

**2<sup>nd</sup> July 2008**

**Report on Access to the Countryside for those with Mobility Problems**

- 1. Introduction** – The Countryside Access Forum for West Sussex (CAFWS) exists to ensure that everyone can access, experience and enjoy the beautiful countryside of West Sussex. However, people with mobility and health problems may not be able to have the same degree of access as the rest of the population; accordingly, CAFWS asked a small working group to look at these issues with the following brief:
- Identify the “clients”
  - What information is available to these groups
  - Consult as necessary
  - Identify problems and needs
  - Review relevant policies
  - Visit sample sites
  - Report back

The working party, under David Ribbens’ chairmanship consisted of Helen Baldwin, Barbara Teasdale, David Whyberd, Jane Noble and Kathy Eels. They each made particular contributions in relation to their specialist interests. A fuller record of their discussions and suggestions can be seen on the CAFWS website. They looked at the needs of those confined to wheelchairs or scooters, to the hard of hearing, those using walking sticks, the visual impaired and Riding for the Disabled groups.

- 2. Public Rights of Way** – These are the principal means for most people to access the countryside and the Group recognised that it was unreasonable to expect all paths to be useable by everyone. However, the Highways Authority does have a responsibility to ensure that the usual “furniture” does not prevent people with mobility problems using a path which would otherwise be suitable for them. This duty has been reinforced by the CROW Act 2000 Section 69 which gives the authority new powers. In West Sussex, the County Council and the South Downs Joint Committee (SDJC) have a good system already in place to review all gates and stiles to ensure they are appropriate and do not prevent use; they find that landowners are usually happy to proceed by agreement.

The Group felt there was scope to develop networks of stile-free walks that could be promoted for use by less mobile walkers but such routes would require a higher standard of maintenance.

- 3. Information and Promotion** – The Group were delighted that WSCC were in the process of revising and reprinting their excellent booklet *Wheelchair Walks in West Sussex*. Members tested several

of the walks and their fuller report includes some detailed comments, the more important being as follows:

- The booklet should describe the type of surfacing of each walk and should mention other possible hazards, such as cattle grids – which are very difficult to use by the visually impaired and their guide dogs.
- The Group thought there were a number of other walks in West Sussex that should be included – perhaps a second booklet in a year or two would be justified – these include the excellent Centurion Way between Chichester and the Downs at West Dean, Burton Pond Trail, Mill Hill Trail and Lynchmere Common Trail. It could also include a number of walks on National Trust properties.
- Kingley Vale Trail is promoted by the SDJC as suitable for people with mobility problems but the Group were disappointed to find the well designed gates to be padlocked. It should not be promoted until the problems are sorted out.
- The Sidlesham Quay trail at Pagham Harbour is well designed but is let down by poor maintenance of encroaching vegetation.
- The Group would like to see signs on promoted trails having larger writing and sometimes using raised lettering or arrows sensitive to touch. Perhaps the SDJC could experiment on the South Downs Way.

In general, the Group concluded that in most parts of the county there are many delightful walks that can be enjoyed by less mobile residents, but the key is how do they find out? There is a need for a central source of information – in the past partly supplied through Social Services. It was surprising to the Group that the main Disabled associations in the county had little to contribute – it may be worth bringing them together to find a solution.

- 4. Cycling issues** – It is recognised that the speed and silence of off road cycles can cause alarm and potential danger and the Group are keen that more should be encouraged to have and use bells. Walkers that are hard of hearing might be able to advertise their vulnerability by wearing of a particular belt or by carrying a white stick: this approach needs to be adopted on a much wider scale than West Sussex if other users understand what is being communicated. It is recommended that CAFWS's Cycling Working Group give this some consideration.

The other issue raised in the Group was the use of cycle tracks, which are being created by Sustrans and other groups usually to a high specification (like Centurion Way) which is ideal for wheelchair use. The Group would like guidance as to whether cycle tracks are only useable by cyclists or do walkers and wheelchairs have the right to use them?

- 5. Wheelchairs and Scooters for the Disabled** – The Group were pleased that CAFWS recognised the needs of this group of users and the new arrangements at Graffham will be monitored closely. The Group felt there was great scope for the wider use in the countryside of Radar locks to admit these users to paths where other wheeled vehicles are undesirable.
- 6. Equestrian Riding for the Disabled** – Helen Baldwin explained the important service provided which does so much to give new confidence to some disadvantaged people of all ages. Bridleways and byways have to be carefully selected, largely on safety grounds, and good parking facilities are essential. Carriage driving has become more difficult to accommodate and, again, it is hoped the new initiative at Graffham is a success. These off road routes are so much more important now due to the build up of traffic on the county roads.
- 7. Conclusion** – The numbers of these client groups who require extensive access to the deeper countryside are small but many do want to be able to enjoy a genuine countryside experience, without being confined to tarmac car parks. Good parking will always be necessary and there is much that can be done – often on a small local scale – to make access easier and more enjoyable. In particular, the County Council and the SDJC are encouraged to “think mobility” when they carry out their maintenance programmes, ensuring promoted paths for disabled users, for example, are kept clear of encroaching vegetation and there is adequate headroom for equestrians.

**David Ribbens**  
**Chairman**  
**Working Group (June 2008)**