

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Local Access Forum held
at Natural Resources Wales (Monmouth Office), Hadnock Road, Monmouth NP25 3NQ
on Wednesday, 3rd May, 2023 at 2.00 pm

PRESENT: John Askew,
Sylvia. Fowles,
Irene Brooke (Deputy Chair),
Shan Lewis,
Phil Mundell,
David Smith,
Mark Storey,
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
Richard Ray	Paralegal
Ruth Rourke	Countryside Access Manager
Bob Campbell	Natural Resources Wales
Sarah Tindal	Natural Resources Wales

APOLOGIES:

County Councillor Ben Callard, Jenny Cockitt and Sheila Hampshire

1. Apologies for Absence / Introductions.

Apologies were received from members: Cllr Ben Callard, Jenny Cockitt and Sheila Hampshire. **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 January 2023

The minutes of the meeting of 26 January 2023 were accepted (proposed by **PM** and seconded by **DS**).

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**Minutes of the meeting of Local Access Forum held
at Natural Resources Wales (Monmouth Office), Hadnock Road, Monmouth NP25 3NQ
on Wednesday, 3rd May, 2023 at 2.00 pm**

4. Countryside Access Improvement Plan Delivery (Presentation by Ruth Rourke, Countryside Access Manager)

RER gave a presentation on the delivery of the Countryside Access Improvement Plan via Access Improvement Grant (AIP). AIP is Welsh Government grant to support improving access to/on the PROW network, open access land and green spaces. Between 2023-25 £80,775 is allocated per year via a formula basis.

Funding to be used for physical improvements to existing routes, improvements to information and promotion, improvements to access/egress points to open access land and green space, improvements to accessing water related recreation, and increasing under represented groups access to the outdoors. From this year funding is partly dependant on meeting two conditions; the existence of a functioning local access forum; and a current rights of way improvement plan – both conditions are met in Monmouthshire.

The LAF had previously considered a three year programme and the following changes were now proposed: not proceeding with the previously proposed Three Castles Circular Walk development and promotion of route. Inclusion of improved access for Fishermen and walkers at Black Rock Car Park and a modification to the previously proposed community links scheme via a partnership with Ramblers Cymru to enable a full time Ramblers Paths for Well Being Officer to work with 3 new community groups, providing materials and supporting volunteering and citizen science.

These changes were intended to simplify delivery and increase capacity to support communities and volunteers.

Members asked questions. **RER** indicated that a future report would look specifically at bridges. The Secretary informed the LAF that additional capital budget had been identified by the Council to fund further bridge investigations. The proposed arrangement with Ramblers Cymru is intended to increase capacity to deliver on the ground, reflecting feedback. The future selection of communities would be flexible and responsive to consultations including with community councils. The project is intended to enable volunteer and community action. Questions were asked about the form of the joint working with Ramblers Cymru, which would be governed by a commissioning agreement and include delivery targets.

This project would sit alongside the work of the Community Links Officer to widen engagement including with younger people, dad's groups etc. In response to questions **RER** indicated that this work would complement continued engagement with other organisations including Canal and River Trust and the National Park (although reminded members the latter was in the context of the formal delegation agreement between the Council and the National Park Authority).

5. Lower Wye Valley Integrated Recreational Access Strategy

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Local Access Forum held at Natural Resources Wales (Monmouth Office), Hadnock Road, Monmouth NP25 3NQ on Wednesday, 3rd May, 2023 at 2.00 pm

The secretary outlined progress on the Lower Wye Valley Integrated Recreational Access Strategy. 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 LAF resolved in December 2021 to support in principle the proposed approach to develop an inclusive user-strategy for all lower Wye UCRs and linked public rights of way, subject to receiving further details.

Since then conversations have continued between the AONB Unit and MCC Highways and Countryside Access and have reaffirmed that a strategic approach is desirable and that the AONB Unit, with its strong multi-sector stakeholder connections, is best placed to lead this new strategy.

Funding from the Welsh Government Sustainable Landscapes, Sustainable Places programme has been secured to take this forward up to March 2025.

The intention is to engage consultants with relevant experience both of countryside access networks and facilitation / consensus building to support a process of consultation with all interested parties. The invitation to tender was published on 28 April with a closing date of 31 May 2023.

It is hoped to appoint suitable consultants and commence the project in mid to late June 2023 and this should provide an opportunity for a more detailed briefing at the next meeting on 11 July. LAF members will also be invited to participate in the planned consultations events / activities.

Members asked several questions including the extent to which this could involve cross border liaison with Gloucestershire CC and the necessity to balance legislative status, history and current use / community view. Members reaffirmed broad support for the proposed process and the need to address the issues.

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.

Whitestone natural playground construction has started this week and will take 4 – 6 weeks. Intention is to look at Wentwood access & recreation with key stakeholders in the longer term and address NRW's routes / signage in the short term. **AU** felt Wentwood was a lot less accessible than it had been in the past. **RC** was keen to have input and identification of what needed investment. NRW are also considering how to address the Woolpitch permissive route which is a state of disrepair.

All of the Welsh Government Woodland Estate will be brought under the National Forest program, this will allow potential access to funding for projects including recreations and access related projects. Any funding would be from 2024-25. However **RC** requested that the LAF start a program of work to identify key access developments that could be build into future funding applications.

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**Minutes of the meeting of Local Access Forum held
at Natural Resources Wales (Monmouth Office), Hadnock Road, Monmouth NP25 3NQ
on Wednesday, 3rd May, 2023 at 2.00 pm**

Ash work is continuing across the area but most of the machine work is finished. Cattle grazing utilising 'geo fencing' as part of a Heathland restoration project on Beacon hill is commencing. If a success this would potentially allow removal of gates and fences around this important heathland habitat to further improve access for all users. Discussions are underway on a management plan for feral wild boar, whose population is increasing.

Following discussion **RC** undertook to check the NRW regulations as displayed on their website regarding any restrictions on horse riding group numbers.

7. Draft Annual Report 22 / 23

The secretary presented the proposed annual report for 22/23 covering the second year of the forum's operation, as required to be prepared by the appointing authority on the forum's behalf. The report was approved, and the secretary will now arrange its translation and publication.

8. Dates of next meetings

8. Dates of future meetings.

2.00pm on Tuesday 11th July 2023
2.00pm on Thursday 9th November 2023
Venues to be confirmed

AU thanked members for their attendance and the meeting closed at 16:15pm.

Signed as a true record of the proceedings:

(Chair)

Date:

The meeting ended at Time Not Specified