

Meeting note

Title of meeting: National Access Forum for Wales meeting 73

Date of meeting: 22 November 2022

Time of meeting: **10:30 – 13:00 (online through Teams)**

Present: Geraint Davies (Chair), Rosie Plummer (NRW Board member), Chris Mills (Afonydd Cymru), Helen Donnan (BHS), Phil Stone (CW), Charles de Winton (CLA), Adrian Walls (CSS Wales), Gwenda Owen (Cycling UK), David Scott Ashworth (Defence Estates), John Cuthbertson (Disabled Ramblers), Evans (Elan Valley Trust), Bernard Griffiths (FUW), Dave Waterman (LARA), Rachel Lewis-Davies (NFU), Ian Mabberley (LAFs), Jonathan Hughes (National Trust), Beverley Penney (OSS), Rebecca Brough (Ramblers Cymru), Anthony Richards (Welsh National Parks), Steve Rayner (WATO), Mathew Williams (WSA), Sarah Smith (WG), Simon Pickering (WG), Carys Drew (NRW Secretariat), Kate Jury (Ramblers GB), Eifion Jones (NRW), Rhodri Hewitt (NRW), Jont Bulbeck (NRW), Delyth Davies (Translator),

Apologies: Ruth Rourke (IPROW, Deputy Chair), Eben Muse (BMC) Steven Morgan (Sport Wales) and Paula Brunt (Disabled Ramblers), Tony Rooney (Deputy National Representative Welsh LAFs)

Observers Eifion Jones (Ceredigion CC), Steve Jenkinson (Kennel Club), Kate Ashbrook (OSS), Angela Charlton (Ramblers Cymru), Kieron Foster (Cycling UK), Catrin Davies (Gwynedd Council), Liza Tomos (NRW), Richard Thomas (NRW), Dave MacCallum (NRW), Peter White (Ceredigion LAF Chair), Alison Roberts (NRW), Sarah Tindal (NRW)

Item No: Item

Welcome and Apologies

1. The Chair introduced himself and welcomed attendees to the online meeting. The simultaneous translation was provided within the Teams meeting, some attendees could not access this system as such the Chair continued in English
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but invited anyone who wanted to contribute in Welsh to do so. Apologies and housekeeping matters were noted. Observers were welcomed and reminded to observe rather than participate in the meeting. The meeting was being recorded for the purpose of the meeting summary and would then be deleted. The record of the meeting is a summary note rather than a verbatim minute.

Actions and Matters Arising

Meeting with the Deputy Minister

2. The Chair advised that the intended meeting with the Deputy Minister had not taken place and there had since been a change in Ministerial portfolios with a new Minister, [Lesley Griffiths MS](#), Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd now having responsibility for access matters. Following this change of Ministerial portfolios, WG officials have provided the new Minister with a comprehensive briefing on access issues including access to water and the previous commitment from the Deputy Minister to meet with the NAFW Chair to discuss these issues. A response is expected shortly.
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Who has a public right of way? Sharing findings from Ramblers' upcoming research and discussion on their focus for the years ahead

3. Kate Jury, Project Manager (Paths and Access Vision), works on a Ramblers GB project to look at where to focus work in relation to the path network. Kate gave an overview of research that Ramblers have commissioned with New Economics Foundation and Astun Technology over the past year looking at building evidence about the path network; collecting and analysing data to inform work of Ramblers and support decision makers and people to make the case for paths. Paths are how most people experience the countryside in England and Wales, Ramblers undertake a huge amount of work to protect, expand and improve the path network through thousands of path volunteers on the ground, legal action and case work, public advice and campaigns and key projects e.g. Paths to Wellbeing and access for all. By having a unified vision and strategy this should help Ramblers make the case to government and funders and help engagement and improve integration internally and to find synergies across the sector.

Kate noted that the first pillar was on building evidence and a move to be more data driven. The research has not yet been released, but she shared some top highlights and some of the narratives.

The research looks at the value to public rights of way network to people and places, how much of network within 10mins walk of people's homes, what the network looks like (how green it is, how well connected it is to people), evidence shows that there is an inequity of network provision in relation to deprivation and ethnicity, both in urban and rural areas. Some interesting insights around how important 'greenness' of network and where it's placed how much people will want to use. Also looked at health and health inequalities

and provision of the network and at age of housing stock in relation to network provision, noting that there are differences in provision from when houses were built. Work is ongoing with a second research report due to complete this year, which also looks at connection with open access land.

Ramblers have developed a way to look at the issues and areas to focus on:

- Provision – inequality of where the networks are
- Quality – barriers on network making it inaccessible and condition impacting overall experience
- Information – lack of information to find and enjoy the network (what information is collected by organisations and where it is to help the public make informed choices)

Kate set out the improvements sought in these areas, noting that currently the path network is not reaching full potential and people are missing out on the benefits of walking in nature.

Kate shared how Ramblers are now framing work under 5 key pillars to have most impact:

- Protect – past, present, and future holding people to account, celebrating importance of public rights of way and legal protection of paths
- Improve – improving condition and removing unnecessary barriers on existing network
- Expand – reducing severance, ensure connectivity for people and places, understand where targeted approaches are needed
- Promote – support information to maximise opportunities and benefits to people
- Champion – the value and to make case for paths, use information and insights to support work

The project has been about compiling evidence on public rights of way and thinking about how this can be used to support the Ramblers as an organisation and to support more people accessing the countryside.

Kate concluded by reiterating that the research report has not yet been released, it will be released in Spring 2023 with a focus on paths following that. She thanked the Forum for opportunity to present and invited members to get in touch with her and link up to learn about other organisations work and talk more and explore working together. Kate.jury@ramblers.org.uk

Discussion points:

- Feedback that the report and information sounds really useful and that it is helpful to have evidence to support access practitioners
 - Ramblers hope to release in early Spring 2023, Rebecca Brough can provide updates to the Forum.
 - Important that project outcomes differentiate between England and Wales as different countries and noting that access is a devolved matter. In Wales stakeholders have been involved in a lengthy process of access reform, differences in sustainable farming scheme and different social demographics.
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- The project has been working across all three nations in GB, but will separate out to individual nations in order to take more targeted approach whilst having GB overview and 'golden thread' through the strategy. Ramblers have been working with Ramblers Cymru to understand how the evidence applies in Wales, and how to have a unified strategy whilst also understanding the differences, legislation, levers and opportunities and timing of these.
 - This research considered quantitative data about where the network is in relation to people and places and analysis of this and this is one evidence pillar supporting the work. In relation to a question concerning safety of users accessing the network and insurance, Kate acknowledged that rights and responsibilities of people when out walking is an important area and this is covered in Ramblers wider work, she invited comment on important points to capture as part of this.
 - There is a key recommendation in wider work and look at education and making people aware of their rights and responsibilities, Ramblers are currently formulating what that looks like. Kate noted that Ramblers are good internally talking to volunteers and members but need to be better externally so looking to consider this in partnership with people with insight and experience.
 - Chair thanked Kate taking the time to share the interesting presentation, look forward to seeing how it developed and for offer to discuss further on other matters noted.

Action: 73.1 Carys to share presentation slides.

Woodland Creation: introducing the new schemes in Wales

Eifion Jones, Specialist Advisor Woodland Creation & Rhodri Hewitt, National Forest Liaison Officer, NRW

Rhodri set out the benefits of trees including increasing biodiversity, mitigating air pollution and flooding, reducing noise pollution, improving water quality as well as benefits to wellbeing from visiting woodland and he detailed some of the recreational opportunities in woodland.

4. Eifion provided an overview of the new funding schemes. The previous Glastir Woodland Creation scheme has been split into three creating new schemes:

- Small grant – low risk relatively small areas for woodland creation
- Planning scheme – creates a verified woodland creation plan valid for 5 years
- Separate woodland creation grant (applied for after the planning scheme)

Eifion noted that, as with any scheme there is a compromise and balance between complexity and convenience. He compared the Small Grant Woodland Creation and the Woodland Creation Grant showing where there was overlap, where the differences were and in what can be funded.

The Small Grants was launched at the end of August, funding rates cover establishing woodland, costs e.g. fencing and gates and maintenance rates.

Datamap Wales identifies the areas that are suitable for the Small Grant areas. Approx 50% of Wales has been excluded where there are any sensitivities. Eifion gave an overview of the process and timings (noting the aspiration is to have the process to apply done within 28 days with trees planted within 12months). The scheme had to be prescriptive in order to comply with the UK Forestry Standard (UKFS) and to have woodland that deliver across all the outcomes sought. UKFS includes requirements for public rights of way and Eifion shared conditions within the Small Grants contract that would be inspected for Rural Payments Wales when tree planting is done.

The Woodland Creation planning Scheme and Woodland Creation Grant, (referred to as the 'main scheme') has more steps in the application process. NRW's involvement had been shifted to the start of the process (compared to Glastir scheme) to be able to better include sensitivities from the beginning of the design process.

The Woodland Opportunity Map (on Datamap Wales) identifies all the opportunities, sensitivities and constraints for registered woodland planners to interpret in order to develop a Woodland Creation Plan. Payment rates include more options for capital works compared to the small grants scheme. Eifion set out how public rights of way need to be taken into account. The Woodland creation plan is valid for 5 years.

The new proposed National Forest for Wales scheme is being launched with some exemplar sites, and the scheme is being finalised before the application process is made public. The ambition is to extend the length and breadth of Wales providing opportunity by planting, growing, protecting trees, mitigate climate change, halt and reverse decline in biodiversity, support health and wellbeing and support commercial opportunity.

There are 14 exemplar sites that have been launched and are now officially national forest, they range across Wales, follow a lot of WG woodland estate, it is hoped these will be added to building up a connected network through the country.

The First Minister had a vision that "future generations have a chance to walk from one end of Wales to the other, without ever leaving a natural and National Forest" this doesn't mean canopy cover all the way through, woodland can comprise of open spaces. The idea is to have a promoted path that anyone can access from all over the country. Rhodri shared some accessibility considerations such as standards, maintenance and connectivity with other promoted routes e.g. the Wales Coast Path and National Trails and emphasised that local opportunities for recreation and people's engagement with the National Forest would be really important alongside the other aims sought.

Detail was provided about the six criteria set out for National Forest; essential criteria are to have

- **Good quality**
- **Woodlands accessible to people**
- **Community Involvement**

Three highly desirable entry criteria:

- **Connected woodlands**
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- **Dynamic multipurpose woodlands and trees**
 - **Woodlands that demonstrate learning, research and innovation**

A further funding scheme has been designed to support this; The Woodland Investment Grant (TWIG) is available to enhance existing woodland to meet the standard needed to be National Forest accredited.

Discussion points:

- Wales Right of Way Management Working Group representatives have been involved in the process. Noted that there have been problems in the past with previous schemes. Woodlands have fences and it's important that paths crossed by fences are properly maintained. Noted that there are allowances for wooden furniture and for metal furniture in the new scheme. Concern that wooden furniture can deteriorate within 10 years but schemes can run for 30-50 years. Question of whether furniture replacement will be funded under the scheme or support for landowners for the duration of the scheme to continue maintaining these structures? Concern of knock-on effect should furniture deteriorate and cause a nuisance and require enforcement action from local authority and whether authority would seek installation of metal furniture to avoid this.
 - Noted that the The Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport (ADEPT) has started a lot of work to look at recycled plastics, initial buying costs are significantly greater but they have 20-30 year lifespan.
 - Eifion noted that Metal gates are only available in the woodland creation grant in the main scheme. Timber gate is legacy from common agricultural policy and retained EU law so hope that this could be changed. Suggestion for recycled plastic is sound as it is a robust material.
 - The Woodland Creation schemes include maintenance for 12 years, if after 12 years there is need for a second round of investment, the Woodland Investment Grant (TWIG) would be able to satisfy that and could include replacement or upgrading of access infrastructure and woodland management to compliment what has been funded previously.
 - Request for LAFs to be consulted as part of the process of Woodland Creation. Eifion noted that the bigger the scheme the more consultation would be required.
 - Multi-user routes have been highlighted in proposals and Rhodri offered to look into this further.
 - Question about whether there had been a financial impact assessment on rural communities in creating a National Forest for Wales, in taking production out of certain places?
 - WG have carried out some financial modelling as part of Environment and Rural Affairs Monitoring & Modelling Programme (ERAMMP) [National Forest Evidence Review | ERAMMP](#) but not the specific question raised. Whilst referred to as National Forest, it is forest in the widest sense, it doesn't have to be closed canopy with stock excluded. See it more as a broader treescape and would include hedges, parkland, agro-forestry and shelter belts, it is about the connectivity of those trees rather than closed canopy woodland. There doesn't necessarily need to be a compromise
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between National Forest and agricultural productivity, could be able to deliver both. If trees are done right can compliment a farm business and improve productivity, hopefully with connected paths, and added tourism where land managers want to diversify - it should compliment rather than compromise.

- Important to have liaison with applicants, NRW and rights of way officers at the application stage, the scheme includes requirement for approval from local authority if existing public rights of way area affected. Where appropriate there may also be benefits to including permissive paths that could be raised with the registered woodland planner. In the Small Grants Scheme these discussions would take place between landowner and local authority directly.
 - Established paths on CROW access land couldn't be planted on and planting around them has to be appropriate.
 - There a register showing location of successful applications on Datamap Wales, unsure about how long it takes for these to appear on the site after the agreement is signed.
 - Chair thanks presenters for interesting presentation and looked forward to seeing how the schemes develop.
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NRW Corporate Plan – our Well-being objectives and steps to take - sharing current draft and opportunity to contribute

The Chair welcomed Sue Ginley, Lead Specialist Advisor, Corporate Planning & Performance and noted that a lot of work to date on developing NRW's Corporate Plan.

Sue noted that following several months of engagement, NRW is now in the process of finalising the development of the Corporate Plan for 2023-2027. The intention is to develop the text by March 2023 and then launch in June 2023.

NRW is asking stakeholder Forums to contribute and to invite feedback through a short survey and Sue gave a summary of the types of questions that would be asked.

5.

In discussion with NRW Board, other stakeholders, NRW directors and staff, Sue emphasised that social justice and involving people is a really important element of the Corporate Plan. There had been some discussion as to whether this should be a separate objective about people and social justice or whether this should permeate through the whole Corporate Plan. The Board decision was that it should permeate through the whole plan and Sue asked people to bear in mind social justice, working with people and equality underpinning everything being proposed.

Sue gave a brief presentation about the process of developing the Corporate Plan and the sign off processes and governance. The context and types of things that would be included in the Plan such as international context, the organisational objectives noting that these are NRW's Wellbeing Objectives. She set out the Vision and mission and the three high level objectives and some of the detail of how NRW would work to achieve these:

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- Nature is recovering
 - Nature and communities are low carbon and climate resilient
 - Pollution is presented

Discussion points

- In responding to a question about the short time available to respond to this critical strategic plan, Sue noted that this stage is part of a process, a previous engagement event had been conducted earlier in the year and the Plan has built on that. This stage is to help develop the draft plan.
- The Chair thanked the team for all their hard work in developing the plan and looked forward to receiving the slides and questionnaire.

Action 73.2: Carys to issue slides and survey questionnaire to NAFW members and members to respond by 6th December.

Meeting feedback summary results and secretariat response

6. Carys Drew circulated a feedback questionnaire for members after the last meeting. Noting that members are welcome to provide her with feedback at anytime, this was a formal feedback exercise to gather views about the meeting format. Carys thanked members for responded and provided and overview of the key points and set out the proposed actions in managing future meetings.
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Written contributions

Written contributions had been circulated.

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- Interest noted in BHS contribution to see the North Wales police contribution to BHS Dead Slow campaign and question about whether this could be encouraged more with other parts of Wales, e.g. National Parks particularly where there are visitors less used to countryside riders. Helen Donnan noted that it is hoped this approach will filter down through Wales with Alan Hiscot, BHS Safety Officer working closely with Road Safety Wales and work coming next year to highlight road safety for equestrians with signage similar to 'Think Bike' campaign.
 - Rebecca Brough picking up on the differences in emphasis of work in GB countries, she noted that there is a Freedom to Roam campaign which is happening in England, and Ramblers Cymru have asked that not to be a Welsh focussed campaign, given the different situation in Wales with Access Reform – not something that Ramblers are looking to push in Wales but she noted that members may see it come up at GB level.
 - In relation points made in the Ramblers written contributions about the Sustainable Farming Scheme, Rebecca clarified that Ramblers are still keen to see some element of existing access legislation being complied
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with as part of eligibility or payments in the new scheme such as cross compliance and National Minimum Standards. It was noted that the most recent stage of consultation had closed and the Universal Actions for access were optional.

- Noted example of work and legal challenges with Network Rail, important and worrying if this is a trend. Rebecca noted they were seeing a blanket approach in England in Wales, on casework side relating to removal of risk away from the railway. Question for other forum members whether they are seeing this experience – potentially huge impact. Would hope Welsh Government takes note.
 - Adrian Walls flagged up there had been work done to come to a new agreement with local authorities and Network Rail, with driven by direction from the UK Minister directing local authorities to come into line with expectations of Network Rail, it is more enabled by Government, as such Local authorities are not in as much of a position to stand up against this.
 - Carys provided a summary of the NRW written contribution and noted in the context of earlier questions about responsible recreation, the work being undertaken on the Countryside Code. NAFW will be kept up to date on this, but members are invited to share views on the promotional aspects of the Code by contacting Dr Emma Edwards-Jones who is the lead contact for Snowdonia Active: emma@snowdonia-active.com
 - In response to a question on whether the NRW Recreation Plan would include suggestions made by outdoor sector representatives that Welsh Government land could be used to test some of the proposals in Access Reform and show good practice. Jont Bulbeck confirmed that some discussions had taken place with WG and that opportunities would be considered, subject to reasonable time frame and suitability, and that feasibility of trialing approaches will be discussed with the team leading the Plan development.
 - Simon Pickering noted that much of the update had been covered including on Access Reform. He reiterated that due to lack of legislative slot in this Senedd term, WG are currently focussing on non-legislative reforms e.g. Countryside Code work and related separate work on dogs on leads. Looking for and taking opportunities to take forward proposals e.g. consultation on the repeal of the 2026 cut-off date. He noted that grant funding was going well this year.
 - Phil Stone noted that there is an an increase in people wanting to access water, recently seen schools recreation survey showing large number of school children accessing water. However there has been a reduction in water available by arrangement since 2019, area of water available has dropped, desperate for conversation to continue.
 - Simon noted that the briefing for Minister for Rural Affairs who has taken over responsibility, had included access to water and the the report of the NAFW access to water sub-group. Discussions taking place with Water Branch colleagues leading on Programme for Government commitment to begin to designate water bodies for recreation, also more explicit in the WG Access Improvement Grant can be used to target access to water improvements.
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Forward look & dates of next meeting

8.

Future meeting dates were confirmed as 14th March 2023 (online) and 4th July 2023 (hybrid – subject to facilities being available)
