviour of some users; impacts on the landscape / ecology; repairs and maintenance issues; flooding and erosion; a lack of information; and worries about the actions of some landowners. However, there were relatively few places where major problems were reported and also relatively few places impacted by very high numbers of visitors, unlike some other National Parks and National Landscapes.

Implications

The Lower Wye Valley Tracks & Trails Strategy and Action Plan, attached in Appendix 1, sets out how these routes will be looked after, improved, enjoyed, enhanced for a wider audience and conserved for the longer term.

Respondents to the consultation exercise confirmed that the appeal of the Tracks & Trails is the natural beauty and the access to it that the network provides, together with the wider landscape, scenery and wildlife and the uniqueness of the environment. Not surprisingly, walking is identified as the most prevalent activity undertaken by residents and visitors in the Lower Wye Valley. In terms of improvements, access to the area was mentioned by many, along with the need for regular maintenance and good signage.

A frequently raised issue during the consultation was the topic of trail / enduro motorcycles using the Tracks & Trails and creating problems for other users and residents, and damaging the landscape. Legal use of Unsealed / Unclassified County Roads, where most of these issues originate, represent 21 kilometres of the Tracks & Trails that totals over 550 kilometres, so less than 4% of the network. The Strategy recognises that these routes are suffering from environmental degradation due to current usage, exacerbated by climate change, and need investment to address these issues. It recommends that on this small

number of routes a mixture of active and collaborative management, voluntary zoning, route modification and other measures could play a part in addressing concerns. Resources are needed for clear signage, robust monitoring, awareness raising and, where necessary, co-ordinated enforcement.

When asked to comment on future priorities, 89% of respondents in the consultation agreed that it was important to encourage responsible behaviours among all users and discourage any undesirable behaviours, with 68% of this group identifying this as very important. In relation to this, 86% of respondents noted the importance of the authorities creating an environment, through resources, facilities and education that would enable all user groups to harmoniously enjoy the Tracks & Trails.

A fundamental principle of the Strategy is to work collaboratively with all interested parties, including residents, volunteers, user associations and visitors alongside professional stakeholders and other interested organisations to develop solutions. These must work well for the majority while also ensuring due regard is paid to the need to reverse the decline in biodiversity, reduce Greenhouse Gas emissions and meet other core criteria, notably encouraging least restrictive access. The Strategy aims to be ambitious and innovative in its delivery. It identifies a range of key themes and actions which need to be delivered in close collaboration with a wide range of interests. It also recognises that current users may need to accept some change in the way they currently enjoy the Tracks & Trails. This reflects the necessity of much of society needing to mitigate and adapt in the face of climate change and the ecological emergency.

The Strategy focuses on five objectives. These work together, provide the foundations for a range of activities outlined in the document and follow through into the associated Action Plan. These core priorities enabling and supporting delivery are:

1. Boosting Awareness
2. Wye for All
3. Robust Management
4. Better Data
5. Making it Happen

It is recommended that the Strategy is led by the Wye Valley National Landscape Partnership and the Monmouthshire Local Access Forum, with the on-going support of Monmouthshire County Council and Natural Resources Wales. A steering group constituted as a sub-group of Monmouthshire's Local Access Forum (LAF) should oversee delivery with representatives from the LAF, the National Landscape Team and other statutory agencies and key delivery partners. The JAC should also have an overview of the development and implementation of the Action Plan. Monmouthshire Councillors and the local Community Councils with the majority of the Tracks & Trails (Devauden, St Arvans, Trellech United & Wye Valley) should also be engaged through reports and feedback to the Wye Valley Villages Delivery Group.

Funding bids will need to be developed to deliver much of this Strategy and Action Plan. Therefore the priority short-term actions will be to build the partnerships to enable implementation and to prepare funding proposals to aid its delivery. The Wye Valley National Landscape Team and Monmouthshire County Council have considerable experience in securing strategic funding.

Background

The Strategy refers to “Tracks & Trails” as a collective term for all the routes in the study area. There are a number of different types of routes including Public Rights of Way (footpaths, bridleways, restricted byways and byways open to all traffic); highways (Unclassified County Roads and unsealed roads) as well as other tracks that may have been agreed as Permissive Paths (such as the section of the Wye Valley Walk through Piercefield Woods) or be access land by virtue of public or benevolent 3rd Sector ownership.

The different types of routes, and the users that are permitted to enjoy them, are not always understood either by users or the general population. Routes on the ground can occasionally differ from the historical record and signage depicting route type can be inaccurate, particularly if it is many years old. The legal differences are important from a management perspective and also for users and residents to appreciate and follow, as permitted activities differ on the different types of routes.

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