

REPORT REF: 7.0

THE FUTURE OF HIGHER LEVEL
STEWARDSHIP PERMISSIVE
ACCESS

1. INTRODUCTION

Following the announcement in 2010 regarding the ending of subsidy for Higher Level Stewardship permissive access, a number of Local Access Forums (LAFs) have been promoting the permissive access sites. Emphasizing the value to local communities for walking, cycling and riding. With walking and cycling being important forms of exercise, assisting in improving health and general well being, it is essential to ensure that access to the countryside for walking and cycling is maintained wherever possible. There were approximately 1800 walks and rides included in the Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) and Countryside Stewardship Schemes in 2010 prior to the subsidy being withdrawn. There will be a gradual reduction in subsidy for permissive access, which will be fully withdrawn in 2020. This report explores the opportunities for maintaining the Natural England web site for permissive routes which have been created as part of the HLS schemes since the 2010 announcement.

2. FINDINGS

- a. The Natural England document “Guidance on continuing to provide permissive access on termination of an agri-environment agreement” states “ Where the provision of permissive linear routes or open access under an agri-environment scheme has proved to be of public benefit then Natural England and Defra are keen that permissive access should continue on a voluntary basis.” Further in the document it also states “Where an agreement holder is hoping to renew the rest of the agreement under a new Higher Level Stewardship agreement, DEFRA has asked that the continuation of well used voluntary permissive access be taken into account by Natural England when assessing the application.” The Farm Environmental Plan (FEP) application, is stated as being a prerequisite of all Higher Level Stewardship applications. The FEP application form ([://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/efep-form_tcm6-6501.pdf](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/efep-form_tcm6-6501.pdf)) to be completed by the farmer/land owner prior to being granted a HLS subsidy includes the questions 3.4:

“Access

- (a) Identify any access opportunities on the farm, and list which access options the applicant may wish to pursue.
 - (b) Does the applicant wish to provide educational access? If so, what is the potential need for increased educational access in the area? What facilities are currently in place to support this?"
- b. Currently Natural England do not record any information relating to the number of applications received that are successful which include permissive access as part of the application. These permissive footpaths and bridleways may not be as extensive as when the grants were paid separately for access but every opportunity should be made to publicise permissive access sites that have been and continue to be created since 2010.
 - c. One of the issues relating to HLS permissive access sites published on the Natural England web site is the lack of awareness by the local communities of the existence of these sites. With the HLS sites created post 2010, any permissive access which the farmer/land owner has agreed to as part of their application for the grant is left to the farmer to update the parish council and highway authority. There is currently no process to ensure this is carried out. It is then up to the farmer/land owner to display signs indicating the permissive way. Therefore only a proportion of the local community is made aware that the permissive route exists. This may also mean that a number of people in the local community may not be aware of the permissive access, due to not using the public highway where the signage for the permissive route is displayed.
 - d. The Government and indeed Natural England are trying to encourage more people to walk, cycle and enjoy the countryside. These permissive routes could assist in doing that and also may help the local economy if these sites are promoted more widely.
 - e. There are currently 75 HLS access sites in England which provide routes suitable for wheelchair users.

3. CONCLUSIONS

- a. The Government and indeed Natural England, are trying to encourage more people to walk, cycle and enjoy the countryside. These permissive routes could assist in doing that and also may help the local economy if these sites are promoted more widely. It is accepted that the farmers/landowners are not being paid separate sums of money for the permissive access but if it is part of their successful HLS application then they are being recognised for the access element of the application and being provided with a grant from the public purse.
- b. If the LAFs became more involved in investigating the access element of the HLS application, it could be possible for the LAFs to evaluate the value of the access in terms of benefits to potential users. The workload of the LAFs would obviously increase if they were involved in assessing HLS access sites. From analysing four LAF areas over a period of seven years the number of new access sites receiving grant subsidy averaged 10 per year, per LAF, with the highest figure being 17 per year.
- c. A national template could be produced to assist the LAFs assess the value of proposed permissive access sites. This could help identify which access agreements would benefit walkers, cyclists, horse riders and local communities. An example of an assessment template can be found in appendix A. The current web site maintained by NE could be used for promoting site details and maps of the successful permissive access applications. If an application for permissive access was found by the LAF as non beneficial to walkers, cyclists, horse riders and local communities it could inform NE and therefore there would be no necessity to up load the site details and map to the NE web site.
- d. To enable the LAFs to be involved it would be necessary for NE to provide the LAFs with the access information from the application. Initially this could be carried out by copying the appropriate parts of the form and emailing to the LAF secretary. To make the process more efficient the application form could be redesigned to enable the access information on the application to be disseminated, this would eliminate the necessity for copying the application. The assessment process in appendix B could be followed to allow a smooth flow of information between NE and the LAF. NE would need to stipulate the timeline the LAF should work to in terms of the speed the response is required for the permissive access assessment.
- e. If the process in appendix B is adopted, permissive access sites created after the 2010 announcement and prior to the process in appendix B being implemented, would need to be investigated. As NE currently has not recorded successful HLS applications which include permissive access, the only method of obtaining this information would be by a person reading through the appropriate part in the successful applications submitted during this time frame. The relevant information could then follow the process in Appendix B.
- f. NE used to provide the sign boards for the farmers and land owners for the permissive access agreements under the Countryside Stewardship and Higher Level Stewardship schemes, this ensured signage was uniform on all sites and the site details were displayed in their correct format. The problem with these signs is that a person passing in a car would not see the information and therefore would not realise the opportunity for walking, cycling or riding on the permissive route existed. NE could continue to provide the sign boards to be displayed at access to the sites and further work could be carried out to explore the benefits of a National easily identifiable permissive route sign from the roadside.
- g. If a process is adopted to identify all the beneficial permissive routes, any change made back to where the farmer or land owner receives a subsidy for the length or area of permissive access would be easy to cost and implement. However that would also mean that NE would need to capture the information whereby the LAF has stated that the permissive access is beneficial. It would also be helpful if NE could summarise total route mileage by Highway Authority (HA) and LAF. The summary could be split into footpaths, bridle paths - cycling allowed, bridle paths – cycling not allowed, wheelchair routes.
- h. Wheelchair users and their carers do not have as much opportunity to enjoy the fresh air of the countryside. The locations of the current grant subsidised wheelchair friendly routes are displayed in appendix C. When taking a wheelchair user out to visit places the preparation can be time consuming and sometimes stressful for both parties. It is therefore essential that any trip out to the countryside is worthwhile and a pleasant experience both for the wheelchair user and their carer. Whilst it is understandable in these harsh economic times expenditure by Government has to be reduced, it would be beneficial if financial incentives were

provided to farmers/land owners under the HLS scheme for permissive access suitable for wheelchair users. Any site provided where payment was made would also need to provide a minimum of one hour's worth of interest e.g. a bird hide with suitable wheelchair access and a minimum and maximum distance to the hide (the minimum and maximum distance to the hide to be decided in consultation with appropriate bodies).

- i. A further classification of permissive restricted byways may also help people to enjoy the countryside more and provide safe off road carriage routes. If permissive restricted byways were included in the HLS permissive access scheme there would be a necessity for the symbols on the current web site to be modified to include horse and carriage. A cycling symbol is also missing off the web site so this modification could be undertaken at the same time.
- j. To promote the permissive routes a monthly or quarterly news release could be provided aimed at parish councils and local community papers. The LAFs through the Highway Authorities secretariat could be the ideal provider of the news release. Ensuring signage is displayed at all the permissive sites access points could be made the responsibility of the LAF or parish council to notify any issues to NE. If the farmer or land owner has difficulty with the permissive access site in terms of users not complying with the terms and conditions of use, the LAF or the parish council could be notified and they would be expected to assist in resolving the matter.
- k. With the current financial climate it is recognised the cost benefit ratio of any government funded project must ensure the benefits dramatically outweigh the cost. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this report to display the cost benefit ratio in terms of pound notes, it is possible to identify the cost and benefit headings if the project is accepted in full. The cost benefits are displayed in appendix D.
- l. The health of the Nation is an important factor and it was felt and hoped by many that hosting the Olympic Games and the remarkable tally of medals would encourage many to take up sporting activities. This would help to reduce the obesity levels and the costs of healthcare for the Nation. Whilst not all people want to be physically involved in sports, many would take the opportunity to walk and cycle if they were encouraged more. The PRoW network across the country, Open Access land, together with permissive access are important recreation facilities which have the opportunity to provide members of the public recreation and exercise. Partaking in walking and cycling could be a catalyst for some people to become involved in other outdoor activities. Advertising by Natural England with role models known to the public that enjoy using the PRoW network and permissive access; pictures of views from permissive routes; slogans such as get fit, keep fit enjoy being fit; could have a significant impact on usage and better health for the Nation.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1. It is recommended that Natural England:

- a. Continues to maintain their permissive access public website (<http://cwr.defra.gov.uk>) and update it with all permissive access sites which have been assessed as successful by the LAFs
- b. Produces a national assessment template for the LAFs to use (similar to appendix A).
- c. Adopts the permissive access assessment process in appendix B
- d. Requests HLS applicants to identify permissive restricted byways in their application
- e. Issues standard signage to farmers or land owners
- f. Modifies the symbols on the website to include Restricted Byway, Bridle Path - Cycling Allowed, Bridle Path - Cycling NOT Allowed.
- g. Investigate the use of more visible signs at the roadside access points
- h. Actively promotes Nationally the benefits of the PRoW, Open Access Land and permissive access
- i. Investigates the possibility of continuing to allow funding to farmers and land owners providing suitable wheelchair routes which provide appropriate exercise for carers and interest for the wheelchair user and their carer. Aiming to provide a minimum of 10 wheelchair friendly routes, meeting the agreed criteria in each LAF area.
- j. Provides press releases for health promotion campaigns, walking, cycling and riding magazines, promoting new permissive access sites on a monthly or quarterly basis
- k. Provides a press release template for LAFs to use
- l. Provides statistics on permissive access to Local Access Forums and Highway Authorities relating to their areas
- m. Provides statistics on a National scale and provides feedback to Local Access Forums and Highway Authorities
- n. Identifies permissive access site details in HLS applications received after the ending of grant subsidy and prior to the new process being adopted and submits the information to the LAFs to follow the assessment process in appendix B
- o. Natural England trial the proposed process with 3 LAFs for a period of 12 months
- p. That a lessons learnt exercise is carried out with the trial LAFs on a quarterly basis

4.2. It is recommended that LAFs:

- a. Create a HLS sub group which meet or correspond, on an as required basis to assess HLS permissive access applications and inform Natural England of the result of the assessment. LAFs promote new sites on a monthly or quarterly basis through press releases.
- b. News releases relating to permissive access are aimed at parish councils and local community papers.

4.3. It is recommended LAFs and parish councils:

- a. Report lack of signage at a site to Natural England
- b. Assist farmers and land owners if there is an issue related to permissive access where a resolution is required.

4.4. It is recommended that Highway Authorities all have links to <http://cwr.defra.gov.uk> from web pages accessed by the public regarding information on walks, bridleways and cycling.

4.5. It is recommended that the 12 month trial includes:

- a. The, andLAFs in the trial.
- b. A lessons learnt exercise is carried out with the LAFs on a quarterly basis.
- c. Feedback from the farmers and land owners is included in the lessons learnt exercise
- d. Improvements in the process or documentation is carried out as required during the trial process
- e. Natural England identify all permissive access applications across England from the start of the trial to ensure there is no necessity to back track through applications at a later date when it is necessary to send the relevant information to the LAFs outside the trial areas.
- f. A regular update is provided to all LAF co-ordinators so LAFs countrywide can see the workload, other issues and improvements made.
- g. The trial LAFs provide updates regarding issues and successes on HUDDLE for other LAFs to examine and discuss

- h. A presentation relating to the trial is provided at the LAFs Regional Chairs meetings.
- i. A presentation and workshop is provided at the National conference.
- j. At the end of the trial a report and summary is provided for all LAFs
- k. A letter is sent to all LAFs asking if they wish to be included in the process
- m. The trial LAFs assist Natural England in developing a training package for LAFs signing up to the permissive access process.
- n. The trial LAFs continue with the process after the end of the 12 month trial period
- o. The trial LAFs assist Natural England in training other LAFs if required.

EXAMPLE TEMPLATE FOR ASSESSING VALUE OF PERMISSIVE ACCESS

Appendix A

Does the access include a footpath?

Does the access include a bridleway?

Is cycling allowed on the bridleway?

Is the route suitable for a wheelchair?

Does the route have safe off road access from the nearest community?

Can a safe off road access be made available from the nearest community?

Is there safe off road parking close to the site?

Does the route join the PRow network?

Does the route have a scenic value?

Is there an opportunity to view wild life on the route?

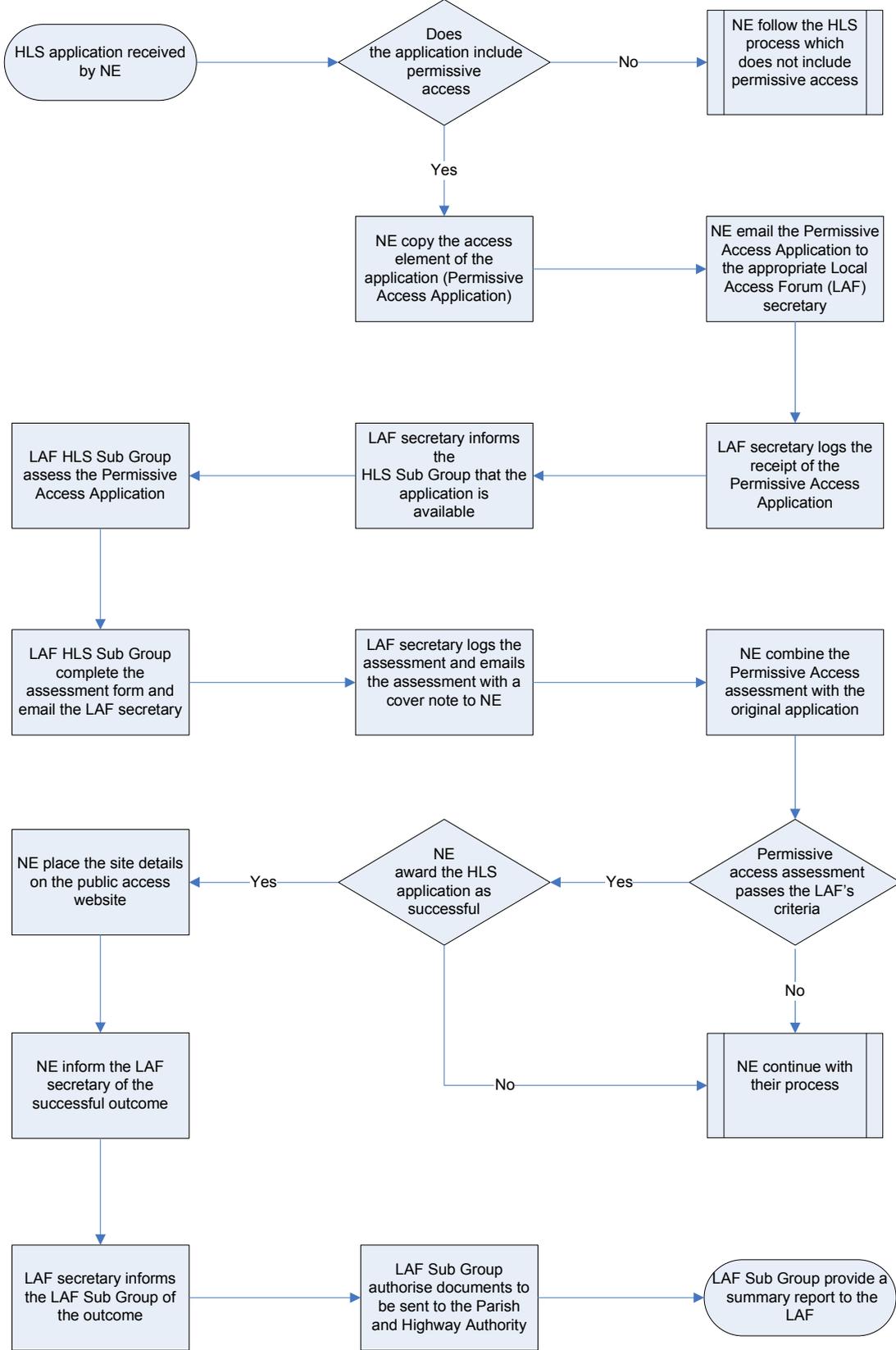
Does the route of historical value?

Does the route have geological value?

Are there examples of unusual or picturesque flora on route?

Appendix B

POSSIBLE PERMISSIVE ACCESS ASSESSMENT PROCESS



ACCESS SITES SUITABLE FOR WHEELCHAIRS

Appendix C

Location	Number of Sites in 2012	Number of Sites in 2013	YEAR GRANT SUBSIDY ENDS							
			2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Bath & NE Somerset	0	0								
Bedfordshire	0	0								
Berkshire	0	0								
Buckinghamshire	0	0								
Cambridgeshire	0	0								
Cheshire	3	3	1							2
City of Bristol	0	0								
Cleveland	0	0								
Cornwall	1	1						1		
Cumbria	6	5	1	1		2			1	
Derbyshire	0	0								
Devon	4	3		1		1				1
Dorset	0	0								
Durham	4	3					2		1	
East Riding	0	0								
East Sussex	1	1								1
Essex *	1	1								1
Gloucestershire	0	0								
Greater Manchester	0	0								
Hampshire	0	0								
Herefordshire	2	0								
Hertfordshire	6	6						6		
Isle of Wight	0	0								
Isle of Scilly	0	0								
Kent	3	2				1	1			
Lancashire	5	5	1	1		1	1			1
Leicestershire & Rutland	0	0								
Lincolnshire	6	6	1			1	1	1	2	
London	0	0								
Merseyside	0	0								
Norfolk	4	4		1		1		2		
North Somerset	1	1		1						
North Yorkshire	8	6					1	1	1	3
Northamptonshire	1	1					1			
Northumberland	5	5		2			1		1	1
Nottinghamshire	2	2		1						1
Oxfordshire	1	0								
Shropshire	2	2							1	1
Somerset	2	2	1							1
South Gloucestershire	0	0								
South Yorkshire	2	2		2						
Staffordshire	2	2	1							1
Suffolk	1	1								1
Surrey	3	2				2				
Tyne & Wear	2	2		1				1		

ACCESS SITES SUITABLE FOR WHEELCHAIRS

Appendix C continued

Location	Number of Sites in 2012	Number of Sites in 2013	YEAR GRANT SUBSIDY ENDS							
			2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Warwickshire	1	1		1						
West Midlands	1	1								1
West Sussex	0	0								
West Yorkshire	2	2							1	1
Wiltshire	1	1	1							
Worcestershire	2	2					1			1
TOTAL	85	75	7	12	0	9	9	12	8	18

* Essex previously had a site categorised incorrectly in 2012

COSTS

Organisation

Natural England

1. Continual maintenance of permissive access web site
2. Copying and emailing permissive access applications to LAFs
3. Amending the application form to reduce the administrative time copying the application form
4. Uploading permissive access site details and maps to the web site
5. Collecting and communicating data re permissive access sites to Highway Authorities and LAFs (Possibly an area of work which should be carried out even if the recommendations of this report are not accepted)
6. Designing press release template for LAFs to target parish councils and local community papers.
7. Designing press release template for health promotion campaigns, walking, cycling and riding magazines
8. Emailing press release monthly or quarterly
9. Signage for permissive access sites entry points
10. Investigation of more visible roadside signage
11. Joint cost with Department of Health funding promoting walking using PRoW and permissive access sites

Highway Authority

1. Secretariat:
 - a. Tracking applications
 - b. Communicating with Natural England
 - c. Communicating with HLS Sub Group
 - d. Emailing monthly/quarterly press release
2. Placing the link to the Natural England HLS permissive access web site on the Highway Authority's web site
3. LAF sub group meeting room
4. Expenses to cover sub groups attendance of meetings – possibly to be reclaimed from Natural England
5. Expenses to cover sub groups site visits if necessary - possibly to be reclaimed from Natural England

Farmer/Landowner

Zero increase in cost

LAF HLS Sub Group

Creation and running of the sub group is all volunteers time

LAF

HLS Sub Groups progress updates at meetings is all volunteers time

BENEFITS**Public**

1. Although costs have to be taken into consideration in any project, the costs in this project become insignificant when it is recognised by Government and many organisations that walking and cycling are important forms of exercise, assisting in improving health and well being. All promotion and advertising of walking and cycling, where it encourages more people to walk, helps increase the health of the Nation.
2. More opportunities for walking and cycling in the countryside
3. More opportunities for assisting in improving local economies due to more walkers and cyclists
4. More opportunities for local communities to take advantage of walking and cycling through countryside

Natural England

1. Providing a service to all members of the public interested in using the permissive access which it currently pays for, through HLS grant money
2. A method of capturing permissive access information from HLS applications
3. A method of analysing and summarising permissive access data
4. A method of being aware of the extent of permissive access
5. A method of providing an excellent service to the public at minimal costs
6. A method to advertise PRoW and permissive access
7. A method to assist in improving the Nation's health and general well being
8. Stronger relationship with Local Access Forums

Department of Health

The possibility of reduced costs due to more participation in walking and cycling through advertising use of PRoW and permissive access

Highway Authority

1. An opportunity for more links in the PRoW network
2. Notification of permissive access sites

Parish Councils

1. More opportunities to provide countryside walks and cycle rides for the local community
2. Better links with LAFs

LAFs

1. More involvement with permissive access
2. More links to local communities
3. Links to permissive access providers (farmers and landowners)
4. More exposure and publicity of the work the LAFs

Farmers and Land Owners

1. More support during the permissive access agreement period by the LAF and parish council.
2. More opportunity to build and improve relationship with the public, LAF and parish council.
3. More understanding from the public, LAF and parish relating to farming issues.
4. Opportunity to encourage the permissive access users to spend money by offering other services such as other business ventures or attracting additional visitors to existing businesses like farm shops etc.
5. Sign boards provided by Natural England