

**RHONDDA CYNON TAF
LOCAL ACCESS FORUM ANNUAL REPORT
2023-2024**

Forward written by LAF Chairperson

The first meeting of the new Rhondda Cynon Taf Local Access Forum got under way, with great enthusiasm from members at the outset. Our members represent a variety of land access and PROW users and collectively have wide ranging knowledge, experience, and reasons for accessing nature. These comprise expanding rights of access, making our countryside and nature more accessible, raising, and resolving issues experienced by equestrian users and conflicting interests e.g. footpaths or former footpaths and by-ways being used by walkers, runners and cyclists, electric bikes/scooters, horse riders and lawful and responsible motor vehicle users and removing barriers to access for those with reduced mobility, using wheelchairs, parents with pushchairs and young children. I feel that elementally, members and council officers believe in promoting this asset of paramount importance as a natural health service for mental and physical healing, well-being, and enjoyment. There have been contributions from all, with useful suggestions for the Forum to take forward as projects and programmes. Of initial and particular interest to the group appears to be the investigation and research of what means there are available for evidencing the health benefits of accessing nature. Another idea to action is the compiling and development of a directory of groups throughout Rhondda Cynon Taf that are actively involved in local access related interests. Most pertinent issues raised in meetings have been clarified by the relevant bodies, and updates on the work of the PROW Team shared with the Forum. A follow up on specific guidance and interpretation of the Active Travel Plan regarding equestrian use and the issue raised about motorbike inhibitors, are to be clarified.

As PROW is now to be included in local authority local development plans, LAF members agreed to participate in the consultation process of Rhondda Cynon Taf's Revised Local Development Plan and as of writing are engaged in this procedure.

On behalf of the Forum, I thank Rhondda Cynon Taf PROW and Countryside Team for encouraging the input provided by Forum members. We look forward to pursuing the above and other interesting ideas that the RCT Team consider have a relevance to the remit of the Forum and anticipate a productive and enjoyable year ahead. Thank you. Claire Brenton- Taylor 26 January 2024.

Chairperson - Claire Brenton-Taylor

Deputy Chairperson – Paul Ford

Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council Members:

Cllr Ann Crimmings, Cabinet Member for Environment and Leisure

Jason Bragg - PROW Officer and LAF Secretary

Sarah Williams – Countryside and PROW Administrator

Timothy Phillips - Definitive Map Officer

Gareth Henson - Countryside Manager

Natural Resources Wales Members:

Miki Miyata Lee – Senior Officer, People and Places

Andy Robinson – Team Leader, People and Places

Total Number of LAF Members	18
Number of members representing users of public rights of way or access to land primarily for:	
Walking/runnig	10
g Horse riding	3
Cycling	1
Lawful and responsible motor vehicle/all terrain users	2
Number of members representing owners and occupiers of access land or land over which PROWs subsist	3
Number of members representing other interests e.g. access difficulties	1
Number of Council and NRW members	6

Volunteer Members - Interests and Organisations

Members of our LAF also work, participate, or have interests in a variety of other groups, associations, and organisations, including but not limited to... The British Horse Society, Curvey Riders, Cwmbach Community Association, Rhondda Valley Runners, Sustrans, Hirwaun Historical Society, Brecon Mountain Rescue, Woodland Trust, Open Spaces Society, Men's Shed Treorchy, Taff area Commoners Association, Welcome to Our Woods, Mounting Training Association, British Mountaineering Council, South Wales Search and Rescue, Daerwynno Outdoor Centre, Ynysybwll Paths and Trails Group, Bonkers, Taf Ely footpath Officer, RCT Muddy Boots, RCT Marauders, Valeways, Llanharen Wimbles, Brynau Taff Ely Bridleways and Tonyrefail & District Community Council.

Guest Speakers

Adrian Morgan – Strategic Transport Planning Officer.

Martyn Broughton and David Harris – Welcome to Our Woods Project and Park Walks RCT. Gavin Bennet – RCT Sports

Training/Consultations

Natural Resources Wales – Outdoor Recreation Strategy – Online Survey

Natural Resources Wales and Coventry University – People in the Landscape – online training with onlinesurveys.ac.uk

RCT Revised Local Development Plan consultation

Meeting Diary

Dates of Meetings:

14 February 2023, 14 March 2023, 18 May 2023, 17 October 2023, 16 January 2024.

Meeting Activities

MEETING ONE	
Item	Activity
RCTCBC/NRW - brief introductions	Rhondda Cynon Taff Cabinet Member, Rhondda Cynon Taff staff and Natural Resources Wales representatives introduced themselves.
New Members - introductions	New members introduced themselves giving summaries of their interests and reasons for being members of the forum.
Natural Resources Wales (NRW) - Role	Miki Miyata-Lee gave a talk about NRW's Area Statement and Themes, South Central Area of Wales and her role in the People & Places Team and her desire to involve local people. The Website address was provided.
Introduction to Public Rights of Way (PROW), work of the Forum and LAF procedures.	Jason Bragg gave an informative presentation to introduce Public Rights of Way, the work of the Council and role of the Local Access Forum. A question-and-answer session followed.
Q&A Session	<p>Enquiries included the process of updating OS maps with Open Access Area and PROWs. Details of Data Maps Wales, administered by NRW, was provided and clarification that PROW Team would update the OS mapping.</p> <p>Forum member Claire Brenton-Taylor asked about the status of insurance for Open Access Land and Jason Bragg confirmed giving details of coverage of the relevant legislation and a web link to access land information.</p> <p>Having a "Directory of relevant Groups & Organisations" was suggested by Claire Brenton-Taylor, discussed, and agreed as a potential good side project for members. RCT added that information on Interlink and Connect RCT may be useful, web links were provided.</p> <p>The importance of having landowners as LAF members was discussed and it was confirmed that some members were landowners or were from a farming background.</p> <p>It was raised and agreed that guest speakers be invited to address enquiries and issues and to give talks at meetings.</p> <p>An enquiry was made to RCT to ask if Highways could be invited to give talks about their policy on Adopted Roads. RCT agreed that this could be arranged.</p>

MEETING TWO	
Item	Activity
Election of Chair and Deputy Chairpersons	Jason Bragg RCT explained the Process. Claire Brenton-Taylor was elected as Chairperson and Paul Ford elected as Deputy Chairperson.
Great Glamorgan Way Project	James Walker introduced project details, progress to date and next steps. The website link was shared to the group The Great Glamorgan Way vale of Glamorgan.gov.uk.
Agenda items for next meeting raised by forum volunteer members and RCTCBC	These included clarification by Highways of their position on barriers on routes for non-motorised users, Active Travel, Welcome to Our Woods and Ynysybwll Vision and RCTCBC reporting of issues and enquiries on PROWs, "Out and About" update and work of the Ranger's Team. Questions about active travel were submitted in advance to allow time for a formal response.

MEETING THREE	
Item	Activity
Active Travel Update	<p>Adrian Morgan, Strategic Transport Planning Officer provided a summary of Active Travel plans, projects, and issues by hand out and attached to the Minutes of Meeting.</p> <p>Question and Answer Session followed.</p> <p>Forum member Jay Kynch raised concerns about the impact of inaccessibility for cyclists on the bus replacement services provided by Transport for Wales. RCT agreed that a communique be sent to Transport for Wales and RCT councillors to ask for reasons why there was this lack of provision.</p> <p>Forum member Debbie James asked why horse riding was not included in the Active Travel Plan. Adrian Morgan confirmed his understanding but suggested following up of the specific guidance and interpretation.</p>

Grow Rhondda Programme and Welcome to Our Woods (W2OW)	<p>Forum member Martyn Broughton presented an insight to the project by power point. The presentation explained how the work of Men's Shed, Treorchy, was benefiting the mental health of those involved in creating community gardens in the area and was gratefully received by members, with ideas and encouragement provided for taking the project forward. A power point presentation was attached to the Minutes.</p> <p>Forum member David Harris gave an informative talk on projects he works on involving park walks (W2OW) in RCT. The talk was gratefully received by members with ideas and encouragement provided for taking the project forward.</p>
Reporting PROW Issues	Sarah Williams RCT spoke about the new PROW 'Report It' form now live on the Council's website. The new facility allows the upload of photographs of issues and how to indicate the exact location using an interactive map.

MEETING FOUR	
Item	Activity
Out and About 2	Jason Bragg RCT provided an update by power point presentation of Out & About 2, the Rights of Way Improvement Plan for RCT. A copy of the presentation was attached to the Minutes of Meeting.
TfW bus replacement service – cycles Active Travel Update	<p>To date, no response had been received from Transport for Wales or RCT Cabinet regarding accommodating bicycles on the bus replacement services. Jason Bragg RTC agreed to follow up.</p> <p>Forum member Debbie James expressed her feelings that there should be greater emphasis placed on Equestrian Use.</p> <p>Debbie and Forum Member Peter Jones also raised concerns of the number of motorbike inhibitors in place on paths across the county that do not comply with current standards and asked what the Council's policy is regarding this. Jason Bragg RCT clarified the relevant policy and Pete Jones suggested that this be an issue for the Forum to pursue.</p>
All Wales Local Access Forum Annual Meeting	Forum member Bryan Meredith provided feedback from the meeting he attended. Notes had been circulated beforehand.
PROW new website update	PROW team gave an update on the new website about to be launched. The Forum gave positive reviews of the changes made.
Penpych landslip/temporary Access Land Exclusion	Natural Resources Wales's response to queries raised regarding the landslip was disseminated to Forum Members prior to this meeting.

NRW Outdoor Recreation Strategy online survey	Some members indicated participating in the online survey.
GDPR	In accordance with General Data Protection GDPR, Members were requested to confirm if they agreed to sharing of their email addresses with the Chairperson.
Setting the Agenda	<p>Members had been previously asked by Jason Bragg RCT to think about priority working areas, with view to developing a forward programme for the Forum. The following ideas were shared:</p> <p>Claire Brenton-Taylor suggested forging links with Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board to measure benefits of access to the natural environment/countryside to improve mental and physical health. Members discussed the challenges of understanding and measuring these benefits. Suggestions included social prescribing via GPs, questionnaires, linking in with existing health projects and footfall counters.</p> <p>Andy Robinson mentioned the work of the Healthy Weight partnership and said he would contact them to discuss with forum.</p> <p>Research into barriers to access for health reasons was an idea raised by Claire Brenton-Taylor for the Forum to be involved in. This matter is to be discussed at future meetings.</p> <p>Claire Brenton-Taylor suggested compiling a directory of local groups, clubs, organisations, and other relevant parties that provide or endorse opportunities to access the outdoor environment to improve mental and physical health. Members suggested reaching out to RCT Tourism and RCT Sports for information and contacts.</p> <p>Martyn Broughton mentioned using community groups to conduct path maintenance and waymarking and referred to work conducted by Welcome to Our Woods volunteers, the programme he oversees.</p> <p>Pete Jones asked whether RCT had a volunteering policy and queried whether volunteers can conduct maintenance on a public path and whether they would be insured by RCT.</p>

	<p>Jason Bragg clarified that RCT can authorise third parties to conduct certain maintenance and that volunteers could be insured whilst volunteering under volunteer group or organisation insurance.</p> <p>Pete Jones asked if the previous forum's minutes could be shared with the current forum. Jason Bragg/Sarah Williams said they would investigate this.</p> <p>Pete Jones asked if an RCT Sports representative could attend each meeting. RCT agreed to make this request.</p>
Annual Report	<p>Jason Bragg RCT agreed to circulate relevant extracts of the reporting Regulation and LAF Guidance and asked if any members wished to write up the report leaving it open for members to express their interest. Post meeting, Claire Brenton-Taylor agreed to draft the annual report for members' perusal.</p>

MEETING FIVE	
Item	Activity
TfW rail replacement bus service – cycles	<p>Transport For Wales reply regarding lack of space for bicycles on bus replacement services was received prior to this meeting and emailed to Forum members. The explanation provided was that cycles are not normally permitted on rail replacement buses due to lack of space or facilities to secure them. The buses provide designated spaces for wheelchairs and prams which take priority over other large luggage. However, where possible, cycles may be carried on-board but at the discretion of the driver who would take into consideration bus type, legal conditions, capacity, and safety.</p> <p>Pete Jones will draft a response to TfW requesting that more consideration be given to this issue on future projects.</p>

Previous Forum MOMs	Confirmation to all that Minutes of Meetings of the previous LAF, as requested, have been emailed to all. Reviewing these MOMs should enable the LAF to conclude that all actions had been taken or to decide to follow up on any unfinished business or take forward any matters of interest.
Event invitations	Events that members have been invited to attend: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-thinking Land-Use • Social Prescribing
RCT Sports Walking Routes	Gavin Bennet of RCT Sports gave an interesting and informative talk about the innovative work his teams have been working on to map, film and digitize 40 walking routes within RCT. Films can be viewed on YouTube and maps are available from their website. His Team is working with Active Travel to carry out similar work with National Cycle Network routes and looking to launch this in April 2024. Any further work to be subject to available funding. Forum Member Debbie James suggested that the British Horse Society would be interested in collaborating to document bridle routes, further discussions to take place. Claire Brenton-Taylor enquired if any other local authorities in Wales had taken on a similar programme and suggested that if all councils became involved could funding from the Welsh Government be sought. Regarding public liability insurance RCT Sports have provision to assist.
Safe access to cold water dipping pools	Forum member Martyn Broughton raised the question of how access to cold water dipping pools throughout RCT could be made safe and Jason Bragg asked Andy Robinson if NRW have extended Part 1 of CRoW Act 'access land' provisions to 'inland water'. Current situation is that this is a proposed Welsh Government access reform and not legislated yet.
Directory of interested organisations	Forum member Claire Brenton-Taylor confirmed that potential interested organisations were being listed. All members to contribute to the directory as an ongoing project. A working group is to be set up to develop this further. Brian Meredith suggested creating a Pro-former to capture this information.
Revised Local Development Plan	Jason Bragg RCT explained that Policy AW7 of the LDP did not include PROW but that they are now to be included. Forum members were invited to participate in the consultation process during the period January and February 2024.

Other items:

The Welsh LAF Conference Summary was received from Carys Drew, NRW and forwarded to members. The conference included:

- The future of recreation on the land cared for by Natural Resources Wales
- Updates to The Countryside Code by Natural Resources Wales, copies of slides provided post conference.
- Welsh Government proposals for updating LAF Regulations that had been developed under the Access Reform Programme
- Updates on The Sustainable Farming Scheme and Accessing funding to support access improvements.

Examples of where LAF members have attempted to influence and advise include:

- Landslip at Penpych, Treherbert – reducing the six-month closure period. Results of an inspection and final report from contractors Arup are awaited in order that risks, potential work required and associated costs can be reviewed. Meanwhile the closure exclusion period has been extended for a further six months by NRW (to 12th July 2024). A request for regular updates/a timeline of planned actions has been suggested by Forum Member, Bryan Meredith, so that progress can be monitored at our meetings.
- Cynon Valley Rail Crossing at Cwmbach: Advice to TfW that the level crossing gate was not wide enough for wheelchairs to access. Advice was ignored and to date the issue remains unresolved.

Past/current Projects – Updates:

- Rhigos Tracks and Trails – Jason Bragg advised that money allocated to this project was diverted to improvements at DVCP as it was undeliverable in the original project area within the timescale required by ENRAW grant funding.
- Abernant/Cwmbach to Merthyr Tunnel - In January 2022, Merthyr CBC became the lead Council for this scheme and to date have not received confirmation of funding to progress further with the proposals. Also, further studies and assessments are needed to address issues raised by constituents of Cwmbach.
- Rhondda Tunnel – Plans to re-open the Blaencwm, Rhondda to Bleangwynfi Afan Valley tunnel for cycling and walking are ongoing. On 24 February 2024 Rhondda Tunnel Society took ownership of a plot of land to develop a small country park and visitors centre near the Blaencwm tunnel entrance. Technical proposals are under development and further funding and grant applications are being applied for. Planning approval will be needed for small excavation work to access at Blaencwm and start repair work and then for access at Blaengwynfi. Access at both tunnel ends is required for main repair work to commence.