

WREXHAM LOCAL ACCESS FORUM



Annual Report for the Year Ended 31 March 2007

FORWARD

The Wrexham Local Access Forum has continued to be involved in countryside and rights of way issues across the County Borough and has sought to develop an understanding of the conflicts that may arise from the use of the countryside by members of the public and the farming community earning it's living from the land.

The Forum has been very active in giving advice on the 10 year Rights of Way Improvement Plan, helping to shape the way the plan has been developed.

The chair has worked hard to promote the work of the Forum and ensure its views are taken note of. My thanks to the work across the year, of the members of the Forum and particularly the chair and vice chair.

Martin Howorth, Parks, Countryside and Rights of Way Manager

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

My name is Ieuan Lewis and I farm beef, sheep, cereals and roots towards the south of the county. I have just completed my fourth year as Chair of the Local Access Forum, having been given a mandate to continue in the role of Chair by the new Forum.

The Forum continues to make steady progress. It has made a significant contribution to the Rights Of Way Improvement Plan, and we look forward to this being published on or before the due date of November.

The Local Access Forum (LAF) has proven that it is prepared to challenge unsatisfactory performance, and members have shown willingness to be 'hands on' when necessary. Nationally, focus has moved away from Access Land, with Coastal Access becoming the primary goal.

Although Wrexham is landlocked the Forum members have maintained a watching brief to ensure that citizens of Wrexham County get the best coastal access possible. Some Forum members have also taken the opportunity to become involved at national level and they continue to ensure that Wrexham remains at the centre of national forum activities.

I think it has been a successful year. I have been helped in this by the input of my colleagues on the Forum, to whom I would like to express my thanks. I look forward to building on the progress we have made. However, I am confident that the Forum members will be able to use their knowledge, experience and expertise to ensure the Forum meets its statutory duty as an advisory body to Wrexham County Borough Council.

WORK PLAN FOR THE COMING YEAR

During the coming year, the LAF are expecting to explore, consider and make recommendations to Wrexham County Borough Council in the following areas:

Rights of Way Improvement Plans (ROWIP)

Definitive Maps

Definitive Map Modification Orders

Interactive Mapping

Lost Ways

Survey Work

Planning Applications

Dogs Issues

Budgets & Resources

Communication Strategy

INTRODUCTION

The Wrexham Local Access Forum was established in November 2002. Members of the Forum have a three-year tenure, and membership changes through an application and selection procedure. This was last carried out in 2005 with the new forum commencing operation in November 2005.

The Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000 required the local authority to create Local Access Forums. The function of the forum is to advise the authority, the Countryside Council for Wales and others as to the improvement of public access to the land in the County of Wrexham for the purposes of open-air recreation, and the enjoyment of the area. However, it must do so with regard to the needs of land management and the natural beauty of the area. All meetings of the Forum are open to the public.

ANNUAL REPORT

This report seeks to provide a brief summary of the work of the forum, the minutes of which are published on Wrexham County Borough Council website www.wrexham.gov.uk/laf and can be viewed at the Guildhall during office hours.

During the Year the LAF have made the following recommendations to the Local Authority.

Recommendation	Authority's Response
Letter sent to the Chief Executive with a copy to Chief Planning Officer asking the Council to adopt the planning guidance notes numbers 1-6 as policy. <i>(See minutes of 05/05/06)</i>	Chief Planning Officer felt that sufficient safeguards had been built into the UDP. He therefore felt unable to recommend adopting the guidance as policy.

Recommendation	Authority's Response
<p>Letter sent to the Chief Executive stating that the situation regarding DMMOs be urgently resolved. <i>(Minutes 05/05/06)</i></p> <p>Letter to Chief Environment Officer asking what steps are being taken to improve the service. <i>(Minutes 07/07/06)</i></p>	<p>Letter received from Chief Environment Officer rejecting the Forums recommendation citing resourcing as the reason. <i>(Minutes 07/07/06)</i></p>
<p>Letter to the authority regarding lay-by parking issues, in particular the inadequate parking facilities in the Ceiriog Valley.</p>	<p>Alan Evans from Highways is going to have a look at the area in question then respond to the Forum in due course.</p>
<p>Recommendation that the Council adopts Interactive Mapping to help improve public information. <i>(Minutes 10/11/06)</i></p>	<p>Positive response, asking if the current level of interactive mapping was sufficient. <i>(Minutes 26/01/07)</i></p>

YEAR REVIEWED

ACCESS LAND

During the year, the Local Access Forum was not required to provide specific advice on access to open land as no applications for exclusions or closures beyond the statutory prescribed limit had been received.

The Local Access Forum received a report from the Countryside Council for Wales (CCW), on activity within the Counties boundaries.

ANNUAL REPORT 2005/06

The Annual Report was approved by the LAF at the meeting of 05/05/06.

RIGHTS OF WAY IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The progress of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan has been closely monitored by the LAF throughout the year. The year has seen the assessment, consultation, and draft report stages being achieved. The LAF has contributed at each stage.

Last year the LAF were concerned that this project might fail to be ready and published within the timeframe required by statute, however, excellent progress has been made and the LAF would like to thank Martin Howorth and his staff for their efforts to ensure this report will be published on time.

(See minutes of 05/05/06, 07/07/06, 08/09/06, 10/11/06 and 26/01/07)

PLANNING APPLICATIONS

In line with LAFs nationally, Wrexham LAF interprets its remit broadly. Wrexham County is currently experiencing regeneration through a number of new and significant developments. The LAF advised the Council Planning Department to adopt what are considered to be best practice that are contained in the Rights of Way Practical Guidance notes numbered 1 to 6 as policy for its officers.

The LAF also considered whether a Sub Committee should be formed to review planning applications and work within the Planning time scales. It was decided that a volunteer would look at the weekly planning application list and report any development they felt significant.

(See minutes of 05/05/06, 10/11/06)

LAY-BY PARKING

A concern was raised about the insufficient level of lay-bys in the countryside, within the county. This was of particular concern in the Ceiriog Valley, where it has been reported that people using the public rights of way are parking in local passing places and causing problems for the local community. This is of particular concern as the Glyn Ceiriog area is increasingly promoted but parking is inadequate and Public transport provision is also inadequate. The LAF wrote to the Authority outlining their concerns.

Northern Marches Partnership compiled a draft Rural Development Strategy which has gone to the Welsh Assembly – at present there are no further developments, but it may be a potential source of funding.
(See minutes of 07/07/06, 08/09/06, 10/11/06 and 26/01/07)

DEFINITIVE MAP MODIFICATION ORDERS

This area of statutory duty for the authority is causing great concern to the LAF. At the meeting held on 10 June 2005, the Local Access Forum was provided with a list of outstanding orders. The number of outstanding items had increased with some being fifteen years old. At the meeting of 5 May 2006, it was reported that between 1 April 2005 and the end of March 2006:

26 applications had been brought forward
5 applications had been received
31 applications were reported outstanding.

It was reported that for the second year running that **0** applications had been processed.

The Forum expressed grave concern that the list of outstanding Definitive Map Modifications had increased and wanted to know why nothing had been done by senior managers to increase the resources to resolve the matter. The issue was of such concern that the Forum will review progress annually.

(Detailed in minutes of 05/05/06 and 10/06/06)

BUDGETING

LAF members believed that the forum should have access into budget plans in order to know what money was being allocated to ROW, staff costs and ground work. As a statutory committee of the authority, it was thought that the forum should have a say on money allocation. The Chief Executive and Council Leader did not attend any LAF meetings, but Councillor Mark Pritchard did attend and listened to the concerns of the LAF.

(See minutes of 07/07/06, 10/11/06)

WYNNSTAY ESTATE

Members visited the Estate on the morning of 7 July 2006.

On behalf of the Forum, member Sue Gittins thanked the secretary for arranging the members' field trip. Although the LAF appreciated the time and effort taken by Capt Bell in showing them around the estate, there seems little chance that the estate will change the current policy regarding access.

GATING OF CERTAIN HIGHWAYS FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRIME AND ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR – CONSULTATION PAPER

The LAF received a presentation on this subject from Pete Bland. Some concerns were raised and the LAF took the opportunity to respond to the consultation document from the Assembly.

(See minutes of 07/07/06)

LOST WAYS

The forum asked about the progress of the Lost Ways Project and was dismayed to hear of the lack of progress.

(Detailed in minutes of 08/04/05)

DOGS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

This issue is a significant concern to the members of the Local Access Forum. It has been raised nationally, and locally. The LAF continues in its attempts to find ways that assist landowners whilst not deterring considerate dog owners from using the Rights of Way network. The LAF has looked into the legality of signage, and discussed the most effective form of signs. It has encouraged members and Community Councils to make use of Section 27 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 and the Clean Neighbourhood & Environment Act 2005.

(See minutes of 05/05/06, 07/07/06, 08/09/06, 10/11/06 and 26/01/07)

INSURANCE COVER

The LAF has been investigating the insurance obstacles that prevent volunteers or groups from undertaking maintenance work on the public rights of way network. Some large organisations like the Ramblers Association provide their own cover, however individuals and small community groups find this cost prohibitive. The Local Authority use volunteers and people with community orders under supervision which is allowed under the terms of the authority policies.

However the LAF sought practices from around the country, but all indications are that unless voluntary workers are supervised by a Council employee, they would require public liability insurance. The Forum agreed that this issue had been explored to its natural conclusion.

(See minutes of 07/07/06, 10/11/06 and 26/01/07)

RANGERS REPORT

The LAF receives a report at each meeting outlining the activity of the rangers. The rangers have been particularly active in leading walks, signage and dealing with the issue of cropped paths.

(See minutes of 05/05/06, 07/07/06, 08/09/06, 10/11/06 and 26/01/07)

NEW MEMBER TRAINING

Concerns were raised about the lack of training for new members appointed to LAFs. The LAF sought best practice from the National Access Forum and also adjoining authorities. Mr J Marchant produced a list of frequently asked questions. With little amendment this was considered suitable for ensuring any new member understood the terms and abbreviations in use at LAF meetings. The LAF thanked Mr Marchant for his efforts.

BALANCE OF THE FORUM

The LAF has considered its membership on several occasions. It is felt that the cycling fraternity are not particularly well represented. The Chair also raised concerns that conservationists are not represented, and finally the young people of the county. The appointing authority is satisfied with the balance of the forum, and the LAF has taken steps to ensure young people's views are considered.

(See minutes of 07/07/06, 10/11/06)

INTERACTIVE MAPPING

The LAF raised the issue of Interactive Mapping. Members had been advised of websites of other local authorities that have interactive mapping and the benefits these can bring. The forum agreed that a better use of interactive mapping would benefit the public.

(See minutes of 10/11/06)

SURVEY WORK

Gerald Moss also tabled the issue of volunteer surveys on the public right of way network. Gerald Moss has undertaken basic surveying work of his local area. This has been of use to the Rights of Way Department, especially as this assists providing some assurance with regard to bridge safety which is vital to ensure the authority retains insurance cover. Other LAF members volunteer to conduct surveys of communities.

(See minutes of 10/11/06)