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West Sussex Local Access Forum



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Sent by email to:
agricultureconsultation@defra.gsi.gov.uk

Dear Sir/Madam

Consultation on “Health and Harmony”: the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit

I am responding to the above consultation on behalf of the West Sussex Local Access Forum (WSLAF).

West Sussex Local Access Forum (WSLAF) is an independent advisory body, established under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, to give access advice to local authorities, statutory organisations and non-government organisations. In giving that advice, the Forum's main objective is to ensure the existing network of public rights of way (prows), as well as the wider access network, is protected and where possible enhanced. The Forum has a balanced membership of knowledgeable and experienced users (walkers, cyclists, horse riders and carriage drivers), landowners and other interests (including conservation, disabled access, landscape). For further information about the Forum please visit www.wslaf.org.

Background

WSLAF covers the areas of West Sussex outside the South Downs National Park (SDNP), which has its own LAF. In our area, both north and south of the SDNP, the PROW are mainly footpaths with a very limited number of bridleways. The paths are generally fragmented, many ending on very busy roads with no onward connectivity, or having to be linked by the use of minor rural roads. These have become unsafe for non-motorised users (NMUs) because of increasing traffic levels exacerbated by the large amount of development occurring throughout the county.

Our Proposal

We believe there is an opportunity following the United Kingdom's departure from the EU, to improve public access to the countryside.

A post-Brexit agricultural funding model to promote non-motorised access to the countryside, linking farm subsidies with enhanced access is needed to ensure that wider public benefit is secured in return for public money.

Those who own and manage the land should be financially rewarded for providing additional access or improvements to existing access by the creation of a payment/subsidy system. Public money used for responsible public access to bring maximum public benefit.

It's important to improve public access to our countryside for walkers, cyclists, and horse riders, with every level of mobility. A well-connected public rights of way network provides excellent value for money, and is an asset that can be used for both transport and recreation, supporting local economies and tourism, improving people's safety, health and mental well-being, and bringing benefits for wildlife and biodiversity in both urban areas and the countryside.

Creating New Access

Schemes for the provision of new access need to be targeted and selective and should have a demonstrable public benefit, as well as being attractive to those who own or manage the land through the offering of financial support.

Ideally new access should be permanent (definitive rights of way), or as a minimum long-term permissive.

Maximum benefit can be encouraged by the creation of rights of way which improve connectivity and reduce fragmentation for all NMUs (pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians). Providing such routes should attract a higher level of subsidy.

With Access Land, improved connectivity to the rights of way network and the introduction of higher access rights across these areas would improve public benefit.

In the case of existing rights of way, the creation of "behind the hedge paths" which run alongside roads and link cul-de-sac routes, or rights of way on either side of the road, would minimise user's contact with traffic, and improve public safety. In this way off-road circular routes can be established, limiting the amount of time NMUs spend on roads, of particular benefit to equestrians.

Improving Existing Access

Payments could be made for the improvement of existing rights of way. This could include providing greater widths to paths, improving the maintenance (or removal where appropriate) of gates and stiles, preventing encroachment of vegetation, and providing higher rights where needed and suitable.

More support should be given to changes to the network which benefit both users and landowners/managers, for example agreed diversions in exchange for new paths or upgrades.

How can this be achieved

Schemes need to be of mutual benefit to landowners/managers, and users of the public rights of way network.

Schemes should be assessed against agreed criteria, such as public demand, objectives of the rights of way improvement plan, connectivity and safety. This would require a national template.

LAFs should be closely involved, to ensure proposals are useful and of best value, and schemes could be assessed by LAFs in liaison with local Highway Authority Rights of Way departments.

Ongoing considerations

Schemes need to be adequately monitored, and a more thorough cross-compliance regime developed, that is fair to both landowners/managers and the public, and ensures that all legislation is complied with.

Routes should be publicised, easily accessible to the public, and listed on highway authorities Interactive Maps or the Definitive Maps, and on OS maps. All routes need to be adequately signed and waymarked.

This letter constitutes formal advice from the West Sussex Local Access Forum. DEFRA is required, in accordance with section 94(5) of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, to have regard to relevant advice from this Local Access Forum in carrying out its functions.

Thank you for considering WSLAF's comments. Members look forward to being updated on progress on this consultation.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jane Noble', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jane Noble, Forum Officer
West Sussex Local Access Forum

Copy for information to: All WSLAF members