

**CORNWALL COUNTY COUNCIL**

**RIGHTS OF WAY IMPROVEMENT PLAN**

**FOCUS GROUPS REPORT**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This report covers the information gained from three focus groups held to discuss and debate the issues surrounding the Rights of Way Improvement Plan. The events were held at the Kingsley Village, Fraddon during January 2006 and comprised three groups – Land Users, Land Managers and a group comprising those with differing disabilities. Questions on the following issues, as designated by The Countryside Service of Cornwall County Council, were put to the groups and are the basis of this report:

1. What do you do in the countryside of Cornwall?
2. What is your attitude to/experience of user conflict in the countryside?
3. What are your concerns regarding countryside access provision in Cornwall?
4. How would you like to see countryside access provision improved?
5. How can people be further encouraged to do things in the countryside?

## **METHODOLOGY**

Focus groups were held at a location central to all areas of Cornwall and facilitated by independent research consultant Sally Lewis over a three-week period in January 2006. The participants for the three groups were invited to become involved as they provided a cross section of interested parties. The participants from the Land Users and Land Managers groups had previously participated in research by completing a questionnaire on the Rights of Way Improvement Plan and were thus contacted for further consultation. The third group, comprising people with disability, were contacted independently and invited to take part.

The focus groups were held in conjunction with other forms of public consultation, i.e. the survey – which involved 6,000 questionnaires being sent in 2005 – training workshops and further public involvement.

This report provides findings from each group and a combined brief summary that amalgamates all three sets of findings, highlighting key issues and recurrent themes, which were noted throughout

## **THE FOCUS GROUPS**

The focus groups were structured in a way that enabled and encouraged participants to give opinions and suggestions around the five key areas of concern listed above.

After an initial introduction the group was divided into smaller discussion groups, followed by general feedback into the group, managed by the facilitator. Evidence from the focus groups was recorded on tape, used solely for reference purposes and discarded after the reports were completed, and from notes taken in the session. In addition, each participant had the opportunity to provide written notes during the group, which were taken to be used in this report, in conjunction with the feedback. This provided each participant with the chance to express individual views that may have been overlooked in group discussions.

## **KEY ISSUES RAISED IN THE THREE FOCUS GROUPS**

- ❑ Need for greater co-operation and communication between user groups, land managers and Cornwall County Council
- ❑ Greater publicity required, and information at tourist centres, to increase awareness of types of routes available and facilities in rural areas
- ❑ A revision of the definitive maps to make designated trails, paths and bridleways (and their uses) clearer.
- ❑ A need for improved signage, to include more information on distances, amenities and type of route.
- ❑ Increased parking needed close to start/end of circular routes and increased disabled parking at beaches.
- ❑ A need for greater respect for wildlife and natural environments by those who access the countryside.
- ❑ Greater respect between user groups required.
- ❑ More wardens needed to uphold regulations and liase between user groups and farmers
- ❑ Requirement to ensure ways are suitable for designated use, e.g. appropriate surfacing for horses, cycles or wheelchair users.
- ❑ Reparation for landowners if land used for leisure amenities or parking, or if maintaining public Rights of Way on their land.
- ❑ A simpler, specialised website needed to promote access and give information

## **LAND USERS GROUP**

This group was held on Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> January 2006 at Fraddon and comprised 14 participants representing all regions of the County. There were 8 female and 6 male participants, all of whom had previously completed a User questionnaire.

When asked to describe how they use the Cornish countryside this group had a wide range of responses and cited many activities including walking, riding, cycling and hunting. Most of the group live and/or work in country areas and gave a full list of leisure and social activities they enjoy, including geology, industrial archaeology, bird watching, photography and paintballing. The group agreed that generally they go into the countryside to relax and enjoy the scenery of countryside and beaches, and some act as informal guides to the area.

'Starting point was walking for health but engendered subsequent interest in flora and fauna, industrial archaeology, local history and Cornish culture and heritage.'

## **WHAT IS YOUR ATTITUDE TO/EXPERIENCE OF USER CONFLICT IN THE COUNTRYSIDE?**

- The height of stiles causes problems
- Access problems for those less mobile
- Various countryside user groups have differing priorities and lack consideration for other users.
- There is a lack of communication between land owners and land users
- A lack of horse-'friendly' gates or routes, with road surfaces unsafe for horses

'Interest groups and owners must work together. They have a common interest.'

'..Land-owners adjacent taking in paths and blocking routes. Building on them!'  
Generally poor maintenance of pathways.'

'Reported issues of Rights of Way always ends in a deafening silence as the 'Rangers' do not report back on their findings and action.'

'Bridleways have been seen with anathema by landowners and occupiers.'

## **WHAT ARE YOUR CONCERNS REGARDING ACCESS PROVISION**

- Information about funding is a concern – how much, when and where is it directed?
- Regarding bronze, silver and gold designated paths there is concern about priorities for cash allocation

- ❑ The definitive map (Ordnance Survey) is incorrect, particularly regarding Rights of Way over lanes etc
- ❑ Directional waymarkers are unclear
- ❑ There is a lack of communication between land owners and land users
- ❑ Different land users have differing priorities

'The 1947 Act is the key problem here...'

'.. There is concern that the gold, silver and bronze system will lead to further neglect and possible disappearance of paths outside the system.'

' My main concern is the need to establish Rights of Way .. tracks and paths that have been traditionally used will be lost.'

'..the so-called 'white road' on OS maps. This results in dead-end footpaths.'

'Bridleways should not be laid with any sort of tarmac. Broken hardcore overlaid with rab or coarse sand is ideal for the more frequently used.'

'Access.. across A30 dual carriageway, currently under construction, seems likely that this will make access to new routes on Goss Moor impossible.'

## **WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE ACCESS PROVISION?**

- ❑ Continued public involvement and communication is needed
- ❑ Comprehensive signposting from roads
- ❑ Way-marking to include destination and distance, and to be in uniform colours.
- ❑ High level of maintenance is needed (e.g. bridges, stiles, surfaces.)
- ❑ More organised courses for countryside awareness are needed, e.g. such information could be included in the Highway Code.
- ❑ A greater awareness is required of legal responsibilities for upkeep of routes.
- ❑ Award incentives could be given to landlords to improve access.
- ❑ More publicised designated sites for specific activities are needed.
- ❑ More circular routes would be good.

'pool knowledge of Rights of Way maintenance via CALC.'

'Rights of Way must be signposted to give 'newcomers' confidence to venture into the countryside.'

'Greater linked access allowing round walks from coast path and connecting back to start point.'

'Could Duchy of Cornwall and Lord Falmouth as major landowners be involved in improving available access.'

'Maybe focus groups in each parish – more exchanging of information/good practice.'

'Parish councils should be instructed by Cornwall CC to review all parish paths on a regular basis.'

'Publications to show networks of footpaths and bridle paths to encourage use of Public Rights of Way.'

'School lessons to increase countryside awareness.'

## **HOW CAN PEOPLE BE FURTHER ENCOURAGED TO DO THINGS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE?**

- ❑ A simplified and specific website is needed.
- ❑ More information available at Tourist Information offices (e.g. maps and guides,) particularly about designated sites for specialist activities.
- ❑ Safer parking at the start of routes.
- ❑ Better (and publicised) public transport links to the routes.
- ❑ More co-operation and communication between all parties involved.

'I put Restormel walks posters up locally and put walks in 2 local newspapers and get some response from them.'

'Local Healthcare Trusts also do very short walks to get people back to walking called 'Roll Back the Years', also cycling.'

'Greater use of information boards showing what wildlife is in area, what history of area is, geology of area.'

'Circular routes or trans-Cornwall trail would lead to safer riding and be attractive to tourists as well as locals.'

### **LAND MANAGERS GROUP**

This group was held on Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> January 2006 at Fraddon and comprised 12 participants representing all regions of the County. There were 8 male and 4 female participants, all of whom had previously completed a Land Managers questionnaire.

When asked to describe what they do in the countryside of Cornwall this group all stated that they lived and worked in the countryside, enjoyed leisure pursuits connected to country life, e.g. shooting or fishing and did not specify activities except to say that they were related to their lifestyles and the areas in which they live.

## **WHAT IS YOUR EXPERIENCE OF/ATTITUDE TO USER CONFLICT IN THE COUNTRYSIDE?**

- ❑ Problems experienced regarding stock
- ❑ Mis-use of disabled access by other user groups e.g. bikes.
- ❑ Conflict experienced between different user groups when areas particularly busy or congested.
- ❑ Public liability issues at the fore, e.g. responsibility for open gates, accidents occurring with Public Rights of Way.
- ❑ Potential spread of disease in livestock due to negligence by users.
- ❑ School bringing pupils onto farmland.
- ❑ Dogs/irresponsible dog owners.
- ❑ 'Fun' Runs
- ❑ Fires/parties/litter issues.
- ❑ Right to Roam being misinterpreted and abused at times.

'Impact on wildlife must be considered, especially rivers- kingfishers, otters, salmon etc do not like people!'

'..Right to Roam has made users far more confrontational. They are less likely to listen to reasoned argument. Impact on others not taken into account.'

'Access is a balance between wheelchairs/pushchairs and preventing motor bikes.'

'...Attracting wrong sort of people – not sticking to footpaths, dogs off leads, vehicle damage and dog toilets.'

## **WHAT ARE YOUR CONCERNS REGARDING ACCESS PROVISION?**

- ❑ There is a conflict with traditions (e.g. fishing and shooting) disturbing wildlife.
- ❑ An imbalance exists – encouragement to use the countryside needs education too.
- ❑ Mis-use of routes is a concern
- ❑ Conflict between different user groups
- ❑ Too many people in certain areas e.g. Camel Trail TOO popular.
- ❑ Capital depreciation of land/property by having bridleway next to land.
- ❑ Definition of 'truly rural' needs revision in light of policing and legislation.

'..Wildlife seeks out areas devoid of people. Attempts to open up areas inhabited by wildlife to the public fail –they are not open zoos.'

'The public need informing and educating if they impact on sensitive environments via footpaths.'

## WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE ACCESS PROVISION?

- ❑ Further penalties and enforcement of rules needed regarding dogs.
- ❑ Different tourist and 'local needs' walks required, to establish which are genuinely needed and not just there for historical reasons.
- ❑ Better signage, especially to local facilities.
- ❑ Offer farmers maintenance cash for paths (as part of SFP.)
- ❑ Cornwall County Council staff need greater agricultural knowledge.
- ❑ Use those on Community Service Orders to maintain paths.
- ❑ Financial contribution from rural business if their activity impacts negatively on the countryside.

'..Improve signage on useful routes. Remove signage on local need routes.'

'Have a purpose for each route – must go somewhere or be of visual value.'

'.. Encourage the public with designated parking.'

'Have places for off-road vehicles, e.g. Blue Hills.'

'Establish a clearer line of responsibility. At the moment it is landowner vs. walker with no arbitration.'

## HOW CAN PEOPLE BE FURTHER ENCOURAGED TO DO THINGS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE?

- ❑ Wheelchair access should be for a reasonable distance, on good conditions, taking a commonsense approach to planning.
- ❑ Sensible routes with a useful purpose and clear signage, showing types of routes and intended use, are needed.
- ❑ Circular routes are good.
- ❑ More discussions and negotiations, with flexibility to allow landowners to provide amenities.
- ❑ Designated car parks at start/end of paths (and compensation for land owners.)

### **DISABLED USERS GROUP**

This group was held on Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> January at Fraddon and comprised 15 participants representing all regions of the County. There were 9 male and 6 female participants, of whom three were attending as carers/helpers. Five in the group were wheelchair users, one was sight impaired and one person was hearing impaired. None of the participants had previously been involved with the survey work.

When asked what they do in the countryside of Cornwall, several in this group said they lived in urban areas but go to the countryside regularly. The

participants walk, use wheels, or cycle to enjoy the scenery and wildlife. All in the group enjoy the beach and coastal area, go on picnics or go fishing. One member uses a quad bike in the countryside.

## **WHAT IS YOUR EXPERIENCE OF/ATTITUDE TO USER CONFLICT IN THE COUNTRYSIDE?**

- Stiles cause a major problem to some in this group
- Kissing gates with tight turning space are difficult
- Locked gates are a problem, as are cattle grids
- Unintended obstacles e.g. on the Mineral Tramways railway sleepers have been used and these are difficult to negotiate
- Poor maintenance and repairs of paths generally
- Mixed-use paths can be dangerous to those with impaired sight or hearing
- Some ways are impassable after horses have used them, particularly after wet weather

'..Could use just gaps in fences rather than gates.'

'Latches are too small or handles too heavy on gates.'

'..mixed trails..need separate trails for cyclists!'

'Stiles date from a time when only burly farmers used them – outlaw them in favour of friendlier options.'

## **WHAT ARE YOUR CONCERNS REGARDING ACCESS PROVISION?**

- Lack of wardens
- More regulated and careful maintenance of tracks and paths needed
- Greater awareness of mobility and access issues needs to be raised
- Lack of incorporation for those of differing disabilities (not just mobility)
- Concerned to keep countryside natural, not spoilt, by 'improvements'.

'Are we in danger of spoiling the countryside if we encourage more people to come to the countryside?'

'Re maintenance of gates and chicanes etc: make crews aware of dimension requirements to ensure compliance.'

'We need more information about accessible tracks – maybe put onto CDF website. Needs to be maintained well.'

## **WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE ACCESS PROVISION?**

- A more pragmatic approach – fewer paths and higher standards
- Develop shorter stretches at focal points

- ❑ More parking needed near to routes and focal points.
- ❑ More regulation and careful maintenance needed
- ❑ More wardens
- ❑ Clearer signage and information on distances and type of route, to enable people to make their own decisions about where to go
- ❑ Colour contrast signs for visually impaired
- ❑ More stopping areas and seats on routes

'...Need more links from town to country.'

'More information on how far you can go on roads and trails, for wheelchair and scooter users.'

'National Trust places can be hard to access.'

'Radar keys for gates in countryside..'

## **HOW CAN PEOPLE BE FURTHER ENCOURAGED TO USE THE COUNTRYSIDE?**

Greater information needed on availability, rights and responsibilities – holistic information.

Clearer signage

Encourage all year round visits and activities, maybe courses

More 'green corridors' needed

Take information and give talks to Centres, to actively encourage those with disability to go to countryside

Charging points for electric scooters needed

'...Provide disabled parking right on beach or close to..'

'Beach wheelchairs.. tried out, very good! Tell people about beach wheelchairs – publicise more!'

'More information through Forum or Tourist Information.'

## **POSITIVE COMMENTS RECEIVED FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS**

Although the focus group is a setting in which people come together and generally express concerns and problems, give critical opinions and combine to provide solutions, it can also be a sounding-board for praise and approval. In this vein, the participants were invited to nominate policies; schemes or practice that they felt were positive and working well. These are the comments:

- ❑ Cornwall County Council subsidises Parishes more, which is good
- ❑ Having a public consultation process is very positive
- ❑ West Penwith consultation of different users seen as Good Practice
- ❑ Beach wheelchair project viewed favourably (but more info needed for public)
- ❑ Some parishes excellent regarding maintenance, e.g. Cubert
- ❑ Coastal footpaths a good initiative (but poorly maintained.)

These areas were considered particularly good for access:

- ❑ Camel Trail
- ❑ National Trust North Cliff Path
- ❑ Crenver, improvement to woodland paths (and teaching facility.)
- ❑ Tehidy Woods
- ❑ Mineral Tramway

