

MID & WEST BERKS LOCAL ACCESS FORUM

PROPOSALS FOR PUBLIC ACCESS IN FUTURE FARM SUBSIDIES POST BREXIT.

We believe there is a need to improve and update public access to the countryside through mechanisms which benefit both the public and landowners /occupiers. Subsidies to landowners /occupiers should be used to create and reorganise the public rights of way network where needed. That is, public benefit will be provided for public money.

Our main proposal is:

that landowners /occupiers should be financially rewarded for creating off-road links (ie. new rights of way) to plug gaps in the rights of way network and to connect existing rights of way which can no longer be used safely because either the roads connecting them have become unsafe for non-motorised users or because the rights of way network has become fragmented by the building of new roads. The required links may have been identified in local authority Local Transport Plans or Rights of Way Improvement Plans.

New access needs to be well publicised, targeted, selective, based on public demand and be attractive to landowners / occupiers. Ideally the new access will be permanent.

We also support **additional proposals** listed in appendix 1.

We suggest that **new schemes are developed** based on the better aspects of previous schemes (Countryside Stewardship and Paths for Communities). See appendix 2.

BACKGROUND

The problem

In the area covered by the Mid & West Berks Local Access Forum, there is a good network of public rights of way in many parishes. However, metalled roads have often to be used to connect these public rights of way. These roads, which include minor rural roads, have become unsafe for non-motorised users because of increasing traffic levels. Hence the public rights of way network is, in practice, fragmented in many areas. This needs to be corrected by providing off-road links by encouraging landowners /occupiers with financial rewards. Examples are given in Appendix 3.

A local access forum under Section 94 of the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000, appointed by, and advising



Benefit of a well-connected public rights of way network.

The benefit of outdoor recreation in the countryside to physical and mental well-being is well recognized (Reconomics Plus¹). Our historic public rights of way network offers a facility to provide healthy outdoor exercise, free at the point of use, for a wide variety of recreational and utility purposes: walking; dog walking; jogging / running; horse riding; carriage driving; cycling; disabled rambling; orienteering; appreciating the countryside for its farming value, wildlife, history and archaeology. The network thus provides excellent value for money. It is also accepted that a well-connected public rights of way network supports local economies and tourism.

However, in many parts of the country with strong development pressures, the public rights of way network has, in practice, become fragmented because roads have become unsafe for non-motorised users. Users of the network are taxpayers and, as such, deserve practical compensation for the loss of the links in the network that have occurred over many decades of growth in vehicular traffic. Where local policies have identified a need, opportunities to secure off-road safe routes need to be taken. Landowners /occupiers need to be encouraged to help solve the problem by offering them suitable subsidies for new rights of way to re-connect and improve the network.

APPENDIX 1: ADDITIONAL PROPOSALS

1. Payment for improvement of existing public rights of way: greater width / mowing / regrading and rolling of green lanes / improving the accessibility of gates and stiles / additional or improved way marking and signposting /providing higher rights where needed and suitable.
2. New access should benefit all non-motorised users, that is, pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians.
3. Payment for helping to maintain existing public rights of way, perhaps relieving local authorities of some expenses.
4. Improved existing cross-compliance and simpler regulation.
5. Consideration of reorganization of the network to suit current land use, perhaps in exchange for new paths, and particularly where existing paths go through sensitive or potentially dangerous areas such as farmyards and where there are dead end, unused or unsuitable paths.

APPENDIX 2: FUTURE SCHEMES

1. Schemes need to be developed which make public access attractive to landowners / occupiers and enhance the public rights of way network.
2. LAFs should be more closely involved to ensure new access is useful and provides best value.
3. Local authorities need to receive a financial award for the maintenance of new access and any other additional duties.
4. Previous schemes should be developed and improved eg. Stewardship access, Paths for Communities. There should be demonstrable public benefit. Schemes need to be better monitored than in the past - perhaps a role for LAFs or local authorities with payment?

¹ - see <http://www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/pages/reconomics-plus> published February 2017.

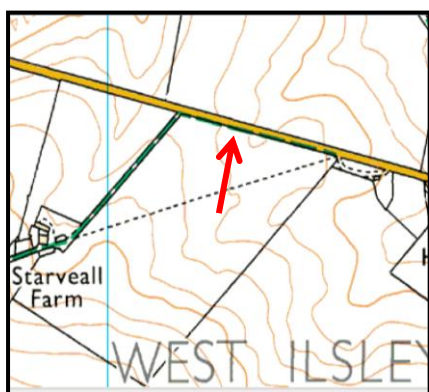
APPENDIX 3: EXAMPLES

Example 1:

The problem of missing links was recognised in ‘*Cyclists, pedestrians and equestrians: a summary of priorities for Highways England’s Network*’ published January 2017 by Transport Focus². On the A35 near Winterbourne Abbas, Dorset, two bridleways emerge onto the A35 a few hundred metres apart with no provision to get between the two apart from using the carriageway. An off-road link alongside the A35 is required to enable the public to use the two bridleways.

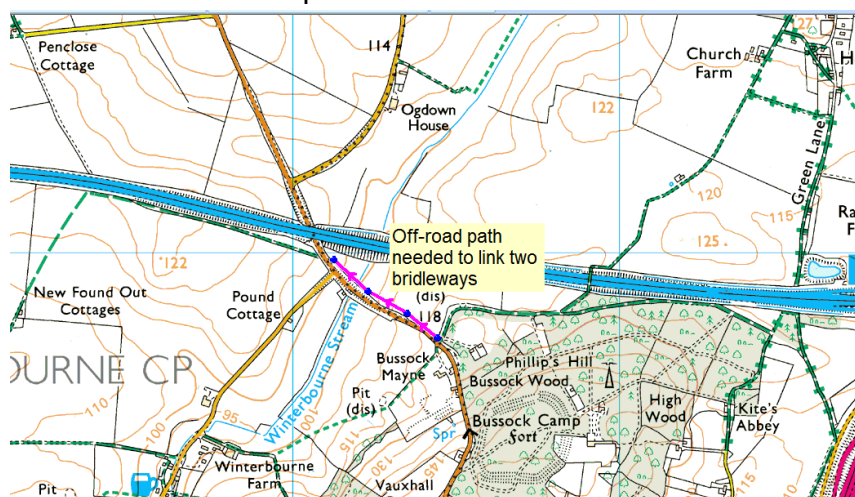
Example 2:

In West Ilsley, West Berkshire, a bridleway diversion for agricultural needs created an off-road link behind the hedge which keeps the public off the adjacent road. This concept needs to be developed by offering landowners / occupiers subsidies to create off-road links.



Example 3:

In Winterbourne parish, West Berkshire, the B4494 has become busy with fast traffic. An off-road path (in pink) is needed to connect the two bridleways (in green) to improve safety. The landowners / occupiers should be rewarded for this.



Further examples may be found in Rights of Way Improvement Plans. For West Berkshire, see the online map at on the Council website.

² <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/research-publications/publications/cyclists-pedestrians-equestrians-summary-priorities-highways-englands-network/>