

Countryside Access Forum for West Sussex

Countryside Access – Position Statement

1. The Countryside Access Forum for West Sussex (CAFWS) is an independent advisory body established by statute to give access advice to local authorities, statutory organisations and NGOs. The Forum has a balanced membership of users, farmers, landowners and other interests with a good knowledge of the county. In giving its advice, the Forum's main objective is to protect and, where possible, to enhance people's access to the West Sussex countryside. The Forum believes that good access should be in the context of sustainable access policies and it supports approaches that can improve health and social diversity.
2. CAFWS is keen to respond to consultations on new housing developments and improvements to the county's infrastructure, such as road improvements. In the past, new housing estates have often turned rural public rights of way (prows) into urban streets and, particularly where new ring roads have been built, become a barrier for people wishing to access the adjoining countryside. However, new development can also be a unique opportunity to solve present problems and to enhance the ability for local people to enjoy access to the countryside.
3. While public rights of way are the principal means to access the countryside, authorities should also consider wider access issues, such as the areas of Open Access Land created through the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.
4. CAFWS will be pleased to be consulted as planning policies and strategies evolve and, at the appropriate time, will be able to give detailed advice on design and access issues. As a general approach, CAFWS would like the planning and highway authorities to take into consideration the following:
 - a) The prow network should be regarded as part of our heritage – many paths are historic routes closely connected to the history of the local community. Wherever possible, a new housing estate should retain existing rows on their existing line; they should be seen as part of a wider network. Sometimes, they will be alongside or contained between hedges – this rural character should be retained if possible as it will give the path a visual and landscape link to the farmland and woodlands beyond. These should be linked with other open spaces and green links within the development.
 - b) A new housing estate should not be designed in isolation and must not become a barrier to countryside access for existing

residents – rather it should provide a “gateway” from the urban area into the rural areas, thereby benefitting also the new residents of the estate and increasing the attractiveness of the area.

- c) A good approach would be to undertake an audit of access needs of all legitimate users – walkers, horse-riders and cyclists (and occasionally carriage drivers) – where do they want to walk? What will be their destination? Are there circular walks available? Are there any missing links? How many of the new residents are likely to be dog owners?
 - d) Included in an audit must be the wider prowl network because that network will come under greater pressure with the increased demand for access. Some path surfaces will need to be improved and it may be desirable, for example, to upgrade a footpath to bridleway status so that it can provide an off-road link for cyclists. These issues need to be identified at an early stage so that these community benefits are recognised within the context of negotiations for developer contributions.
 - e) As designs are progressed, it will be essential also to address the long term issue of sympathetic management of the paths and open areas.
 - f) A similar audit would be appropriate to ensure links are available, not only to the wider countryside, but also to other services.
 - g) Where a new road is planned or an existing road is to be upgraded which crosses a network of prows, authorities should endeavour to provide safe crossings using, ideally, grade separation or lights. The difficulty of crossing busy roads safely on horseback should not be underestimated.
 - h) Quiet minor roads are important countryside access routes, particularly for horse riders and carriage drivers. Where these link into new housing developments or new roads, there is a danger that they become “rat runs” and unsafe: in such cases a case may be made for an off road alternative.
5. These general comments will, where appropriate, be supplemented by detailed comments by CAFWS when detailed proposals are subject to consultation.