

Shropshire Local Access Forum	<u>Item</u>	<u>Paper</u>
24 January 2011	4	A
10.00 a.m.		

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SHROPSHIRE LOCAL ACCESS FORUM
HELD ON 21 OCTOBER 2010 AT 10.00 A.M. AT THE SHIREHALL ABBEY
FOREGATE SHREWSBURY**

Present

Members

Mr Gareph Boxley, Mr Steve Charmley, Mr Chris Chillingworth, Mr Richard Cotham, Mr David Cowell Mr Bob Hill, Mrs Jane Ing (Chair), Dr Jane Morris, Mr Stuart Morgan, Mrs Alison Parker and Mrs Zia Robins

Officers

Ms Jan Cook, Team Leader, Traffic and Transport Studies, Ms Deb Hughes, Countryside Access Manager, Officer, Mr Jim Stabler, Access Development Officer and Mr David Wise, Forum Secretary

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Mr Stephen Bell, Mr Clive Leworthy, Mr Mike Owen, Mr Roger Plowden, Ms Sula Rayska, Mr David Shelley and Mr Mark Weston.

Mr Jonathan Felton, Natural England, had also indicated that he was unable to attend the meeting.

2. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

3. Shropshire Local Transport Plan (LTP3)

Jan Cook, Team Leader, Traffic and Transport Studies presented a report on the preparation of the next Local Transport Plan for Shropshire.

She explained that Shropshire Council were preparing a new Local Transport Plan to cover the period April 2011 to March 2026. The Plan would have a very wide remit covering every aspect of transport. The draft high level objectives

were set out in Appendix A. There would be a series of documents covering essentially, the core transport strategy, an implementation plan and a series of supplementary documents, e.g. walking, cycling and parking strategies, which would be developed periodically. Some studies would therefore come later and be renewed, as required.

With regard to funding Ms Cook explained that the Department for Transport had provided nearly £19m in 2010/11 in capital funding, the majority of which was used on maintaining highways and a smaller proportion (£4m) on integrated transport schemes. However, both capital and revenue funding could be subject to large scale reductions and more would be known in the next few weeks.

The objectives were being considered in the context of their relationship to the Shropshire Community Plan, which had three priorities: Enterprise and growth, with strong market towns and rebalanced rural settlements; Responding to climate change and enhancing our natural and built environment, and healthy safe and confident people and communities.

In the Community Plan there was a focus on enabling older people to be active e.g. where possible removing stiles and other barriers to access.

Questions were raised about the high cost of car parking. It was also pointed out that holders of disabled blue badges were being asked to pay the normal price. Ms Cook replied that car parking was a contentious issue and a separate car parking strategy was being developed. The demand for parking in Shrewsbury town centre was more than the environment could cope with and it was priced accordingly. She recommended using Park and Ride. However, comparing the cost with other towns, car parking charges were relatively inexpensive.

In relation to the objective of reducing the impact of traffic on communities and the quality of life, she confirmed that a number of speed limits had been changed and lowered as a result of new policies, with many aimed at reducing traffic speeds in settlements in rural areas. In addition vehicle activated signs appeared effective in jogging motorists' attention to the speed they should be travelling.

It was suggested that there should be a default speed limit of 50 mph for country lanes. Ms Cook replied that the main problem was that of enforcement as blanket traffic regulation orders were not supported by the Police, but she would be interested to know whether there were any other areas in the country with such policies. She agreed to look at the suggestion.

A member stated that as the Police could not possibly enforce widespread speed limits, why had the Council not implemented traffic calming measures in association with speed limits? Ms Cook explained that traffic calming measures had been part of ambitious proposals to extend village speed limits. However, such schemes were incredibly expensive and had met with strong resistance from local communities, who did not want chicanes or humps outside their houses because of the potential noise and nuisance. So the policy had been changed.

With regard to the policy to improve sustainable access reference was made to the small number of safe pedestrian crossings over the A5 dual-carriageway road around Shrewsbury. Ms Cook replied that she accepted that the A5 formed a barrier to cyclists and pedestrians. Shropshire Council would be pushing the Highways Agency, which was responsible for this road, to provide improved crossing facilities for cyclists and pedestrians as part of any junction improvements.

A request was made for further white lines on roads for the benefit of cyclists. She replied that the issue in this case was that the majority of Shropshire roads were of insufficient width to allow the delineation of separate cycle lanes.

It was pointed out that there had been no mention of horse riding in the report. The importance of roadside verges for horseriders should also not be overlooked. Horseriding was not simply for adults but there were increased numbers of school children out riding on the roads during the school holidays. Ms Cook replied that horseriding would be mentioned in the Transport Plan, but it was not seen as a priority, as it was a leisure pursuit, not an everyday transport element.

4. Minutes

RESOLVED : That the Minutes of the last meeting held on 15 July 2010 be approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record.

Arising thereon:

Quiet Lanes (Item 5.3)

A request was made for the subject of Quiet Lanes to feature on the agenda of the next meeting.

5. Public Question Time

There were no public questions.

6. Walkers' Forum changes

The minutes of the Walkers Forum meeting held on 1 October 2010 were circulated.

Ms Hughes drew attention to various policy changes with regard to the Forum, detailed in the minutes, upon which there had been broad agreement at the previous meeting:

The Forum would become known as The Walking Forum to reflect their wider remit and broadening of representatives to include all forms of walking activities.

The emphasis in future would be on physical activity and walking and countryside and tourism activities. They wanted to recognise fully the amount of guided walks and promote the health benefits as well.

The Forum would discuss policy issues and contribute to the preparation of LTP3, which was seen as a key area of work.

RESOLVED: That the proposed new ethos of the Walking Forum be endorsed.

7. Rights of Way CROW Act Task and Finish Group

Ms Hughes reported that the work of the Task and Finish Group had been completed. The final report of the Group had been taken to the Community Services Scrutiny Committee, where she had outlined the Forum's comments.

A new route hierarchical system was intended to be brought in together with a scoring system to avoid the possibility of arbitrary decisions in responding to complaints about maintenance and other issues raised by the public, as discussed previously.

The Scrutiny Committee had agreed to changes in priorities suggested by members of the Forum. A comment had been made that walking for health routes should be given a higher priority in the route hierarchy, and that had been agreed.

The comments about the usefulness of Stewardship schemes were accepted as important and therefore linking rights of way would be given priority.

The Forum had also mentioned routes near the county boundary which might be near large populations. This had been examined but felt to be a minor issue and was not seen as a criteria for inclusion in the hierarchy.

With regard to repeat offences by landowners, the Scrutiny Committee had agreed that the old policy of taking them into account should be re-inserted and therefore would be given greater prioritisation.

The Access Team were carrying out a 100% condition survey of the network within the parish access project areas. Members wanted to see how the new approach to tackling problems and the hierarchy of routes worked when tested against the condition survey, to see whether any further changes needed to be made.

A report would be made to the Community Scrutiny Committee and the policies would be reviewed in twelve months time to take into account the condition survey data.

The next stage was the submission of the report to Cabinet in November.

8. Shropshire Council Countryside Access Team Annual Report 2009/10: Making a Difference

The Chair stated that she had asked Jane Morris to prepare a short report on the document.

Dr Morris explained that the annual report demonstrated that a lot of progress was being achieved in helping access to the countryside from parish through to county level. The presentation was clear with use of charts, graphs and photos. However, one criticism was that spreading tables across pages without repeating the column titles was irritating. She was also concerned about the use of abbreviations, when words should be written out in full, at least for the first time. She abhorred the closed shop they engendered and suggested much less use of them.

Real progress had been made in the number of gates put in place, the development of the websites for countryside users, which were being increasingly downloaded, and the development of the Walking for Health Programme. In conclusion she thanked Deb Hughes for the much good work she had managed.

Other members also gave their views on the annual report.

The wealth of photographs was welcomed but it was pointed out that they seemed to be based solely on walking. The inclusion of photos of equestrians, and of vehicles using byways open to all traffic was also requested in future. Members were asked to submit any photographs that might be suitable.

They also complimented officers on the quality of the website, compared to other councils and other organisations. The difficulties/irritation in trying to find permissive routes properly recorded by Natural England on their website, was also referred to.

9. Shropshire Local Access Forum Annual Report

The Forum considered the draft annual report for 2009/10 prepared by Jim Stabler.

RESOLVED : That the report be approved, subject to the insertion of 'take any' in the last line of the paragraph on consultations with other bodies, the correction of spelling mistakes in the first bullet point of the paragraph on feedback from other forums and representing being replaced by fields of interest with regard to the Forum membership.

10. Updates

10.1 Diversion of the Shropshire Way/ Jack Mytton Way at Plowden

Mr Stabler was pleased to report that he had held further discussions with Mr Plowden, who had agreed to the diversion of the route around the former railway station. It was hoped that the necessary works would be carried out during the winter.

10.2 Minsterley – Pontesbury Cycleway

Mr Stabler reported that feasibility studies had been undertaken, but there was no funding available at the moment for the former railway route proposal. The Group had been told to gain political support to improve their chances of funding being allocated.

10.3 Much Wenlock Quarry

Mr Stabler reported that the acquisition of Lea Quarries North and South by the National Trust would be a tremendous public asset.

He had taken the Council's bridge engineer to view the disused railway tunnel. An internal inspection would also be required to check whether it could be safely used by members of the public, as part of a re-routing of the Shropshire Way.

10.4 Shropshire Way

Mr Stabler reported that he had given a presentation to the Oswestry Local Joint Committee on the project to extend the Shropshire Way around Oswestry, and they were very keen to get involved in the project.

A Shropshire Way Project Officer, Peter Dunhill, had been appointed and he would be starting work on 8 November for a period of two years. Mr Stabler also briefly reported on proposals in North Shropshire to upgrade the route and add new links, and the development of circular walks around Much Wenlock and the Shropshire Way to make it a hub for discovering East Shropshire.

Ms Hughes reported that links between actions of rural development (LEADER) funding had been obtained, to develop the rural heritage and enhanced tourism potential of Offa's Dyke, in the Stiperstones area as far as Bayston Hill, Shrewsbury, creating a circular walk around Snailbeach and Pontesbury.

It was also proposed to create a new section of the Shropshire Way into Shrewsbury, over the municipal golf course and along the Rea Valley, ending at Shrewsbury Abbey. These walking routes were well used but were not on the Definitive Map, and a legal dedication would be required. She was committed to finding the resources, in order that this ideal green corridor route could be used.

RESOLVED : That the Forum wholeheartedly agree with the proposed new route of the Shropshire Way into Shrewsbury

10.5 Stakeholder Working Group on Unrecorded Public Rights of Way

Ms Hughes stated that there was nothing further to report on this issue – it had all gone quiet.

A member expressed concern that 2026, the current cut-off date for recording historic rights of way on the Definitive Map, was only 60 meetings away, so there should not be any complacency about the matter.

11. Review of England Access Forum

The Forum received for information a copy of the response compiled by Mr Stabler and the Chair which had been sent to Natural England commenting on the future of the England Access Forum and the structure of the overall Access Forum hierarchy.

12. LAF Members' Handbook

Mr Stabler reported that only two members had commented on possible contents. He would willingly give abbreviations and guidance on what were local, regional responsibilities and the relationship with EAF.

There was a Natural England handbook for LAF members, comprising 277 pages, and they were looking to produce a simplified version.

Members suggested that there should be a list of both fellow LAF members and officer contacts and guidance on how to claim expenses.

Mr Stabler said that he would put together a draft proposal to members so they could comment before the next meeting.

13. DEFRA Consultation document : An invitation to shape the nature of England

It was reported that Defra had produced a consultation document in advance of a new White Paper on the natural environment, planned for Spring 2011. The document sought answers to a number of questions and the Forum were asked to discuss questions 6, 7 and 8 to enable a response to be made on their behalf.

Question 6: What best practice and innovative approaches to protecting and enhancing our natural environment do you think should be considered as we develop the White Paper?

In discussing this question it was noted that landowners received Common Agricultural Policy subsidy payments, if they met cross compliance requirements in respect of all their activities including the maintenance of landscapes and the protection of habitats.

However, it was pointed out that public rights of way were highways and historically occupiers had not had to pay rent or taxes on the areas of land crossed by them. They were now classed as uncropped land, and were deducted from any payments made by the Rural Payments Agency.

The Forum agreed that it would be helpful if landowners received an incentive to maintain rights of way if presently this land provided no income.

Members expressed concerns that it was very difficult to put in a permissive path because of unnecessary bureaucracy, which was a minefield, and accordingly deterred farmers from agreeing to the creation of permissive paths across their land. They also felt that permissive paths should be targeted.

When landowners received specific payments for permissive paths schemes, members agreed that they should be properly vetted. This was not the case at present. Mr Stabler reported that Natural England now consulted Shropshire Council on every scheme involving public access, to check whether the individuals had a good record of maintaining public rights of way across their land and whether there were any outstanding problems, before approval was given. Members agreed that this example of good practice should be commended for adoption on a national basis.

Members also stated that Natural England gave public access much less priority than some of their other activities, with very little mention on their website. It was hoped that the information held on permissive paths would be kept up to date and adequate publicity given in the future.

The question of whether the natural environment should be protected in its current state was also discussed. It was pointed out that because of climate change, habitats were changing, as were farming practices, with for example Kent farmers planting walnuts and the expansion of vineyards in Hereford and Worcester. The current landscape had been shaped by mankind over the centuries and perhaps therefore the aim should be to keep it special rather than simply protection.

Members considered that every effort should be made by organisations to utilise and co-ordinate volunteers more effectively, and they should have the necessary training and adequate capacity to do this. It was also proposed that consideration should be given to simplifying or relaxing health and safety guidelines where appropriate. Members agreed that they should recommend that a national volunteer website should be established.

Question 7: How best can we harness and build on public enthusiasm for the natural environment so people can help improve it through local action, as informed consumers or by shaping policy?

Members discussed Parish Plans which gave a birds eye view of socio-economic and environmental issues at the local level and proposed answers in the form of action plans. It was pointed out that in Shropshire a number of Parish Path Partnerships (P3) had been established through the initial parish planning

approach. They carried out important practical improvement work to the local network of rights of way. This grass roots support had been very helpful to Shropshire Council, but some Councils did not have the assistance of P3 Groups. Members agreed that all councils should be advised to administer Parish Path Partnerships.

It was pointed out that Biodiversity map surveys (using Phase One mapping techniques and Target Notes) had also been carried out under the auspices of parish plan work. The species composition and diversity within different types of habitat in fields and woodlands, etc. could be listed to provide each parish with a record of their biodiversity. This survey work was always carried out with the permission of landowners.

Members agreed that Parish Plans should be an important influence on upper tier local authorities and should be fully taken into account when decisions were made on future development proposals which affected their communities.

Question 8: What should be our vision for the role of Civil Society in managing and enhancing the natural environment and for engaging individuals, businesses and communities in setting the agenda for that work?

The Chair pointed out that Muller Dairy based at Market Drayton, were a well known national company, whose workforce carried out volunteering work e.g. with the Shropshire Wildlife Trust. Other members referred to examples of local businesses and organisations which helped the environment e.g. Middle Woodbatch Farm which looked after a section of the Shropshire Way, RAF Shawbury and Walford College.

Members agreed that more businesses should encourage their workforces to undertake voluntary work and participate in enriching the countryside. They also felt that local companies could for example adopt stiles or gates as well as maintaining traffic islands to improve their appearance.

14. Feedback from other Forums and items for noting

The Forum received for information:

Minutes of Shropshire Riding and Carriage Driving Groups held on 7 June 2010
Minutes of Shropshire Hills AONB Recreation Tourism and Products Development Group held on 22 September 2010
Shropshire Cycle Forum Minutes of 7 September 2010
Access newsletter issue No. 46

15. Future meetings/frequency/ format of away day/ future agenda items

It was suggested that the Sustainable Tourism Strategy for the Shropshire Hills should be the subject of a presentation at a future meeting.

A member felt that Shropshire failed to market itself as a walking destination, even though the county had the most varied scenic walking experiences and a mix of circular, linear and long distance walks. Mr Stabler accepted that while the

Council had some money allocated for promotional work a lot more could be done in this area. It was suggested that a Facebook page for Shropshire or use of Twitter would be productive.

It was noted that meetings had been scheduled for 24 January and 27 April 2011. It was agreed that meetings should continue on a quarterly basis with an away day. Proposed dates for 2011/12 would be put to the next meeting for approval.

Signed

Date

The meeting closed at 12.40 p.m.