

**Coastal Plain Sub Forum on behalf of the Countryside Access Forum for West Sussex (CAFWS)**

**General** – CAFWS welcomes the improvements to the proposals which have been incorporated since the 2007 consultations; the approach of having the twin aims of a coastal route and, where possible a spreading area gives a better framework. The concept of a continuous route around the English coast is attractive, especially to the more committed walkers; it is likely that its creation will spawn a series of circular walks, as has happened along National Trails such as the South Downs Way in this county.

CAFWS has worked through the Draft Scheme and finds the approach generally sound and sensible concerning the establishment of the route; there are some detailed concerns set out below. However, the principal concern is one of resources: both at Natural England (NE) and at the Access Authorities. Staffing and establishment costs will be high and, assuming there are no new resources, what present programmes will be cut back to finance this initiative? There is already something of a credibility gap concerning the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act – a huge effort is being put into the preparation of Rights of Way Improvement Plans (ROWIPs) but there is no funding for their implementation. Guaranteed funding for the proper implementation of Coastal Access must be in place.

**The Issue of Higher Rights** – CAFWS is very disappointed that this issue has been ducked in the scheme. In government circles much has been made of the need for “joined up thinking” and we see a need to develop related proposals in a coordinated and complementary way. Thus the CROW Act has created new ROWIPs for each county which should identify where improvements are needed – not only for walkers. Similarly, there is a general support from all parties to the work of the charity Sustrans in creating a National Cycling Network, including a Coastal Cycle Path, which helps to deliver sustainable transport policies.

We note that NE will take account of local development plans (para 6.11.2 of the scheme) but we recommend that this duty should be widened, requiring NE to also take into account local ROWIPs and other similar proposals. Where this might involve the upgrading to accommodate other rights, such as cycling and horse riding, that should be incorporated into the report submitted to Defra. The establishment of the coastal route may be a once and only a chance to look at these issues comprehensively.

It may well be that on occasions this upgrading cannot be implemented immediately: where this can reasonably be anticipated in the future, it is essential that the design of infrastructure (eg bridges) will have the capacity for the higher rights – rather than be a block to further progress. Perhaps the initial assessment process should include a checklist to look at future potential.

**Consultations and procedures** – the approach is sensible and CAFWS is pleased that they, as a Local Access Forum, will be part of the consultation programme. The work needs to be done very thoroughly to ensure all interests have the chance to contribute positively – not just react to proposals. In view of the cut off for exclusions and exceptions, relationships with landowners will need to be close and constructive.

**Ongoing responsibilities and management** – from the scheme it would appear that NE will have a direct role to play in the establishment phase and will, presumably, have a secure budget to match. However, the creation of these new rights and the new route is only the start – in many parts of the Scheme, problems and issues are identified and the normal solution is through “informal management.” No doubt this responsibility will fall on the access authorities, landowners and similar organisations but this responsibility does need to be spelt out – and, of course, properly funded.

Spreading room areas near concentrations of population will be very vulnerable – especially those with a high conservation value such as important high tide winter roosting areas and, especially in early years, a wardening service might be necessary: in these cases, such a requirement should be set out in NE’s report and be recognised as a necessary cost. Similarly, infrastructure such as fences and gates will have to be maintained by someone at a cost.

Beyond the 10 year establishment period, local situations will change – coastal erosion is a good example. NE’s responsibility to find new solutions must continue.

**Communications and understanding** – the proposals represent a quite new right of access and it is vital that an effective public education programme is put in place. It will be difficult to explain the difference between legal rights and responsibilities on the new route compared with public rights of way. Will the new route appear on Definitive Maps? CAFWS is not sure how it is possible to ensure the responsible use of spreading areas by dog owners.

Likewise, how will seasonal restrictions and exclusions be made known and enforced? CAFWS believes that this issue should not be underestimated as, in popular holiday areas, coastal areas are already under pressure. It is vital that Special Protection Areas and similar sites receive proper protection.

**Conservation Issues** - the way the regulations are drafted it would appear that NE will be in “Judge and Jury” position concerning wildlife and heritage issues. Defra should consider whether a more independent assessment of proposals should be introduced.

CAFWS is worried about the concept of mudflats and tidal areas being automatically available for public access.

**Condition of Route** – the scheme provides for the coastal route to follow existing public paths where they are suitably located – as is the case in much of West Sussex. However, the physical condition of these coastal paths is often far from satisfactory – for example often located along an ancient and crumbling sea defence bank. Provision must be made for these paths to be upgraded to a good standard within the process. A continuity of standards is desirable.

**Field margins** – the aligning of the route along the seaward margin of arable and grass fields is sensible, although it will often be necessary to fence on the landward side. However, the field margins are often left uncultivated now for conservation reasons and regular disturbance will reduce that value for wildlife. There may be implications for the Single Payment scheme.

**Compensation payments** – CAFWS is still strongly of the opinion that, where it can be shown that there is a financial loss – such as the loss of land for cultivation – farmers should be entitled to compensation. The success of the project will partly depend on a good partnership between NE, the access authority and the landowners and it is important that the latter are seen to be treated justly.

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