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| Shropshire Local Access Forum | <u>Item</u> | <u>Paper</u> |
| 13 May 2011 | 6 | A |
| 10.00 a.m. | | |

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SHROPSHIRE LOCAL ACCESS FORUM
HELD ON 24 JANUARY 2011 AT 10.00 A.M. AT THE SHIREHALL ABBEY
FOREGATE SHREWSBURY**

Present

Members

Mr Stephen Bell, Mr Chris Chillingworth, Mr David Cowell, Mrs Jane Ing (Chair), Mr Stuart Morgan, Dr Jane Morris,, Mrs Alison Parker, Ms Sula Rayska, Mrs Zia Robins and Mr Mark Weston (Vice-Chair).

Officers

Ms Lisa Barlow, Community Officer, Shropshire Wildlife Trust, Mr Mark Blount, Development Manager, Leisure and Outdoor Recreation Service, Mr Jonathan Felton, Senior Specialist for Access and Recreation, Natural England, Mr Jonathan Hayes, Team Leader Public Transport, Ms Deb Hughes, Countryside Access Manager, Richard Knight, Access Maintenance Team Leader, Mr David Wise, Forum Secretary and Mr Neil Willcox, Head of Leisure and Outdoor Recreation.

1. David Shelley

Members stood for a minute's silence in memory of Mr David Shelley, who had died on 5 December 2010.

2. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Mr Gareph Boxley, Mr Richard Cotham, Mr Bob Hill, Mr Mike Owen and Mr Roger Plowden.

Mr Jim Stabler, Access Development Officer also gave his apologies.

It was reported that Mr Clive Leworthy had resigned from the Forum.

3. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made by Members.

4. Minutes

RESOLVED : That the Minutes of the last meeting held on 21 October 2010 be approved and signed by the Chair as a correct record, subject to noting that the comments recorded in Item 15 had not been expressed in a negative manner. Shropshire was a unique walking experience and means of identifying it as a tourist destination should be encouraged.

5. Public Question Time

A written copy of three public questions submitted by Mr Hodges was circulated at the meeting.

Mr Hodges stated that the decision to close public conveniences, affected not just Shrewsbury, but the whole of the county and he urged the Forum to make representations.

A written summary was provided by the Secretary on a proposed community toilet scheme, in areas where Council ran public toilets were to be closed. This scheme would allow members of the public to use toilet facilities in participating local businesses. The Chair suggested that further information should be sought on the effect of the closure decision.

With regard to Mr Hodges' request for information on the Shropshire Way route in Shrewsbury, Ms Hughes informed the meeting that a report had been drafted on the dedication of a public footpath through the Rea Valley. There was no intention to abandon the Shropshire Way route along Beehive Lane.

It was agreed that a presentation should be made to the Walking Forum on proposals to allow contra flow cycling in some one-way streets in Shrewsbury.

6. Natural England Organisational Changes

Mr Felton reported that following the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review it had been proposed to reduce Natural England's revenue budget by 32% over the next two years. Four hundred staff were being made redundant, with around another 400 posts scheduled to be lost in the subsequent financial year.

There would be a restructuring/reorganisation and there would not be regional offices any more.

Natural England would concentrate more on bio-diversity themes, agricultural reform and the green economy. The organisation would not be concerned with writing policy, but would be concentrating on customer focus.

Access and public rights of way were no longer seen as a priority, but Natural England would still be undertaking their statutory duties under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 and Natural England and Rural Communities Act 2006. They would be involved with coastal access areas e.g. the flagship schemes around Weymouth, open access, and undertake a review

of the national trails with a view to setting up management trusts. It was proposed to sell off the Public Forest Estate and the management of Areas of Outstanding Natural beauty would again be taken under the wing of DEFRA.

Natural England had still to make a decision on the future of the England Access Forum. There was also a question mark over the future of Regional Local Access Forum co-ordinators.

With a much reduced budget attention would be focussed on developing a corporate plan that concentrated on eco systems and natural assets. Having a more holistic approach was a laudable aim, but it would be difficult to achieve with less resources.

Mr Felton also explained the reasons for the closure of revenue funding of access schemes under HLS.

With regard to the aim of achieving more local support via the Big Society, members pointed out that this had existed for a long time e.g. parish plans and P3 groups.

In reply to a question on Walking for Health schemes, he reported that another sponsor was being sought and the likelihood was that they would transfer from Natural England to the Department of Health.

Natural England would try to ensure that Local Access Forums were kept fully up-to-date with the reductions, especially those which impacted on their work.

7. Bus Strategy for Shropshire 2011-2016 – Consultation

Mr Jonathan Hayes gave a power point presentation.

He explained that Shropshire Council were developing a sustainable transport network to meet the aims and objectives, as less funding would be available in the future. Under the consultation process views were being sought from members of the public and stakeholders on what the spending priorities should be.

There would not be any changes in bus services provided by operators on a commercial basis, but there would be reductions in bus services supported by Shropshire Council.

Reductions would include, service frequency reductions e.g. inter-urban services which operated on an hourly frequency, would with less subsidy operate once every two hours between peak times and in local town services . The subsidy would be removed from certain Sunday services and selected evening services resulting in fare increases. There would also be the withdrawal of high cost services (which cost over £4 per passenger trip) and subsidies would also be withdrawn from services pre-dominantly carrying non-entitled school children. Other proposals were to increase passenger contributions in respect of community car schemes (Dial-a-Ride), to increase fares on Shrewsbury Park and Ride, through the removal of concessions, and also to cease pre-9.30 a.m. concessions on Park and Ride.

There was no intention to review Shropshire Link services for the next six months, but the effects of the changes on usage of this service would be monitored.

Shropshire Council's 2011/12 draft budget strategy proposed savings of around £700,000 from the public transport and concessionary fares budget. If the decision was taken to reduce the public transport network to the minimum set out in the draft strategy, a further £300,000 could be saved and achieve total annual savings of £1 million. He also drew attention to the fact that as part of the consultation process road shows were taking place in various locations in the county. Comments from the consultation process would be considered in the final Bus Strategy which would be submitted to the Council in April.

8. Local Transport Plan (LTP3)

It was reported that the bus strategy formed part of the Local Transport Plan, which had been the subject of a presentation at the previous meeting from Jan Cook. A survey on priorities could be undertaken on line at <http://www.shropshire.gov.uk/transportconsultation>

9. The Sale of the Public Forest Estate in England

The Forum considered a report from the Secretary on the implications of proposals to sell a significant proportion of the Public Forest Estate.

Mr Weston reported that concerns had been expressed about future public access because the Government had only indicated that they would retain statutory rights of access on foot for public recreation and not tacit access for equestrians and cyclists. It would however be possible for the Forestry Commission to dedicate spatial higher rights (riding, cycling, carriage driving) under Section 16 of the CRoW Act 2000.

It was reported that this was an important access issue, as for example part of the Jack Mytton Way ran through Forestry Commission land. Haughmond Hill was also part leased and part owned by the Forestry Commission.

Ms Hughes added that there were many routes through Forestry Commission land, and a number of which were not legally defined.

A question was also raised about a sentence in the report which referred to the concerns of the Open Spaces Society that if land was sold off and used for another purpose then the CRoW Act would no longer apply. It was unclear whether access land which was then sold off and used for another purpose could become excepted land. It was explained that if a public right of way was dedicated by the landowner it created a right of access in perpetuity, (or in respect of leasehold land for the period of the lease).

RESOLVED : That Shropshire MPs be urged to support the Forum's concerns and make representations to the Secretary of State

10. Shropshire Council Budget 2011/ 12 and organisational changes

Neil Willcox, Head of Leisure and Outdoor Recreation, reported on the rapid changes being experienced by Shropshire Council, which were in the middle of a process of evaluation, budget setting, restructuring and transformation.

Things were changing rapidly and while it was not possible at this stage to provide a detailed picture of the future situation he was able to reference information already within the public domain. He also speculated from a personal stand point, on how the management of rights of way and parks and sites might respond to the changes.

The context was that £66 million in savings needed to be achieved over the four years with savings being front loaded to achieve approximately £20 million in 2011/12.

Shropshire Council had responded to the 2011/12 savings targets in a number of ways, through changes to terms and conditions of staff employment, additional income from fees and charges, changes to roles and responsibilities of Council managers and efficiency and service savings.

For the Outdoor Recreation Service a number of savings for 2011/12 had already been confirmed including:

No recruitment into vacancies within the Countryside Access Team – £52,000
Discontinuing parks grants to Parish Councils in the Oswestry area - £6,000
Review of use of Modern Apprentices and student placements - £30,000
Investment in improved retail at Severn Valley Park - £6,000

Mr Willcox drew the Forum's attention to a report on the Council's Medium Term Financial plan report, considered by Cabinet on the 9 November 2011, which was a good starting point for understanding the Council's intended approach to meeting future challenges. This report referenced the localisation of services, extending local choice and engagement, service changes and reprioritisation, creating new forms of services and new forms of service delivery, reflecting key priorities including economic growth, flourishing Shropshire communities, public confidence, high quality schools, and a modern infrastructure. The report had also referred to what the Council might need to stop doing or to do differently. Outdoor Recreation had been included within this review list.

With regard to the Outdoor Recreation Service, the status quo was not an option.

- The Service would need to do things differently – which had started with the suggested creation of a single Outdoor Recreation Service. A larger cultural change would also be required.
- The Service would need to involve local communities in decisions.
- The Service would need to build on already successful local relationships and partnerships – parish and town councils, parish paths partnership volunteers, site management groups, and myriad groups of volunteers.
- The Service would need to work more and differently with the voluntary and community sector (the third sector) which included the Ramblers

Association, Shropshire Wildlife Trust, Shropshire Walking Forum and the Local Access Forum.

Mr Willcox also referred to some examples of how this might look in a practical sense such as the Active Market Town approach recently adopted in Oswestry. Budgets could be devolved to support the aims and aspirations of the local communities. A good example was the Pontesbury Parish Paths Group where there was a well maintained rights of way network strongly owned by local communities and providing access to the countryside and supporting promoted routes, disabled access and walking schemes. Other possibilities were asset transfer to alternative governance arrangements or retaining minimal strategic and significant responsibilities – long distance routes, major circular routes, health and safety and large capital works.

He also gave examples of where Outdoor Recreation had an important contribution to meeting the “big national agendas” With regard to Big Society, locality working with a strong community and volunteering ethos was already well established and there was a real opportunity to further encourage community ownership and engagement. Other examples were supporting Shropshire’s local economy through tourism. A walk in the countryside was a key element of what made Shropshire an attractive place to visit with good access underpinning initiatives such as the Shropshire Hills AONB and ‘Walkers are Welcome’ Towns. The creation of GP consortia and the merger of public health functions within the Council provided a major opportunity to be commissioned to deliver well being services, particularly around the healthy living and physical activity agendas. The promotion of independence and the use of personal budgets within Adult Social Care would also give the service a further opportunity to provide support before people were taken into care or required hospital treatment.

Mr Willcox accepted that much of the information which he had provided had been general. Whilst the budgetary picture was changing rapidly he was unable at present to provide detailed information on the new staffing structures. It was agreed that he should be invited to attend the next meeting to provide an update.

It was suggested that hoteliers should be encouraged to draw attention to the tourist potential of encouraging walking holidays in Shropshire’s unique and idyllic landscape and the use of public transport to reach the various destinations.

11. Open Space, Sport and Recreation Guidance

Mark Blount, Development Manager, Leisure and Outdoor Recreation Service, reported that Shropshire Council had adopted county wide Interim Planning Guidance (IPG) pending the development of new policies as part of the Council’s Local Development Framework (LDF). Shropshire Council had become the planning authority in 2009 and the purpose of the Interim Planning Guidance was to address the inconsistency and uncertainty which arose from the different policy approaches in ‘saved’ District Council Local Plans which all contained different policies requiring developer contributions towards public open space. The IPG would apply a standard tariff based on National Planning Policy Guidance 17 (PPG17) in the interests of consistency and fairness, and then tailor it to meet local needs.

It would provide consistent and more up to date and locally sensitive advice concerning the calculation of open space and recreation provision to be provided as part of new developments, following the Open Space, Sport and Recreation Study (PPG17) which recognised areas of deficiency in types of open spaces across all areas of Shropshire. This study had examined the quantity but not quality of provision. There were several key areas, children's play areas, community space, natural open space and outdoor sports.

There was a need to develop a Green Space strategy using geographical information systems (GIS) information. At the pre-application stage, the developer and planning officer would be informed of the needs for sport and recreation provision and where open space needed to be safeguarded. Shropshire Council would also be changing to a community infrastructure levy (CIL), with Section 106 legal agreements being phased out by 2014. (Section 106 agreements did not cover access).

Under CIL arrangements the average developer contribution would be around £4,000 per unit of development or approximately £40 per square metre of floorspace. The charge would apply to single developments, though there would be some exceptions, which was a key change from Section 106 as this applied to developments of five or more houses. Therefore potentially CIL could raise more funds from developer contributions.

Further information was on the Shropshire Council website and he agreed to provide a link to Mr Wise to pass on to members.

12. Meres and Mosses Landscape Partnership Project 2012- 2017

Lisa Barlow, Community Officer, Shropshire Wildlife Trust, gave a short talk on the Meres and Mosses Landscape Partnership project which would involve the conservation and restoration of the natural and historic environment within a 200 square kilometre area of North Shropshire and South Cheshire. The programme would run for five years, if their action plan to the Heritage Lottery Fund (to be submitted August 2011) was successful and they were allocated £1.5 million. The improvements to the built and historic landscape would include restoration of the control tower on Prees Heath Common, and work on Whixall Moss. There would also be increased community participation and increased access and learning about the area with short circular walks with interpretation boards. It was also intended to increase training opportunities in local heritage skills.

13. Shropshire Walking Forum

Mrs Alison Parker gave an update on the meeting of the Walking Forum held on 20 January and stressed that further information would be provided in the formal Minutes.

She said that there had been an encouraging response to the invitation for interested persons to attend the meeting. Unfortunately Ms Hughes and Mr Stabler had been unable to attend. She wished to record her admiration to Ms Shona Lewis and Ms Gemma Price for the way in which they had coped with the unexpected situation.

The decision to extend the Walkers Forum had been mutual. At the present time a wider membership was required, which included not just her organisation, but other groups and individuals who used paths. Input into the forum also had to be made for the 'providers' i.e. Countryside Access Team and also from those who had an interest in the pathways such as the businesses who provided services for walkers etc. While she disliked the term there was a need for Shropshire paths to be marketed if the economic benefits from walking were to be fully realised.

The prioritisation of fault reports along rights of way and the claiming of "lost ways" had been raised by other members. Council officers had highlighted their current work areas, projects and promotions, but there had been little time for any discussion from 'the floor'. The meeting had received a report on the AONB's Walking for Wellbeing project, the Countryside Access Strategy and the Local Transport Plan.

Mrs Parker stated that a proposal outlining a possible remit for the Forum, submitted by Ms Hughes, was to be emailed for comment, but she believed that members should be consulted as to what they wanted from or could contribute, and that should be considered properly before any such remit was imposed.

With regard to Lost Ways Ms Hughes reported that there had been no further information on the 2026 cut-off date, but the position might change. Mrs Parker added that it was her understanding that unrecorded rights of way would be considered as long as the claims were submitted before the cut-off date.

14. Rights of Way Condition survey

Mr Richard Knight gave a power point presentation which covered the aims of the survey, delivery of the survey, what data was collected, the programme and current progress.

He explained that the aim of the survey had been to gather data on the whole rights of way network for the first time to:

- Inform an asset management/lifecycle approach to network management.
- Inform the hierarchical approach to network management.
- Specify improvements that could be delivered through Placed Based Planning.
- Inform the process of effective Community Consultations on priorities.
- Improve forward planning for maintenance and enforcement works and developments.

The survey did not cover UCRs, which would be surveyed separately.

(The presentation including a list of surveyed parishes and where work is in progress is on the webpage for this meeting).

15. Sustainable Tourism Strategy for the Shropshire Hills

The Forum received and noted a report from Phil Holden, Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership Manager.

16. Update on Shropshire Way and other matters

The Forum received a detailed report from Jim Stabler, Access Development Officer.

Members expressed their appreciation for all the hard work put in to improve the Shropshire Way.

With regard to item 8 an update on the situation at Lea Quarries was requested for the next meeting.

17. LAF member's Handbook

Three copies of the draft handbook were handed out to Jane Morris, Stuart Morgan and Zia Robins for their comments.

18. Changes to Higher Level Stewardship payments for permissive and educational access

It was reported that in December representations had been made to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs by the Chair on behalf of the Forum, against the decision that future Higher Level Stewardship schemes would no longer include payments for permissive and educational access, other than grants for capital works. A copy of a response from DEFRA dated 4 January 2011 was received.

These representations had also been copied to Shropshire MPs and initial responses from three of them had been received.

19. Grassroots Engagement on the development of the White Paper on the Natural Environment

The Chair reminded the Forum that DEFRA had asked for comments on the places that were important to people and their ideas and innovative solutions to help shape the development of the White paper on the nature of England.

She and Mr Stabler had not prepared a written response on behalf of the Forum as there were only two sets of comments.

Mrs Robins had done a comprehensive report on Shropshire as an area which had been sent separately and Mr Morgan had also been asked to send in his comments.

20. Feedback from other Forums and items for noting

The Forum received for information:

Byways Liaison Group Minutes of 16 September 2010
Shropshire Cycle Forum Minutes of 7 December 2010
Access newsletter issue No. 47

21. Items for next agenda

Members were asked to suggest agenda items for the next meeting, other than those already suggested, which was scheduled for 27 April 2011. The Chair, Vice-Chair and certain other members had indicated that they had difficulties in attending on that date, and it was

RESOLVED : That the date of the next meeting be changed to Friday 13 May 2011.

It was noted that Jan Cook had agreed to attend the next meeting to talk about Quiet Lanes and give an update on the Local Transport Plan.

It was agreed that Phil Holden should be invited to attend in relation to the Sustainable Tourism Strategy for the Shropshire Hills.

22. Future meetings

RESOLVED : That future meetings be arranged on:

Wednesday 13 July 2011 (at Craven Arms Community Centre)
Thursday 20 October 2011
Monday 23 January 2012
Tuesday 1 May 2012

Signed

Date

The meeting closed at 12.57 p.m.