

RHONDDA CYNON TAFF **LOCAL ACCESS FORUM ANNUAL REPORT 2018**

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Introduction

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The 2018 Rhondda Cynon Taff Local Access Forum (RCT LAF) Annual Report is a summary of the Forum's main achievements during 2018, and recommendations for next year. The year has been unusual due to a high turnover of members and because LAF members have responded to the impact on access of grim spending cuts by soul-searching about how they might contribute further to mitigate these cuts (for example, the LAF produced a draft of this report for the authority instead of vice versa). RCTCBC thanks LAF members for their efforts, and their support and guidance provided throughout the year.

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All meetings of the LAF are open to the public, although no uninvited people came to the meetings in 2018.

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Overview

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The RCT LAF has between 10 and 22 individual members appointed in a voluntary capacity to give advice to various government authorities and other bodies on how to provide access to land for open-air recreation and enjoyment. Members are appointed by the Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council. The RCT LAF is mindful of representation of conservation, tourism, transport, land managers as well as vulnerable, disabled and limited users.

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The Forum aims to balance the desire for greater public access to the countryside with the needs of landowners and land managers and to ensure that the natural environment is not damaged as a result. It can also give advice to planners of major housing and transport developments about protecting existing public rights of way and incorporating the needs of all people to access the outdoors (from May 2018 developers must show Public Rights of Way on their maps).

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Membership and recruitment

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In January 2018, recruitment was undertaken because the LAF was not quorate, and this introduced better diversity among the fresh faces. The LAF was sorry that our Chair, Steve Carter, stepped down, but welcomed Pat Byrne as new Chair – and Steve is still a fully active LAF member and passionate advocate of access. Mike Ash (best known for his hard work uncovering the parish roads of the Rhondda) resigned as Vice-Chair and LAF member Jamie Lewis has stepped up as Vice Chair.

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Meeting of Chairs of the Local Access Forums in Wales

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The LAFs across Wales have regular national meetings. RCT LAF was represented by long-standing member Tony Yule at the Chairs meeting and received his report in January 2018. The Welsh Government consultation "Taking Forward Wales" had been discussed at length. The majority of responses came from campaigning groups and LAFs wanted the more balanced LAF views to carry more weight. There remains controversy on access to water and others users on footpaths, and more agreement on the All Wales Digital Map, new rules for dogs around livestock and changes to the Public Rights of Way procedures. RCT LAF expects a long road ahead.

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Also of relevance in RCT was the suggestion that the LAF should be involved as stakeholders in NRW Glaisir projects because woodlands could affect water supplies and viewpoints.

The LAF representative noted shared procedures to make LAFs more effective, some of which have been, or are being adopted by RCT LAF, such as those concerning the working relationship with the council, Annual Report and programme of works for the coming year, including inspiring the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP).

Presentations to, and Advice given by, the Local Access Forum 2018

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Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP): the Review

The continuing role and input of LAF in RCT's ROWIP was an agenda item in every LAF quarterly meeting, and support was carried out through a sub-group. National legislature, that is the Well-being of Future Generations Act, the Active Travel (Wales) Act, the Environment (Wales) Act, and the emerging Public Services Board Cwm Taf Well-being Plan inform the Review. New additions in 2018 are working with the Metro, level crossings, promoted routes and working with tourism. LAF members have been prominent in scoping the latter.

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~~During 2018, the RCT LAF assisted with a consultative dialogue through contacts with national, regional and local organisations; this informed the data gathering exercise including the extent to which local rights of way meet the present and likely future needs of the public; advised on how the network could be improved for the public and where there are particular land management concerns; advised on problematic access to open countryside; commented on published draft plans; and assisted in the resolution of conflicts.~~

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~~draft revised Plan was approved for publication in June for the statutory twelve-week consultation. In addition to the formal online and paper consultation, LAF sub-group members successfully added less formal discussions with groups or individuals using the survey questions, and the results were fed into the consultation process. After scrutiny, the final plan goes to RCT Cabinet.~~

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Aberdare to Pontypridd bridleway

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RCT LAF formally encourages this route, which has fallen into a state of disrepair, to be included as part of the ROWIP and to recommend proposals for future maintenance. Scoping for the project will have to be undertaken in conjunction with RCT tourism contacts. The route was opened in 2012, a 14-mile route from Dare Valley Country Park to Barry Sidings Countryside Park via Llanwonno, using permissive routes, forestry and including places to stay for riders and horses in Porth and Aberdare.

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Natural Resources Wales

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NRW has an observer role on RCT LAF, fulfilled by Sarah Tindall and Chris Heaps in 2018. NRW gave a summary of LAF functions at the national level and provided invaluable guidance for the new members of RCT LAF. The NRW observer provided clarifications on LAF queries about open access land and responsibilities for structures.

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Adopt-a-Path and Community Engagement on the Graig: University of South Wales

As part of a community engagement module, Geography students from the University of South Wales gave a presentation on the Graig Section of the Pontypridd Circular. They hoped to promote, develop and increase use and awareness of the path and expand the RCT Adopt-a-Path scheme. A successful final event was in May 2018.

Links Facebook: Adopt a Path – Graig Path Twitter: @AdoptAPath Instagram: adoptapath
Adopt-a-Path volunteers survey the network but are not required to take no practical action. The Forum advised that people need to know how to report problems and what measures are in place. RCT LAF advises a role for Keep Wales Tidy which insures people for works on footpaths.

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Healthy Hillides Project by NRW Environment Officer

The Forum received a presentation on this project, begun in January 2018 and at the planning stage. The project is being trailed in 8 sites (Clydach Vale, Penrhys Fach, Penrhys Fawr, Hengoed, Tylorstown, Gurnos, Castell Nos and Llantrisant Graig). There is concern that the eco-systems are repeatedly damaged due to wildfires, especially in bracken on under-grazed land. The aim is to reduce the fuel load by reducing bracken and encourage more grazing. NRW are currently working with the Fire Service, which manages fire breaks and the use of these as footpaths, and the Police have been in talks about how they can manage the fire-lighting behaviour.

The project proposes erecting fencing over the open access land and introduce low density grazing. It is hoped that communities will get involved. The areas will be expensive to fence due to the nature of the terrain and the need for professional fencing.

LAF members raised issues about fencing off open access land which prevents access and is not aesthetically pleasing. The LAF advised that there are CROW Act restrictions in relation to Open Access and Common Land and access will have to be retained.

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Regeneration and access: Ynysybwll Regeneration Partnership – Louisa Addiscott –Programme Manager

The LAF were given a presentation of a project linking enterprise opportunities to an existing access infrastructure of forestry and the natural environment that surrounds Ynysybwll. Running alongside the potential development at the Lady Windsor site is the cycle track to west Wales, an old tram way into the forestry, an old rail track with potential for development, a route to a paddling pool and 3 forest routes. The work is being undertaken with community groups, encouraging access and daily walking. They have planning permission for a Visitor centre, and long-term visions of circular paths and bridleways.

The group want to implement better signage and information boards, and as the project develops it will be publicised online and hope that more people will go into the village and contribute to the Health & Well Being Act & Green Travel. All this is going ahead due to the work of volunteers in Ynysybwll. It was estimated an average of 30,000 people are using the forestry annually.

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Active Travel and Safe Routes for 21st Century schools 2018

The LAF is regularly updated and makes suggestions on developments by the Strategic Transport Planner and LAF members. The Active Travel page on RCT's website contains the Integrated Network Maps (INM) which were approved by the Welsh Government. The LAF suggested that, instead of having the INM on a different page of the website, the proposed active travel routes should be incorporated into a layer on the MyRhonddaMaps online. Link: <http://my.rctcbc.gov.uk/myRhondda.aspx>

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RCT has given formal support to the Rhondda Tunnel Society to reopen the Rhondda Tunnel – to become a tourist attraction and boost the local economy, as well as enabling residents in Neath Port Talbot, who commute to Cardiff, to use the tunnel to reach the railway station in Treherbert and then continue by train. A bid is being prepared for strategic cross boundary schemes that will link with the planned reopening of the Rhondda and Merthyr tunnels to cyclists and walkers. The Merthyr/Abernant tunnel will improve links for residents who need to travel between the two valleys to work, study or shop, and residents will use the tunnel for cycling or walking as an alternative to driving over the top. In addition, the Metro network will widen the pool of available labour for local businesses. Other schemes are local and aimed at improving existing active travel routes and bringing them up to current standards, or feasibility of potential route alignments. A new active travel route has recently been built in Ystrad providing a link to the railway station, Gelli Industrial Estate, local schools and the Leisure Centre.

In terms of **Safe Routes in Communities Schemes**, the Council has been focussing on improving the new walking and cycling routes as part of the **21st Century schools** re-organisation programme. The LAF suggested the need for a suitable path and cycleway to and from a 3-16 age school, into Pontypridd Town Centre, without going through Trallwn. There are currently speed restrictions of 50mph to reduce emissions on the nearby A470. If the cycle track is moved away from a polluted area this would be an opportunity for the school children to use Public Rights of Way. The aim is that routes identified will be safe and suitable for children and the air quality on the proposed routes improved. The environmental health team have identified a range of measures to tackle air quality in the area and not only moving an active route.

Last year a sustainable travel guide for Pontypridd was produced (a copy can be viewed on the website) and the Council is hoping to receive funding this year to publish a reprint as well as produce a similar guide for the Rhondda area.

The LAF noted that active travel schemes are aimed at walkers and cyclists on regular journeys to the shops and work etc and not residents undertaking recreational journeys. The LAF also advised that provision of charging points in town centres for mobility scooters should be included.

Programme for the coming year

Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP)

▲ The LAF will provide assistance with implementation of the ROWIP, which will be a standing item on the agenda of meetings.

Safe Routes and 21st Century Schools

▲ The LAF will assist in identifying suitable ways for school children to walk safely to and from school avoiding polluted areas.

Woodland Classroom Project

▲ The LAF will look at this project to see if other areas can be identified that could benefit and provide recorded access. The primary school has found a classroom area deeper into the woodland. Access is difficult and there is no right of way from the highway. The LAF advised that this is currently a recorded footpath and the school would be in charge of completing any Risk Assessments and Supervision.

The aim of the project is to provide a safe route in order to get the children out into the environment, promoting health and wellbeing and improved education.

Engagement Plan

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▲ The LAF Vice Chair noted that there is a strong representation of some groups, and less of others, among members of the LAF. The case was made for benefits of engagement with relevant groups which are not represented on the LAF. In 2019, an engagement plan will be scoped out and put into action if agreed.
A LAF working group is carrying out Stakeholder Mapping (what groups we currently have represented on the forum and what other types of groups are out there), contact points for the groups and how best to engage them with the work of the Local Access Forum.

Prepared by Rhondda Cynon Taf Local Access Forum

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