

LEICESTERSHIRE LOCAL ACCESS FORUM – 25TH MAY 2011

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT & TRANSPORT

HIGHER LEVEL STEWARDSHIP - ACCESS

Purpose

1. To update the members on changes to grants for access under Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) and implications on public access to the countryside.

Background

2. Environmental Stewardship is an agri-environmental scheme that offers payments to farmers to manage land to protect and enhance the environment. The HLS component is a discretionary targeted scheme with 10 year agreements on sites with high environmental value. A range of management options are encouraged to anyone bidding for funds including, until recently, grants for creating linear or area public access and the encouragement of educational visits. The scheme is managed by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) with support from Natural England (NE).
3. The United Kingdom (UK) Government had been in discussions with the European Union (EU) regarding the scheme to ensure that it complies with funding rules. It has been agreed that EU rules prevent the use of EU funds for the access revenue funded elements. This element of the scheme is therefore funded by the UK Government. Following the Comprehensive Spending Review, this was an area that was cut.
4. Within Leicestershire there are approximately 145 kilometres of linear paths (equivalent to 5% of the Rights of Way (ROW) network) catering for walkers and in some cases horse riders, under the scheme (see appendix). Another 221 hectares is open access (about the same area as the open access at Bradgate Park). NE has been working with the Authority to develop grant packages that are in areas with little statutory access and also provide links to offer better recreational routes in conjunction with the rights of way network. Information on the schemes is posted on site and on the internet by NE. All of the schemes are recorded digitally alongside the ROW data on internal systems to inform officers carrying out access functions.
5. DEFRA has now indicated that elements of the educational support will remain in a new package but the ending of support for new grants for access has been confirmed. The changes are not retrospective and existing agreements will continue to the end of the term agreed. These will gradually cease over time. Within the County about 40% will end by 2015 with the remaining 60% gone by 2020. There are still limited monies available, including EU support, for capital spends on items to provide access such as stiles, gates or bridges. However, there are no revenue payments for granting the access or covering other issues such as insurance.

6. Most of the schemes will be in place for a number of years. Some were established under different grant criteria, such as Countryside Stewardship. It is not clear that even if HLS did continue to fund access that some of the sites would have qualified for renewal. Some were based on previous informal permissive access that occupiers may allow to continue.

Options

7. At the last meeting of the Forum concerns were raised about the loss of this access and how participants in the scheme could be encouraged to retain permissive access after the agreements come to an end.
8. A series of actions were suggested, these included:
 - Assess and advise on the future loss unless action is taken;
 - Advise on possible actions that could be undertaken which could save the HLS sites;
 - Seek any willing partners to undertake administration duties for saved HLS sites;
 - Document current processes used by NE (if they are willing) for any future administering body to adopt if required;
 - Advise possible sponsors and seek their level of interest.
9. The LLAF has indicated that it may wish to play a part in encouraging and helping occupiers to retain permissive access, although this would need to be further developed and involve close working with occupiers and NE. The County Council ROW team works with occupiers to support informal access including, where appropriate, permissive path agreements. The County Council is also able to facilitate the dedication of routes as ROW if the occupier wishes and, as an Access Authority, can help with the dedication of land as Open Access, thereby avoiding occupier liabilities.

Recommendation

10. To note the changes to the grants package and to determine the best way forward, including any involvement of the Forum.

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