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MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Local Access Forum held
at Room P4 - County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA on Tuesday, 11th July, 2023 at
2.00 pm

PRESENT: Anthea Fairey
Jenny Cockitt
Sheila Hampshire
Tracey Hook
Irene Brooke (Deputy Chair)
Shan Lewis
Phil Mundell
David Smith
Anne Underwood (Chair)

Also present: County Councillor Peter Strong

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Matthew Lewis (Countryside)	Interim Performance, Evaluation and Programme Development Lead for MonLife
Richard Ray	Paralegal
Ruth Rourke	Countryside Access Manager
Nickie Moore	Wye Valley projects Officer, Wye Valley AONB
Bob Campbell	Natural Resources Wales

1. Apologies for Absence / Introductions.

Apologies were received from members: John Askew, Cllr Ben Callard, Sylvia Fowles, Mark Storey, Martin Sweeney. Apologies were also given by Paul Keeble, MCC and Sarah Tindal Natural Resources Wales. 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 3 May 2023 (Attached).

The minutes of the meeting of 3 May 2023 were accepted (proposed by PM and seconded by SL).

In response to questions RER updated members on progress with the Paths to Communities project with Ramblers Cymru. A Service Level Agreement had now been signed between Ramblers Cymru and the County Council and a call for action and expressions of interest from communities has been circulated.

RER confirmed that the project represented additional resources, via the Access Improvement Grant, over and above the existing support for community and volunteer action, through the Community Links officer and the wider team. This would add to, and

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complement, the support already in place by providing additional support in three communities up to March 2025 (the end of the current 3-year Access Improvement Grant commitment from Welsh Government).

4. Lower Wye Valley Integrated Recreational Access Strategy (Nickie Moore, Wye Valley AONB)

NM gave an update on progress on the Lower Wye Valley Integrated Recreational Access Strategy. Members had previously considered the issues regarding the use and condition of the countryside access network with the AONB. In particular, the unclassified county road (UCR) network remains a cause of concern. These issues are complex and relate both to the condition of these routes (generally in very poor condition from water erosion/run off from surrounding land) and their use.

Conversations between the AONB Unit and MCC Highways and Countryside Access and have reaffirmed that a strategic approach is desirable, rather than cherry-picking routes that could prove difficult to justify versus other routes, and/or not actually be what the local communities and users want or need.

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.

The AONB Unit, with its strong multi-sector stakeholder connections, is leading this having secured funding from the Welsh Government (WG) Sustainable Landscapes, Sustainable Places (SLSP) up to March 2025.

The strategy will incorporate MCC's statutory requirements as Highway Authority, but also consider the effects of climate change, nature recovery, heritage, tourism and active travel agendas, and the context of the AONB Management Plan.

Working with Herefordshire Council's Procurement team (HC is the AONB Unit's treasurer), the Invitation to Tender process has been successful. The contract has been awarded to the consultancy Tomorrow's Tourism to lead on the development of the Integrated Recreation Access Strategy and Action Plan.

Tomorrow's Tourism (TT) brings in depth knowledge of tourism, recreation and effective consultation and the specialist tools to help explain and present the issues in a compelling way and they are teaming up with:

- XV Insight, a specialist firm experienced in consultation and research
- Landsmith Associates, landscape architects with green infrastructure expertise
- an IPROW member company will also be on the team to deal with all technical issues relating to rights of way
- experts in flood risk and hydrology will be drawn on when necessary.

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The programme will include detailed consultation with all stakeholders and a detailed stakeholder mapping exercise is currently underway. LAF members were asked for their recommendations as to who needs to be included in the consultation and members made a number of suggestions

5. Active Travel Schemes update

The Secretary gave a brief update on progress on key active travel proposals at Caldicot Castle Country Park / the connecting disused railway line and at Castle Meadows, Abergavenny.

With respect to Castle Meadows it was noted that an invited stakeholder session with Abergavenny Town Council was to be held on Monday 17th July. After discussion the forum nominated Jenny Cockitt to attend on its behalf. A public open session at Abergavenny Town Council offices was also to be held on Tuesday 18th July, 10:00-1:00pm. The secretary undertook to circulate these details and links to a questions and answers web page relating to Castle Meadows and the individual active travel scheme pages.

Members enquired about progress on the Undy to Rogiet shared route and any progress from Welsh Government on the promised Llanellen bridge pedestrian footbridge study. The Secretary undertook to follow these enquiries up.

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:

NRW has a new Corporate Plan to direct our work until 2023 which has recently been launched.

James Harris has joined Tim Jeffery looking after woodlands in the area. Recent wildfires in the area have distracted the team however the normal work program is still under way, major ash works are ending however minor operations will be ongoing, PROW work etc continuing. Contact has been made with a multi-cultural community group in Gloucester; The Friendship Café who use the Wye Valley woodland for many of their activities and who have a horse-riding facility in the town, we are looking to see how we can make our woodlands more inclusive and open them to a wider array of both religious and cultural groups going forwards.

A new 'natural' focused 'exploration' zone in Whitestone in the Wye Valley will open to the public at the start of the school holidays.

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The heathland grazing project at Beacon Hill is going well and if successful this will potential allow us to remove about 4 km of fencing, 5 gates and a cattle grid in the future on the site while still reviving the heathland.

Wentwood steering group meeting yet to happen however we are keen to engage with the wider landowner stakeholders and the AONB to look at the future of the site in respect to recreation and access. We hope to approach the LAF for some formal advice shortly once the stakeholder group has met.

We hope to bid for some National Forest funding from WG 24-25 to improve access and recreation in our area.

The forest operations program is focused on managing tree diseases Larch & Ash die back, planned operations that will now start in September due to bird nesting and other protection restrictions are:

- Nine Wells (thinning)
- Chepstow Park (Larch removal)
- Trelleck New Mills (clear felling)
- Fedw Wood (clear felling)
- Brias Grove (thinning)
- Wentwood East (thinning)

There have been several complaints regarding stone that has been used to prepare forest roads for future forestry operations in the area, mainly at Wet Meadow and at Beacon Hill and this has started an internal process to evaluate the potential to have two specifications of road surface in the SE with a better grade of material being used on high use recreation sites.

7. Recruitment of New Forum (Report attached)

The secretary presented the proposed arrangements for the recruitment of the Monmouthshire Local Access Forum for the next 3-year period of appointment as the current term of appointment ends on 24 November 2023 and arrangements are now required to recruit a new forum to ensure continuity.

The County Council meeting on 20 July 2023 was due consider a report, which recommends a, hopefully streamlined, process both for this recruitment process and future appointments.

8. Dates of next meeting - 2.00pm on Thursday 9th November 2023 (the final meeting of the current forum) Venue to be confirmed

2.00pm on Thursday 9th November 2023 at County Hall, Usk

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AU thanked members for their attendance.

The meeting ended at 4.30 pm

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