

Evidence from the Mid & West Berks Local Access Forum

A local access forum under Section 94 of the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000, appointed by, and advising, West Berkshire District Council, Reading Borough Council, Wokingham Borough Council and other section 94(4) bodies.

Summary

The Mid & West Berks Local Access Forum is a statutory body set up under the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000 to advise local authorities and other bodies 'as to the improvement of public access to land for the purposes of open air recreation'. We strongly support Part 1, section (1) (b) of the Bill: financial assistance for public access, particularly to improve the public rights of way network and access to it and other open spaces by a range of measures which reward land managers for doing so. We set out 8 proposals and the key benefits of doing so. Our proposals support many of the points in the recently published 25 year Environment Plan. Our recommendation is that public money should be used to support public paths and public open spaces.

- 1. The Mid & West Berks Local Access Forum** was established in 2003 and, since then, has been composed of up to 20 members who include users of public rights of way & open access land, land managers and others (eg. conservationists). It meets 3 times a year and deals with business between meetings by email correspondence to provide balanced advice on a range of public access issues. It covers rural, semi-rural and urban areas. It has a wide range of expertise & experience and feels well placed to advise central government of the current short comings and problems of using the public access network.

Recommendation

- 2.** Public money should be used to support the improvement of public paths, the public path network and public open spaces.

Evidence

- 3.** We are submitting evidence in support of Part 1, section (1) (b) of the Bill:

'The Secretary of State may give financial assistance for or in connection with any of the following purposes—

(b) supporting public access to and enjoyment of the countryside, farmland or woodland and better understanding of the environment;'

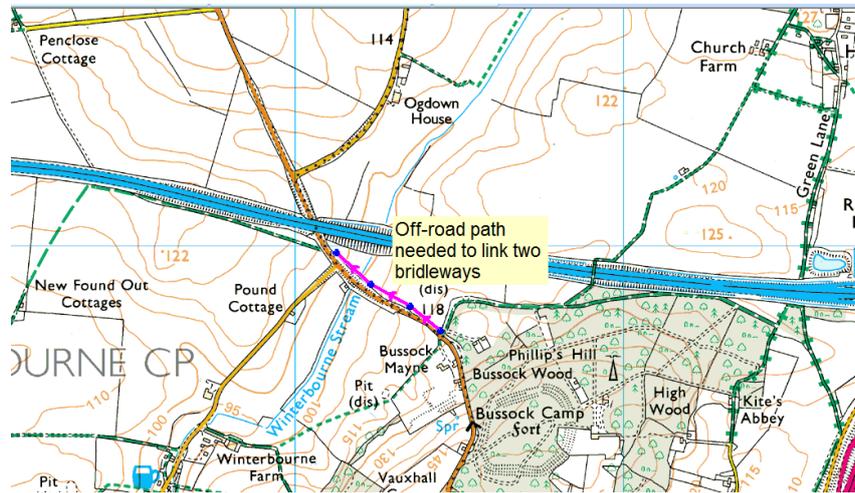
4. In particular, we wish to ensure that financial assistance is given to improve the public rights of way network (public paths) and access to it and to open spaces, for non-motorised users.
5. We believe that the public rights of way network is a much under-rated example of natural capital which can be developed for the benefit of the public, land managers and the environment. Future farm subsidies offer an excellent opportunity to provide land managers with an income stream while helping to solve the current problems with public access which we see on a frequent basis, ie. the lack of connectivity of the network and poor maintenance of it. The development of the public rights of way network will provide one of the most direct & obvious benefits to the public from public subsidies, ie. public goods for public money.
6. Financial support for public paths will help achieve the public access objectives in Chapter 3 of the 25 Year Environment Plan ¹ and the recommendations in the recent House of Lords report on the NERC Act 2006, published 22 March 2018 (paragraphs 24 and 167) ².
7. The public rights of way network provides a framework to improve health & well-being in the natural environment, is available to the widest possible range of ages & socio-economic groups, free at the point of use for a range of activities and gives an insight into the local heritage.
8. Unfortunately the public rights of way network has become badly fragmented because the tarmacked roads which link public rights of way and open spaces have become too dangerous to use by foot, bike, & horse. Our evidence provides ideas to unlock the potential of the public rights of way network while providing an income stream for land managers.
9. We propose 8 schemes which land managers could choose from:
 - a. **Payment for existing public rights of way:** *Payment to farmers & land managers for the presence of definitive public rights of way which run over their land.*
 - b. **Payment for maintaining & enhancing existing public rights of way:** *Payment to farmers & land managers for maintenance (eg mowing, cutting back hedges, maintaining surfaces, improving quality of gates and catches etc) and enhancing (eg widening, draining etc) existing public rights of way on their land.*
 - c. **Link paths: linking town and country:** *Payment to farmers & land managers for the creation of new off-road link paths which take the public off roads, plug gaps in the public rights of way network and / or link urban areas to the countryside.*

Example:

In Winterbourne parish, West Berkshire, the B4494 has become busy with fast traffic. An off-road path (in pink) is needed to connect the two bridleways (in green) to improve safety. The landowners /occupiers should be rewarded for this.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan>

²² <https://www.parliament.uk/nerc-act-committee>



- d. **Creation of Community Circuits and Heritage Trails:** *Payment to farmers & land managers for the creation of off-road community circuits to educate urban and rural dwellers about their local environment and farming practices while improving health and well-being.*
 - e. **Locations for specific activities: 'Places to play':** *Payment to farmers & land managers for provision of land & tracks for specific activities, eg. dog walking.*
 - f. **Places to park:** *Payment to farmers & land managers for provision & maintenance of parking facilities.*
 - g. **Conservation volunteer groups:** *Payment to land managers for the provision of land suitable for conservation volunteer groups, such as Green Gyms, to carry out practical conservation activities.*
 - h. **Public access, free at the point of use, to all publicly owned woodland & forests and access for horse riders and cyclists to existing tracks over open access land.**
10. Details on how these proposals would work are available on request with respect to the benefit to land managers, benefit to user groups, benefit to society & the environment & method of operation.
11. We believe that our proposal to offer financial assistance to improve the public path network and access to it and other open spaces offers the following to the public and land managers:
- a. Informal, outdoor activity, free at the point of use, to encourage uptake by all socio-economic groups and ages, whether walking, jogging, horse riding, carriage driving, cycling or disabled;
 - b. Financial reward to land managers dependent on the amount of new access provided and maintained; the amount of existing access maintained and improved; the number of user groups provided for eg. multi-use to get more funding than single use.
 - c. Improved safety by taking vulnerable users off tarmac roads.
 - d. Choice for landowners on which user groups to allow. Wherever suitable, new access should provide for multiple activities but land managers to have the choice about which user groups to accept.

e. Available to the public most of the time, not just at limited opening hours

12. The key benefits of our proposals are shown in the flow chart below.

