

## VALE OF GLAMORGAN LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

Minutes of a meeting held on 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 2023.

Present: I.A.N. Perry (Chair); W.A. Hennessy (Vice-Chair); S. Bain, F. Coleman, R. Exley, I. Fraser, K. Lucas, S. McMillan, G. Thomas, P. Walsh and Councillor E. Williams.

Also present: G. Davies (Secretary), D. Hunt and S. Thomas (Vale of Glamorgan Council) and N. Davies (Natural Resources Wales).

(a) Apologies for Absence –

These were received from I.R. Buckley, S. Campbell, J. Cole and S. Gaffney.

(b) Minutes –

AGREED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 26<sup>th</sup> April, 2023 be approved as a correct record.

(c) Presentation from External Witness - Least Restrictive Access –

The Chair welcomed Mr. C. Grimes who was Managing Director for Experience Community and had been invited to provide a short presentation on Least Restrictive Access to Public Rights of Way.

Mr. Grimes, in his presentation, referred to the following:

- It had been identified that some of the information for disabled people to assist with access to the countryside was quite prescriptive, fairly short and did not provide a true reflection of the challenges that they might face.
- As a result, Experience Community, back in 2019, had developed a route grading system from 1 to 5 with 5 being the surface where disabled people might come across potentially impassable barriers and where assistance from non-disabled people may be required.
- In terms of grading the routes, this included photos of any potential barriers that disabled people may face and whether a radar key gate was installed as sometimes a key was not always available and so a disabled person would need to clarify before commencing the route.
- Information was also collated around the minimum path width as this was particularly important for people in wheelchairs.
- Natural Resources Wales had undertaken an audit to highlight the section of the Wales Coastal Path which could be improved, and this had led to a promotional campaign for disabled people that included six basic questions that would help a person assess whether a route was suitable.
- Both elevated and downslope gradients had been recorded and this assisted people requiring mobility equipment.

- Finally, the Experience Community organisation had devised an accessible public toilet of which there were many examples across the country, which was one of the recommendations made for the Council to progress.

A member of the Forum asked Mr. Grimes whether there were any areas in the Vale that could be improved to assist accessibility, particularly on footpaths. In reply, Mr. Grimes stated that he was sure that there were, and he was closely working with the Council's Public Rights of Way Team and Natural Resources Wales to identify sections of the network. A pilot project had been extended which would look at ten more sections across Wales and which would provide recommendations and advice on how to improve accessibility and that work would be shared with the Vale of Glamorgan Council.

Mr. Grimes agreed to share a link to the webpage regarding 'Changing Places toilets' for people with a disability and limited mobility.

The Chair thanked Mr. Grimes for his presentation, and it was noted that further information would be provided to the Public Rights of Way Team in order to progress and improve access for people with a disability.

(d) Draft Local Access Forum Annual Report 2022/23 –

The Secretary presented the draft Annual Report for 2022/23 for consideration.

AGREED – T H A T the draft Annual Report be endorsed for publication.

(e) Maintenance Report –

D. Hunt provided an update on the maintenance work undertaken by the Rights of Way Team.

He referred to the Access Improvement Grant (AIG), which was funding provided by Welsh Government to all Local Authorities in Wales used to improve access to the Rights of Way network. For the current financial year, the AIG had been used for the installation of over 100 new way marker points, the installation of 2 new footbridges and the replacement of old and faulty furniture.

It was noted that in relation to the Wales Coastal Path, 20km of vegetation had been cleared through two separate cuts in order to improve access to paths. In addition, the Coastal Path around St. Donats had been rolled back and new fencing erected at Porthkerry Country Park.

With regards to Rights of Way maintenance work, there was an annual budget of £50k. That had been used for legal orders and for survey works undertaken by volunteers. In total 35km of paths had been cleared of vegetation and a number of stiles and kissing gates repaired or replaced.

The Forum noted that landowners had a responsibility to ensure that network paths were accessible for all as per the Equalities Act, but the Rights of Way Team was happy to assist or investigate issues further.

AGREED – T H A T the maintenance report update be noted.

(f) Legal Orders and Evidential Modification Orders Updates –

S. Thomas provided an update of the Legal Orders and Evidential Modification Orders currently in the process of being completed.

S. Thomas referred to Path No. 8 within the parish of St. Donats for which the pre-Order consultation was underway. The path required roll back due to coastal erosion and an agreement had been reached with Atlantic College for a 3m wide corridor with a change to the fence line brought in from the cliff edge. No objections had been received so it was hoped that the Legal Order would be completed by mid-January.

S. Thomas also referred to Path No. 9 and 9A within the parish of Barry under the local name Merthyr Dyfan Recreation Ground. Again, pre-Order consultation was underway for which several objections had been received so those would be collated, and the PROW Team would contact the interested persons in order to resolve some of the concerns and issues. If not, then it was likely that the diversion would be considered by the Council's Public Rights of Way Sub-Committee.

AGREED – T H A T the report be noted.

(g) Update on Performance Indicators –

D. Hunt provided an update in relation to the Performance Indicators (PIs) used by the Public Rights of Way Team.

It was noted that data for a number of indicators was only captured for certain years and Welsh Government had changed the performance reporting framework. Therefore, the Welsh average was unavailable and so from 2013 there was no comparative data. It was noted that in terms of paths that were some distance from the road, the figure submitted by the Vale of Glamorgan for 2022/23 was 63%. In terms of paths that were easy to use, the 2022/23 percentage was 56%. It was noted that the performance for both PIs fluctuated over the past few decades.

AGREED – T H A T the update report be noted.

(h) Grant Funding Overview –

D. Hunt provided an overview of the grants available for the development and maintenance of the Public Rights of Way Network.

This included the Coastal Access Improvement Project (CAIP), for which the Council had been allocated a sum of around £40k from Natural Resources Wales (NRW) which had been received for maintenance work. Mr. Hunt referred to maintenance work being undertaken to the roll back of a path around Atlantic College and the installation of new stiles, kissing gates, furniture including new footbridges built.

In addition, there was the Access Improvement Grant (AIG) which was a three-year funding stream for which the Council was currently within its second year. Money had been used to design new footbridges for installation next year following agreement from NRW. Work was underway to legalise new sections of the network at St. Donats following the roll back of the path.

AGREED – T H A T the update report be noted.

(i) Evaluation and Feedback on the Previous Local Access Forum Workshop –

D. Hunt provided a verbal update on the Network Accessibility Workshop held during the previous meeting on 26<sup>th</sup> April, 2023. For this, the Forum had been split into three working groups, the first covering the perspective of a path user, the second group the perspective of a land owner and the third from the perspective of Rights of Way Officers and the Vale of Glamorgan Council.

In terms of the perspective of footpath users, feedback had indicated the importance of ensuring that objections were cleared and the development of an app to clearly display routes which had been deemed something that the Rights of Way Team would investigate further.

In terms of the perspective of landowners, there was recognition to consider the types and size of furniture installed and the need to ensure that paths were safe. The need to maintain biodiversity and heritage features was considered important as were good access points and car parking facilities.

With regard to the perspective of officers and the Vale of Glamorgan Council, this included such areas as funding and grants, disabled access, collaboration with other Authorities and providing safe passing ways for all users.

The feedback was being assessed by the Rights of Way Team.

AGREED – T H A T the update report be noted.