

Email to local MP

RURAL FUNDING

LEICESTERSHIRE LOCAL ACCESS FORUM (LLAF) SUGGESTIONS FOR TARGETED LANDOWNER SUBSIDIES

In the interests of the safety of travellers by non motorised means we think that subsidies to landowners can be better targeted to give the general public better value for these public funds. Non motorised travel is good for the environment and good for the general health, fitness and wellbeing of those enjoying it. Presumably the whole issue of funding subsidies to the agricultural sector will be revisited when we stop contributing to the EU and getting some of our money back.

The countryside many of us crave and where we want to encourage more people to get out and enjoy nature is not natural in the true sense – it is largely man made and is maintained as it is by people working the land and the creatures that graze it. As such it is proper that they should get some public support in recognition of this fact. Support for farmers to maintain walls, gates, stiles and other infrastructure on access points to the countryside should be provided where needed but subsidies for gates and stiles should only be provided when the landowner can demonstrate a need to enclose livestock. Encouragement should be given to remove them, and hence the financial burden, in favour of gaps.

There is also a widely recognised need to improve and update public access to the countryside and subsidies to landowners /occupiers of marginal land should be able to assist them whilst at the same time being used to create additions and improvements to the public rights of way network. This could involve landowners / occupiers being rewarded for creating off-road links to close gaps in the rights of way network including those where at present the link is a metalled highway which can no longer be used safely. Many such links have been identified by the LLAF and other LAFs and are often recognised in local authority Local Transport Plans or Rights of Way Improvement Plans.

When we use the term targeted it is in the belief that under Stewardship/HLS schemes money was given out for access where there was little or no public demand or need. By targeted we mean that it should only be on offer where there is a demonstrable public benefit from the access being offered with priority being given to missing safe links. We also think that funding should be directed towards smaller privately owned farms especially on marginal land and not large corporate or institutional organisations. Bodies like the National Trust, Wildlife Trusts, Woodland Trust or RSPB have other funding sources they could use to create accessible routes on their land.

We can as a country, be rightly proud of our historic public rights of way network and Leicestershire County Council does an excellent job of ensuring it is maintained and given adequate signage but there are many gaps making the network dysfunctional. This will not improve in a county with strong development pressures unless positive action is taken. There is a need for belated public compensation for the loss of the links in the network that have occurred with growth in vehicular traffic and many new roads. We also feel that

where major new disruption is planned compensation should be built into the system. Here in Leicestershire we face HS2 cutting many longstanding rights of way and the people of Leicestershire will see no benefits from this scheme. We are also to see a Strategic Rail Freight Interchange also disturbing the network. As a LAF we have made overtures to the HS2 Company to try and get agreement to some mitigation measures but we do feel that, somewhat akin to the Section 106 planning benefit, there should be a sum of hypothecated money provided to improve the rest of the network. This would enable us to pursue some of the subsidy suggestions without increased call on the national exchequer.

Turning to specific suggestions:

1. Payment for improvements to the public rights of way network where the route in question is deemed of sufficient public benefit by the local Rights of Way Authority in consultation with the local LAF.
2. Preference to be given to routes aiding all non-motorised users (that is, pedestrians, cyclists and equestrians) providing higher rights where needed and suitable, with priority being given to smaller privately owned farms, hill farms in particular.
3. Payment for maintenance on routes over privately owned land and in open access areas i.e. mowing of grass tracks, improving the accessibility of and maintenance of walls, gates and stiles and assistance with directional signage.
4. Funding to come from a hypothecated fund part grant aided and to be used for no other purpose
5. Agreements should be better policed than has been the case in the past, by improved cross-compliance and simpler regulation. Whenever landowners are applying for support under Stewardship, Woodland Management or any other public funding grant they must look after the environment and provide safe access to the public into any amenity land. We do not think the present level of inspection is adequate and would like to see a portal where the public can raise concerns for the inspectorate to look into.
6. Access funds provided previously have not produced best public value, partly because of underuse due to a lack of awareness and poor publicity and in some cases due to a lack of maintenance, we would suggest that any new tracks created should be added to the Definitive Map of Public Rights of Way so that they will be publicised via OS maps and subject to a well-established reporting and inspection system by regular users and highway authority staff.