

TECHNICAL OFFICERS'  
WORKING PARTY REPORT

WYE VALLEY AONB  
JOINT ADVISORY COMMITTEE  
7<sup>th</sup> November 2016

## **LYDBROOK BRIDGE AND WYE VALLEY WALK CONSIDERATIONS**

### ***Purpose***

To inform members of the current situation with Lydbrook railway bridge and other aspects of the Wye Valley Walk long distance trail.

### ***Recommendations***

That the JAC

- A. Supports the continued promotion and development of the Wye Valley Walk as a long distance regional recreation trail co-ordinated through the Wye Valley Walk Partnership.
- B. Supports Gloucestershire County Council and Herefordshire Council in finding a viable solution to reopen the former Lydbrook railway bridge on the Wye Valley Walk.
- C. Welcomes the investment of the Welsh Government in aspects of the Wye Valley Walk in Monmouthshire.

### ***Key Issues***

- The first 52 miles of the 136-mile Wye Valley Walk go through the length of the Wye Valley AONB.
- The Wye Valley AONB Unit co-ordinates the Wye Valley Walk Partnership consisting of representatives from the counties of Herefordshire (Balfour Beatty), Gloucestershire, Monmouthshire and Powys.
- The Public Rights of Way sections in each county manage and maintain the physical infrastructure of the route, although some of the Walk is on permissive paths.
- Lydbrook Bridge is one of the three remaining rail bridges spanning the River Wye in the AONB that provides a strategic crossing for walkers.
- Gloucestershire County Council had to close Lydbrook Bridge earlier this year due to safety issues with the structure.
- There are a number of other infrastructure issues along the Wye Valley Walk that may become critical over the next few years, requiring a strategic approach and review of the route.
- Welsh Government have awarded Monmouthshire County Council £48,500 for improvements to access in the Wye Valley AONB.

### ***Reasons***

The Wye Valley Walk Partnership manages the strategic co-ordination and promotion for the Wye Valley Walk. The aspiration of the Partnership is for the Wye Valley Walk to be of equivalent standard to a National Trail.

Lydbrook Bridge, also known as Stowfield Viaduct or The Black Bridge, spans the river between Herefordshire and Gloucestershire. The decked walkway is used as a footpath forming part of the Wye Valley Walk and provides key pedestrian access to the Wye Valley Youth Hostel at Welsh Bicknor. The footpath is a designated Public Right of Way on the Herefordshire half of the Bridge but not for the Gloucestershire part. Under mutual agreement Gloucestershire County Council have responsibility for maintenance of this bridge.

Gloucestershire County Council had to close the footpath over Lydbrook Bridge in February 2016 due to safety issues with the structure. Herefordshire Council / Balfour Beatty implemented a Path Closure and Diversion for the Wye Valley Walk which crosses the bridge. On behalf of Gloucestershire County Council, Amey commissioned a Principal Inspection Report for Lydbrook Bridge. The report covers visual and tactile inspection of the visible areas of the structure, using rope access and an Underwater Inspection.

There are several other places along the Wye Valley Walk where infrastructure issues may become critical over the next few years. For example Redbrook Bridge is not dissimilar to Lydbrook, however a £1 Million Lottery Bid for its restoration was unsuccessful in 2013 as it was not deemed 'under imminent threat'. There are also locations where the Walk is along the riverbank and river erosion threatens the route.

Welsh Government have secured capital funding to support access projects that deliver network creation &/or improvements to paths, car parks and access to the outdoors in the AONBs and National Parks. In liaison with Monmouthshire Rights of Way Section it was agreed to submit an application primarily focused on resolving a number of issues along the Wye Valley Walk.

### ***Implications***

Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) have recently received the Lydbrook Bridge Principal Inspection Report. They are currently reviewing it with their Amey Structural Engineers. It is anticipated that Amey will complete a feasibility exercise to come up with some costs and solutions for the Bridge that should be available early in the New Year.

In the meantime a security barrier closes off the Bridge for health & safety reasons. GCC will share the potential plans and costings for a viable solution to reopen the bridge with the Wye Valley Walk Partnership and other interested parties, when known. However based on the experience and estimated costs from Redbrook Bridge in 2013, any solution is likely to require between £300,000 and £1million. There is no intention to permanently close the Lydbrook Bridge if a viable solution can be found to reopen it, but currently the Wye Valley Walk must remain diverted and the bridge is unsafe to walk across.

The Wye Valley Youth Hostel report experiencing a negative impact on their business as many of their customers including school groups used to use the bridge. This has resulted in coaches having to use the narrow Goodrich / Welsh Bicknor road.

Welsh Government's Access funding of £48,500 will be invested primarily to resolve a number of issues along the Wye Valley Walk and is being managed by Monmouthshire's Rights of Way Section. Projects include:

- Resurfacing of a stretch of the Wye Valley Walk at Chepstow
- Fingerpost repair or replacement along the Wye Valley Walk and across the Wye Valley AONB in Monmouthshire
- Minor improvements at three locations to ensure accessibility of overall routes: Bridge replacement at Trellech; minor works at Devauden and resurfacing a bridleway at Whitelye

A strategic review of issues and infrastructure along the Wye Valley Walk is needed along with a strategy to secure funding to resolve critical blockages.

### ***Background***

The 136-mile Wye Valley Walk, way-marked by the distinctive 'leaping salmon' logo, starts at Chepstow Castle, near the mouth of the River Wye, and follows the valley to the source of the river on Plynlimon in mid-Wales. The first 52 miles (83 km) of the Wye Valley Walk go through the heart of the Wye Valley AONB. In 1975 the first 14 miles were opened between St Arvans and Monmouth. The route was extended over the years reaching Rhayader by the 1990s and finally concluding at the river's source in 2002.

The Wye Valley Walk Partnership has representatives from the local authority Rights of Way officers for the four counties covered by the Walk and is serviced by the Wye Valley AONB Unit. Current Member organisations are:

- Herefordshire (Balfour Beatty)
- Gloucestershire County Council
- Monmouthshire County Council
- Powys County Council
- Wye Valley AONB Unit

Each partner gives a discretionary contribution to the Wye Valley Walk Partnership. The Wye Valley AONB Unit hosts and services the Partnership and manages its finances through an account with Herefordshire Council. The Wye Valley Walk Partnership is 'the author' of the Official Wye Valley Walk Route Guide, published by Cicerone. From time to time, the Partnership bids for extra funding and sponsorship to carry out additional work.

Most of the Wye Valley Walk follows public rights of way, but the land they cross is private, and there are some permissive sections of path, particularly through woodlands.

Lydbrook Bridge, constructed circa 1869-1873, is one of the four remaining (of the original ten) rail bridges to span the River Wye and was constructed to carry the connection between the Ross-Monmouth Railway and the Severn and Wye Railway at Lydbrook junction station, for the Edison Swan Cable works. The bridge is not listed and is currently maintained by Gloucestershire County Council.