



MINUTES

Meeting Date: **11 December 2023**

Meeting Time: **2pm to 4pm**

Meeting Venue: **MS Teams**

Attendees:

Jeremy Boxall	JBox	Chair
Anne Beecham	AB	(Vice chair) Tourism Representative
Anne Rillie	AR	Equestrian Representative
Charles Tassell	CT	Landowner/ Land Management Representative (CLA)
Robert Peel	RP	Walking Representative
Theresa Trussell	TT	Multi-User Representative
Graham Rusling	GR	KCC Public Rights of Way and Access Service – Special Advisor

Guest:

Simon Fathers	SF	High Weald National Landscapes
---------------	----	--------------------------------

Apologies:

Richard Dickenson	RD	Motorised Vehicles Representative
Sarah Barker	SB	Parish Council Representative (KALC)

Minutes:

Serena Mitchell-Burns	SMB	KCC Public Rights of Way and Access Service
-----------------------	-----	---

Welcome and apologies:

JBox opened the meeting and welcomed the guest presenter Simon Fathers of the High Weald National Landscapes to the meeting.

1. Minutes and matters arising from the last meeting:

Minutes from the KCAF 2023 Quarter 3 meeting held on 11 September 2023 were approved, and no matters arose from the minutes.

Actions from meeting held on 11 September 2023

Action 1.

GR to approach possible new KCAF new member to replace the cycling representative, and further new members to broaden the representation within the forum.

See item 3.

Action 2.

PC to contact Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council for information on their 'Talking Lamp Posts' scheme.

PC not in attendance at meeting to advise.

Action 3.

GR to circulate PROW and SE England Coast Path document on KCCIIIECP responsibilities.

Document in production, GR will circulate what is relevant to the forum once finalised.

1. Membership (*standing item*):

GR advised that regarding the recruitment of new KCAF members he has approached Christine Reid of The Woodland Trust to represent land management / woodland interests and is waiting to hear back.

He has also approached Rachael Carley who was recommended by the Active Travel team as a replacement cycling representation, and she has acknowledged interest in joining the forum but would like to meet first to discuss requirements of the role before committing.

SMB to set up an MS Teams meeting with **GR**, **JBox**, and **Rachael Carley**. **ACTION 1**

2. High Weald National Landscapes – presentation from Simon Fathers:

A presentation was provided by Simon Fathers (**SF**) about the High Weald National Landscapes.

SF advised the forum that he is the new Access and Recreations Officer for the recently rebranded High Weald National Landscapes, previously High Weald AONB. This is a newly created post and team within the HWNL, and as such would like to engage with all local access forums connected to the HWNL area.

SF spoke about the history and geography of the High Weald which is the 4th largest National Landscape area in the country, covering areas in Kent, Sussex, and Surrey, approximately 26% of which is within Kent.

He talked about what his team do within the HWNL and their broad and currently evolving remit which looks at access and recreation across the whole of the High Weald.

As part of his new role, he has been speaking to local access forums to introduce himself, talk about the work his team does, and talk about how the LAF members can get involved with the HWNL.

SF spoke about available funding such as FIPL (Farming in Protected Landscapes) funding, and DEFRA 'Access to All' grants.

Part of **SF's** work is to make the HWNL as accessible as possible to all within the limitations of the landscape, and as such they are looking at EqlAs, at developing people's connection with the landscape, and addressing physical and cultural barriers.

As over a quarter of the HWNL area is within Kent **SF** feels that it is very important to get Kent and its people involved with HWNL, and as such his team will be:

- Promoting HWNL for recreation purposes.
- Develop people's connection to the landscape to benefit wellbeing and the environment.
- Addressing barriers to the landscape.
- Help manage visitor impact on farming, wildlife, and communities.
- Offering opportunities to all by working with a diverse range of land managers, volunteer organisations, community groups, parish councils, local authorities, and other organisations.

SF asked the forum members for their ideas and input in relation to grants and funding available to the HWNL, including DEFRA's 'Access to All' grant for capital expenditure to change or improve facilities such as toilets, replacing stiles with pedestrian gates, general accessibility, etc. **SF** also asked the forum members for their input in to the 'High Weald Walks Festival' to take place 07 to 13 September 2024, and is run in conjunction with rambler groups. He has asked if any of the forum members or anyone they know would be interested in volunteering as a walk leader, or if they have any other ideas or assistance, they can provide to please contact him directly.

SF then asked the forum members if they had any questions relating to his presentation or new role with the HWNL:

- The shortage of cycling routes in West Kent was noted, and discussions with the HWNL around this would be beneficial to users. **SF** confirmed he has been doing some work around multi-user routes which were identified in the local transport plan and is also happy to have discussions with the forum over other multi-user routes and improvements in the High Weald.
- More specifics on the types of funding and grants available was requested, and **SF** advised that FIPL funding is available, DEFRA 'Access for All' funding, Sussex Lund grant, plus other capital funding grants which will be available in 2024-2025.
- A question was raised on whether all AONBs across the country will now be rebranded as National Landscapes, to which **SF** confirmed that will be the case as all titles and logos will come in line for consistency across the country.
- A subsequent question to this was raised about the replacement of signage around the country which currently has AONB on them and will this all need to be replaced. **SF** advised that he does not currently have full information on the planned process for the change of signage.
- A question was asked about **SF**'s new role of Access and Recreation Officer and whether all of the rebranded National Landscapes will have the same role withing them, to which **SF** advised that currently the HWNL is the only one to have set up a new team and role for this and that other NLs will be dealing with the funding and projects that his team will deal with from existing teams within their organisations.
- A question was asked whether **SF** what percentage of PROWs within the HWNL which had higher rights, and **GR** advised that within Kent this is approximately 16% of the routes.
- The final question was regarding the replacement or removal of stiles for a more accessible network, and whether the HWNL had any influence over landowners to make this happen. **SF** advised that although both HWNL and PROW can advise and encourage the replacement with pedestrian gates or removal of stiles the decision is down to the landowner.

The meeting thanked Simon for his presentation and discussion.

3. Kent Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan

GR spoke about the Active Travel capability fund and consultation which commences on 10 January 2024. This looks at the cycling and walking network and aims to produce an infrastructure plan for the whole county.

GR noted the following personal observations regarding the consultation documents:

- the document currently focuses more on East and Northwest Kent with very little emphasis on West Kent.
- Some of the proposed routes use off-road sections such as Byways Open to All Traffic

(BOATs) and needs to be mindful to respect the rights of existing users, especially on bridleways.

- Active Travel are developing a rural guidance but have so far not consulted with PROW or the KCAF members on this, and he will be contacting AT regarding this.
- Some routes are long muddy ones and are they actually the commuter routes they are advertised as being.

JBox advised that he has shared the consultation with his local parish council chair, who also agreed that West Kent was not represented in the consultation documents. He also noted that he does not feel that when encouraging active travel there needs to be a more cohesive strategy to join parish, district, and county plans together.

AR noted that network users are relying on PROW to ensure that within the consultation to ensure that the creation of new or upgrading of existing routes is not done at the detriment or exclusion of other users, such as horse riders.

AB noted that as a national strategy that some lesser used country roads could with better traffic control measures could be prioritised for non-motorised users.

JBox advised that the role of the KCAF members was to assist in looking a better countryside access and getting people out of the towns and into the countryside. As part of this the KCAF members will be submitting consultation responses as individuals and on behalf of their respective organisations, but also as a collective KCAF forum response.

JBox asked for a volunteer to collate the members opinions and construct a consultation response to submit both through the website and also by letter, and **AR** offered to take this forward on behalf of the forum.

4. Development sites (*standing item*):

a) Lower Thames Crossing:

RD was unable to attend the meeting, however he provided the following update of the Lower Thames Crossing development by email:

“There have been ongoing Compulsory Acquisition, Issue Specific and one Open Floor Hearing. I had been advised that our thoughts given in the original written submission would be given more weight if I could speak on access issues at one of the relevant Issue Specific Hearings via Teams or in person. Issue Specific Hearing 10 on the 24 October 2023 at Brands Hatch Hotel was the best match for issues we had with the DCO.

- *Legal Status of proposed NMU routes and PROWs:*
Whether there is clarity and agreement between parties of the legal status of new and affected routes. Whether there is a need to confirm the legal status of other existing routes within the

application boundary.

- **Design standards:**

Whether proposed design standards are suitable and applied appropriately.

Whether opportunities to maximise the potential benefit for NMU users and routes has been suitably considered. How usage surveys and assessments have been undertaken and their relevant application.

- **Future Maintenance:**

Whether future maintenance responsibility and cost has been sufficiently considered.

- **Construction Impact:**

Whether alternative routes during construction have been fully considered and appraised.

General approach to how diversions during construction will be agreed, approved and managed.

Unfortunately, I was unable to attend but KCC were represented by a Joseph Ratcliffe who raised some good points, as did representatives from Gravesham Borough Council and Shorne Parish Council.

There are now a few deadlines for comments on the last of these hearings and the close of the Examination is 20 December 2023. The Planning Inspectorate must prepare a report to the Secretary of State within 3 months of the end of examination. The Secretary of State then has a further 3 months to decide whether to grant or refuse development consent.”

b) Sealink:

GR spoke to the meeting about the sealink coming from Suffolk running along the seabed and coming back to land in the Thanet area. **GR** advised this should be added to the agenda for a future meeting.

c) Stone Street Solar Farm:

GR noted that the Stone Street Solar Farm proposal requires a future agenda item and possible site visit so that the KCAF members can assist **PROW** with both user and land management views.

5. PROW Vegetation Clearance:

GR advised that **PROW** have produced an initial guidance on their procurement process for vegetation clearance contracts and has shared the basics of this with the forum looking for support and advice with specifications relating to the following:

- What is on the schedule. The schedule is largely driven by parish councils and received fault reports, however there are budgetary constraints around the number of paths which can be cleared and therefore which should be prioritised.
- How wide should we be clearing. Feedback on the preferred width and height of clearance would be beneficial, taking the positives and negatives of either clearing narrower but longer stretches of path, or wider but shorter stretches of path that then require fewer cutbacks in the year.
- The status of the routes, as this impacts on the type, width, and height of the clearance.
- The PROW approach to hedge clearance when they belonging to landowners adjacent to the path, as they are not for PROW to maintain.
- The clearance frequency. Routes are cut once, twice, or three times a year depending on the status, usage, and landscape of a specific paths.
- The start date for the first vegetation cut varies dependant on seasonal changes, rates of growth, and other environmental factors.

AR commented on the possibility of cutting woodland brambles in the winter months to extend ensure the paths are clearer in the spring and summer.

GR advised this is possible however there are budgetary considerations to be looked at.

AB spoke about fenced off paths quickly becoming overgrown and unmanageable.

GR asked everyone to please ensure these are reported as faults for attention as early as possible.

GR asked the forum to send any feedback to him, and once PROW have drafted a completed specifications document, he will then present this to the forum for further comments.

6. Deregulation Act:

GR updated the meeting on the Deregulation Act and advised that the cut-off date has now been confirmed as 2026, and the Statutory Instruments have been laid before parliament and are to be implemented by 2031.

The list of streets has been looked at and decided that a more robust document is required, as such a new working group has been created to produce a consistent and robust list of streets.

7. King Charles III England Coastal Path (*standing item*):

a) Coastal Margin Safety:

Move forwards and add to March 2024 meeting agenda. **ACTION 2.**

b) Update:

GR advised the meeting that the Ramsgate to Whitstable section has been opened, and the next sections to be opened in 2024 are the Isle of Sheppey and Iwade to Grain routes.

8. Correspondence (*standing item*):

JBox advised that he has been invited to join the Local Access Forum Chair meetings and feels this will be beneficial for the KCAF members going forward to discuss and collaborate with other LAFs on their role as a working LAF within their respective counties.

JBox advised that he will circulate the LAF Chair meeting minutes from December 2023 as soon as he has received them.

9. Any Other Business:

a) KCAF meetings for 2024:

JBox raised the matter of the KCAF meeting dates and venues for 2024. The general agreement was to have two in-person meetings within the year, preferably within the lighter months of March and June to accommodate possible site visits, and the two later meetings in September and December to be online MS Teams meetings.

GR reminded the forum members that KCC do have financial considerations and constraints to the end of the current financial year, which does include budgeting for KCAF meetings, venue hire, and site visits.

JBox advised that he will circulate some proposed dates and venues to the forum members for agreement and will then advise **GR** accordingly.

Next meeting:

Date: **Monday 25 March 2024**

Time: **2pm to 4pm**

Venue: **MS Teams**