Somerset Local Access Forum

Minutes for the Meeting held on: 14th May 2020

Via Microsoft Teams

SLAF members present: David Lovejoy (Chair Person), Julia Gadd, Anthony Gray, Ann Finn, Alicia Aras, Sally Flack, Suzy Dymond-White, Trish Coombes, Lynn Myland

Members of Public: Sarah Bucks, Philip Hackett

SCC Officers Present: Pete Hobley- Rights of Way Service Manager

Apologies: Keri Blackmore, Cllr Paul Maxwell

Retired: Chris Sidaway

Minutes by: Keri Blackmore- SLAF Secretary

Welcome

PH went through how the meeting was going to work on Microsoft Teams. He announced that Chris Sidaway was retiring due to ill health.

DL welcomed everyone to the meeting, invited the new member LM to introduce herself. LM stated that she had been part of the Hertfordshire LAF and had moved to Somerset 3 years ago. She has an interest in disability access on PROW and is an environmentalist.

Minutes & Matters arising October 2019

DL has created a letter to County Farm Sales and hopes to get it sent out soon.

Newsletter- DL said that he was sent no ideas for the newsletter but would like it if members could come up with ideas for it and send it across to him. The ideas can be photographs, reports, PPLO reports etc to promote SLAF and the Somerset PROW. SF, LM & JG all expressed an interest in coming up with ideas.

Volunteers- AF asked if the volunteers are informed of the SLAF meetings. PH replied that currently they aren’t, the agenda is only published online. He stated that this is something that we can do from now on. DL mentioned that they could also be sent the newsletter and ask them to contribute to it, which was agreed.

DL asked if Martin Cooper, the new volunteer’s officer, could attend SLAF meetings occasionally to update the forum. PH agreed that this is something that could be arranged. AG felt that the hours the volunteers put in should be publicly credited. DL, LM, SDW also agreed that it should be recognised, along with the work Martin does. SF asked how new recruits are canvassed? PH stated that they work with the Parish
Councils for vacancies but mainly the central volunteer team help with a number of matters that cover recruitment, health and safety and inductions. He sees the newsletter as being part of the recruitment drive in the future. DL believes that this highlights the real need for the newsletter and is a chance to give thanks and promote the work volunteers do.

River Parrett- SF asked about the fingerpost project to see if other parishes were taking part. PH stated that it is only Otterford Parish that he is aware of that are doing the project and has a piece from them ready for the newsletter. He mentioned that this it is part of ROW daily work to repair/replace fingerposts but is happy if parishes want to do these themselves and will supply fingerposts.

DL said there is no update to the working group.

AOB- DL spoke about the misuse of ROW. PH said there is work happening in various locations to help these issues with installing bollards or barriers to minimise vehicular use.

**CoViD 19 Rights of Way Response**

PH went through briefly what the rights of way response has been to CoViD 19:

He said that the prediction for a reduction in workforce due to the virus was at 20%-50%. Luckily his team are working at the lower 20% reduction, meaning most of the team are able to work from home.

Lockdown level 5 resulted in emergency and health and safety visits only, officers were continuing their work from home. A greater impact has been childcare, and a few staff have been redeployed part time, and some went through self-isolation but were able to work through the majority of it. Fairly positive outcome overall, maintaining good service level.

Lockdown level 4 is now active where work is able to start with business as usual with safeguards in place regarding social distancing. Stakeholder site meetings will be the option of last resort if cannot be done over the phone or email, but majority of the team are still working from home. County Hall is still closed. The only exceptions to this are Rambler working parties and order making/confirmation due to the requirement to have documents on deposit. This has been suspended for the time being and advice has been sought from DEFRA for any ways around this to avoid delays.

Vegetation cut is largely proceeding as normal with some minor adjustments for contractor’s safety. An increase in usage and issue reporting has resulted in increased landowner/user tensions at a busy time of the farming year. Some processes are taking longer or on hold until access to County Hall is possible. Advice has been provided to landowners to keep legal lines of paths open but welcome to sign
temporary alternatives away from farmyards/gardens. NFU have also created standard signage templates for landowners.

LM asked if the 2026 cut of date had been requested to be moved as unable to gather evidence currently. AF asked if this is something SLAF could do, putting forward a proposal. SB thinks that there is a possibility that a 5 year extension could be lobbied as this is what BHS and other user groups are doing. PH said this is a good opportunity for SLAF to use their voice and should be addressed direct to DEFRA, or the minister of DEFRA. AF & LM to put together a letter to send out to the other members, SB to assist on an advisory capacity.

Rights of Way Service update

PH gave a brief ROW update:

Prior to CoViD their business case was approved with 7 new posts in the team structure available and the conversion of a part time warden to full-time. The roles were for 4 new modification officers, 2 new bridge wardens and a part time coast path officer to facilitate delivery of grant funding from Natural England to do with the coast path. Non-essential recruitment has been suspended so have been unable to recruit yet but there is a hopeful start date of September at the earliest for new staff.

ROW has been extremely busy, particularly with development control, with an increase in land supply for housing development mainly.

Sarah Littler retired in January but is still working in a consultancy capacity on a few Hinkley Point related projects – one of which is a possible bridleway creation that will connect Steart Marshes bridleway to Hinkley Point area, largely on the coast path.

England Coast Path grant funding has enabled development of StoryWalks. https://englandcoastpath.storywalks.info/

There are a series of 9 StoryWalks which are smart phone friendly GPS routes that triggers information and images that pop up as you walk along circular or linear routes of the coastal paths. There are 6 currently available on the website now. The team have been unable to field test them yet due to lockdown but will look to push this in the future to promote the coastal path.

Percentage ease of use figure for the network was around 80% for 2019/20. A steady outturn that is consistent with previous years.

AA suggested that SLAF could meet up and test one of the routes of StoryWalks for ROW. PH agreed that this would be a great idea. LM asked if the StoryWalk routes had disability access. PH stated that they haven’t been designed with that in mind, they are premised on existing walks that have been uploaded on the national trails.
PH expects that some of these walks will be accessible to disabled users, there are things in the pipeline, it’s just having the staff resource to put these in place that we haven’t had this last year.

**Neroche Herepath**

PH heard from Forestry England, disappointingly they do not consider funding a priority for the Neroche Herepath. He was due to escalate a response via the Director but due to CoViD, PH has made the initial approach and is awaiting a response. PH is happy for the forum to write direct to Forestry England on this issue.

AF to continue her work on this issue, to create a letter to send direct to K Stannard at Forestry England. DL mentioned that if we don’t hear anything from the letter when sent, we could get media coverage on the issue.

AF suggested a forum visit to the Herepath so the members can see the issues themselves. PH mentioned they would need the landowner’s permission to access the route.

**Department for Transport ‘pothole’ funding update.**

PROW had £100k in funding for surface improvements, which has been allocated to a number of different projects. £56k has been spent of the £100k so far, £13k has been delayed by CoViD and the remainder will be spent hopefully throughout the rest of the year as the funding was able to be carried over into this financial year.

**A303/A358**

A303 – Inspector’s decision has been put back until July. SWECO are now the sole consultant assisting Highways England with the design phase. Early design discussions have commenced with the Council but nothing of substance yet.

A358- nothing has been said about this yet. DL agreed he has heard nothing.

**Update from working group**

None

**Newsletter**

PH mentioned that current membership ends at the end of 2020. He sees the newsletter as a way of recruitment for the forum, there are currently 4 vacancies. PH is happy to provide RoW content and can produce/ distribute the newsletter but would appreciate content from members as far as possible with their experiences.
AOB

PH spoke about the £2bn of funding for walking and cycling as a result of the pandemic impacts. The council is actively looking at how they can tap into the funding.


PH also mentioned the DfT consultation, about micromobility vehicles to use footways and other pedestrian areas, the deadline for this consultation is the 3rd July. Members to contact PH to discuss both of these points raised either individually or pass to DL who will pass to other members, deadline mid-June.


AF asked if SCC will allow equestrian users access to linear road records as others are. PH said that yes they will be able to, IT are in the finalising the last stages of code to allow them to update the disclaimer before it goes live. Members will be updated when this happens. P.S: It is now live. Select ‘Adopted Highway’ from the layer control menu at Explore Somerset mapping.

AF asked about fast track applications for DMMO’s and if this had progressed yet. PH said the Council is committed to shortened investigations as part of the process review for DMMO applications. Examples that were identified by user groups have unfortunately fallen short of the criteria that have been produced. However, a more recent example that does qualify has come to light in Cheddar and this will be processed soon under the new shortened investigation process. Batching of qualifying applications will occur where identified. PH to get Andrew Saint to email AF, SB & PHa.

AF asked about ORPA. PH- ORPA is not a recognised highway classification so is not definitive proof of a public highway or of any rights it may carry, but to best of knowledge in Somerset they represent what were known as unsurfaced unclassified county roads but there may be some anomalies. Difficult to provide a blanket answer with regard to ORPAs.

UUCRs should be on the LoS but this is no evidence of public rights, only public maintenance. Likely that DMMO applications will be required. PH/SCC to write to Minister seeking a declaration or further statute to address this issue which will likely affect the whole nation.

New Highway Hierarchy – the 339 UUCRs are now split across several bands, 106 into 9 (Lanes/Minor Lanes) or higher, 172 into band 10 (Green Lane & Track), and 61 into
band 11 (Disused Track). Due to this change it may thus be even more difficult to provide a declaration in relation to status of UUCRs/ORPAs

LM said about the environmental test scheme that is looking how landowners could be paid for access routes/modifications etc that is happening in Mendip. Asked if a presentation could be shown at the next forum meeting. Asked to bring it up for the arrangement of the October agenda.

Next meeting is Thursday October 15th 2pm-4pm. Likely to be on Microsoft Teams again.

**Summary of Actions**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Owner</th>
<th>Complete</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14/05/2020</td>
<td>Send letter to County Farm Sales</td>
<td>DL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14/05/2020</td>
<td>Volunteers to be sent meeting invite and copy of newsletter</td>
<td>KB/PH</td>
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<tr>
<td>14/05/2020</td>
<td>Produce a letter to DEFRA (End of May deadline)</td>
<td>AF &amp; LM with SB</td>
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<tr>
<td>14/05/2020</td>
<td>Articles for newsletter from members asap</td>
<td>All</td>
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<tr>
<td>14/05/2020</td>
<td>Produce a letter to Forestry England</td>
<td>AF</td>
<td>29/05/2020</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Andrew Saint to email AF, SB and PHa</td>
<td>PH</td>
<td>18/05/2020</td>
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<tr>
<td>14/05/2020</td>
<td>Produce a letter to Minister on ORPA</td>
<td>PH</td>
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