



# Kent countryside access forum

## MINUTES

Meeting Date: **Monday 09 December 2024**

Meeting Time: **2pm to 4pm**

Meeting Venue: **MS Teams**

### Attendees:

|                   |    |   |
|-------------------|----|---|
| Richard Dickenson | RD | (Vice Chair) Vehicular User Representative                    |
| Anne Beecham      | AB | Tourism Representative  |
| Anne Rillie       | AR | Equestrian Representative                                     |
| Charles Tassell   | CT | Landowner/ Land Management Representative ( <b>CLA</b> )      |
| Robert Peel       | RP | Walking Representative  |
| Sarah Barker      | SB | Parish Council Representative ( <b>KALC</b> )                 |
| Theresa Trussell  | TT | Multi-User Representative                                     |
| Graham Rusling    | GR | KCC Public Rights of Way and Access Service – Special Advisor |

### Minutes:

|                       |     |   |
|-----------------------|-----|---|
| Serena Mitchell-Burns | SMB | KCC Public Rights of Way and Access Service |
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## 1. Welcome and apologies:

Apologies were received from Jeremy Boxall, Chair, who was experiencing technical difficulties and could not join the meeting.

Apologies were also received from Cllr Perry Cole.

Other forum members did not join the meeting however apologies were not received in advance of the meeting.

## 2. Minutes and matters arising from the last meeting:

### **Actions from meeting held on 09 September 2024:**

**RD** chaired the meeting in **JBox** absence and asked if there were any objections or amendments to the minutes of the previous meeting, which there were not.

**RD** asked if there were any matters arising from the previous meeting to which there were none.

### **Actions from meeting on 09 December 2024:**

#### **Action 1.**

**SMB** to circulate the 'Let Nature Feed Your Soul' project website link.

**Completed.**

#### **Action 2.**

**JBox** to register interest with the Planning Inspectorate in regard to Stonestreet Green Solar project on behalf of KCAF.

**Completed.**

#### **Action 3.**

**JBox** to collate thoughts and suggestions from Forum members and formalise and objection ready for the Stonestreet Green Solar project planning application.

**Completed.**

#### **Action 4.**

**SMB** to circulate the link to the Stonestreet Green Solar project on the Planning Inspectorate website.

**Completed.**

### 3. Membership (*standing item*):

- a) **CT** advised the forum members that he has now completed 3 years as chairman of the CLA (Country Land and Business Association) in Kent and stood down at the last committee meeting in November 2024. William Boscawen has now taken the seat of chairman for the Kent CLA; however he is happy for **CT** to continue as their representative on the Kent Countryside Access Forum.

**CT** also asked if Rosie Salt-Crockford (RS-C) who is a member of staff working in the CLA regional office at Hampshire but who oversees Kent could be added to the KCAF email distribution list to be able to pass down information from a national level to the forum members.

**GR** agreed this would be beneficial, and all information such as minutes and agendas are published on the KCC website for public access there would be no issues with this.

**SMB** to coordinate with **CT** on email address contact and confirming that **RS-C** agrees to her email address to be viewed by all KCAF members in email correspondence.

#### **ACTION 1.**

- a) **AB** asked if **Amanda Corp (AC)** was still an member of KCAF as she had not been in attendance at meetings for a couple of years.

**GR** advised that earlier in the year both **Chris Jelly (CJ)** and **AC** were contacted to ask if they wished to remain as members of KCAF as they had not been in attendance at meetings for some time, at which point **CJ** advised that he would step down as a member due to other commitments but **AC** advised that she would like to remain as a member.

**GR** advised that he will contact **AC** again as she has not attended any more meeting since their last contact.

#### **ACTION 2.**

### 4. Development sites (*standing item*):

- a) **Lower Thames Crossing:**

**RD** updated the meeting that after the change of Government after the General Election the new Secretary of State for Transport (SoSfT) has pushed forward making a decision to 23 May 2025.

There are ongoing negotiations between the SoSfT, Essex Wildlife Trust, and the RSPB regarding the levels of compensation to be paid by National Highways, the SoSfT, and the Metropolitan Police Firearms training centre at Gravesend (MOPAC).

**GR** advised that PROW were recently contacted by the new SoSfT to ask if more could be done relating to the LTC in relation to Active Travel, and as part of this there are some projects, including the Gravesend ferry, now going forward.

**GR** also noted that KCC had raised the unsuitability of the proposed National Cycle Route (NCR) diversion.

**b) Stonestreet Green Solar Project:**

**RD** advised that there appears to be little talk of mitigation for the work to commence in relation to the project.

**RP** mentioned that Andrew Swarbrick who is representing the village against the solar project, and Nigel Spencer representing the Ramblers have both been attending the planning and consultation meetings and are both working on separate representations to be submitted by the deadline date of 10 December 2024.

**TT** asked if **JBox** had submitted a consultation response on behalf of KCAF to which **RD** confirmed had been done, however he advised that if the Forum members wanted to submit a further response with more detail in it this would need to be done by midnight on 10 December 2024, the day after the meeting.

**RD** asked all Forum members to submit ideas and suggestions for any further consultation response from KCAF as soon as possible so that he and **JBox** could then arrange to submit this by the end of the day.

**RD** spoke about other solar projects and developers and suggested that it would be beneficial to the KCAF members if they had an ongoing comprehensive list of all solar developments so they could be ready to submit any consultation responses where necessary.

**GR** advised that going forward it would be useful for KCAF to have a standing advice guidance for use when responding to consultations.

Several forum members raised concerns relating to the solar scheme, such as diversion of paths is inconvenient, visual intrusion, etc.

**AB** also noted that the scheme's economic life may be somewhat shorter than stated in the DCO, and we could end up with an unused and derelict site many years before the developer must reinstate the land.

**c) Highsted Park:**

**GR** spoke about the Highsted Park housing development which is a large-scale development in separate applications for phase 1 and phase 2. Swale Borough Council have refused consent, and the matter is now being dealt with by the Secretary of State (SoS) and will go to inquiry.

Statement of Common Ground is to be submitted by 03 January 2025, and then there will be a timetable for submission of proofs of evidence to follow.

Public Rights of Way are currently in a position of objecting, and the plan is for both plans to be considered in the inquiry.

**TT** mentioned that the scale of the proposed development has already been reduced and advised that she believed that approval for the development was dependant of improvements to the nearby M2 junction 5a and asked **GR** if a developer can fund changes or improvements to a highways junction to aid their development application.

**GR** advised that he doesn't believe this junction was part of the development plans but was instead a relief road into Sittingbourne that would be affected, and works would be funded within phase 1 of the development.

**RD** advised that the best way forward would be to look at the plans and then the timetable for consultation responses, and then for the Forum members to construct and submit a written objection to the development.

**GR** suggested that if KCAF had not already registered as an interested party they may not be able to submit an objection at this point in the proceedings, and **RD** said he will look in to this.

## 5. Explore Kent Update:

**Chloe Weatherley (ChW)** and **Chris Walker (CW)** provided an overview to the Forum members of what Explore Kent do in regard to both their website and social media presence, and what they do in collaboration with both Public Rights of Way and Active Travel.

**ChW** spoke about the new PROW section on the Explore Kent website, with sections on Countryside Code, Report a Fault, Public Rights of Way Improvements, Walking your Dog Safely, Health & Wellbeing, and Active Travel.

### [Public Rights of Way - Explore Kent](#)

**ChW** also told the Forum members about the recent and current campaigns Explore Kent have been running for KCC and their other partners to promote Kent outdoors and provided figures and information on the levels of interaction and feedback received from the public.

As part of Explore Kent's ongoing work for PROW **ChW** advised the Forum's equestrian user representatives that feedback and input to use in the equestrian pages on the website and social media would be appreciated.

**SB** asked as the KALC representative on the Forum if Explore Kent had been in contact with KALC's communications member, and if not, she could arrange a collaboration so that Explore Kent information and links could be added to the KALC newsletter to inform the Parish Councils.

**AB** asked how Explore Kent monitor how well received any of their website or social media information and campaigns are received. **ChW** advised that sometimes it can be difficult to accurately monitor how successful their marketing plans are, however, they do receive figures on website traffic as well as on hits on specific links and articles, as well as social media likes and interactions so that they can gauge how well different topics and methods of delivering information are received and then target their work based on this.

**AB**, supported by others, said it was good that Explore Kent helped with access for activities other than walking.

## 6. Public Rights of Way – DMMO Backlogs and Approach:

- Number of applications
- Determined applications & progress
- Successful applications

**GR** spoke about the Deregulation Act cut-off date of 2031 and how this has affected application received so far as well as possible future application figures.

**RD** asked whether the schedule was publicly available and how often it is updated.

**GR** advised that the schedule of applications is updated daily, and the last update date shown on the schedule at any time will reflect the last time new information was added or updated. He advised that the schedule is available on the Kent County Council website here - [Correct the rights of way map - Kent County Council](#)

**GR** talked about the different application types and the timescales involved in processing, the current backlog estimated timescale, and the prospective future backlogs.

**AB** asked if there was an observable pattern to the rejected applications received that would show a way to address this and reduce the overall application numbers and backlogs.

**GR** advised that PROW are already proactive at gatekeeping and will advise applicants if any issues are seen in the application so that they can be advised to resubmit with alterations or additional input, and therefore mitigating problems further down the application process.

**GR** also noted that that although the applications are dealt with in order of date of receipt, if the backlog becomes too long, KCC may have to move up the list applications which are based solely on user evidence as witnesses may not be available as time goes on due to age, death, etc. before the application can be determined.

**AB** also asked about applications still awaiting allocation and whether the KCIIECP has made any impact to Kent application levels as opposed to counties without the Coastal Path in them.

**GR** advised that the Officers dealing with the KCIIECP alignment and the Officers dealing with DMMOs are from different PROW teams and therefore it has had no significant impact on Kent applications levels.

## 7. Brief Updates:

### a) Implementation reform package:

**GR** advised that there was currently no new information on the Deregulation Act Reform Package, other than the KCAF letter to Rt Hon Steve Reed MP on 09 December 2024.

**b) Are Public Rights of way Discriminatory? - Highways Act 1980 & Equality Act 2010:**

**GR** advised that this question arose in another county who were looking at the interplay between the Public Sector Equality Duty and the Highways Act 1980 to ensure that Public Rights of Way Services as the Highways Authority are adhering to the requirements of both acts. **GR** noted that PROW have recently done a large amount of work to update all their EqlA forms to ensure that equality for all users is considered in all decisions and work made relating to the PROW network, and that these forms are completed when considering any changes to the network.

**c) Access Improvements – High Weald National Landscape:**

**GR** spoke about the project where the High Weald National Landscapes (HWNL) had procured funding to replace stiles with gates where required for farming and protected landscapes so that these could be provided to landowners free of charge, and to advise that PROW currently still have some of the gates in storage

He also spoke about the funding received for surfacing works which will be carried on out on the HWNL trails WT109, WB5, WB53, WT109, WB50, and WT403.

**RD** asked **GR** if the gates put aside for Kent national Landscapes have been ringfenced for the HWNL area only to which **GR** confirmed they have been.

**RP** mentioned that Kent Ramblers have funding allocated for the replacement or removal of gates so if anyone knows of landowners who want to change the gates on PROWs on their land, please direct them to him.

**AB** asked why Explore Kent list only 20 stile free routes and why there are not more.

**GR** responded to advise that approximately 80% of the PROW network is now stile free, however some routes may have one or two stiles still on them and although the majority of that route is accessible it cannot be promoted as 'stile free'.

**AB** spoke again as also raised in previous meetings about structures places at path entrances and what could be done to advise landowners of their responsibilities.

**GR** confirmed that there is already guidance for landowners available, and that the 'Gates, Gaps, and Stiles Guidance' was also currently being updated to make it more robust regarding accessibility for users in consideration of land usage.

**d) Enclosure of paths:**

**GR** mentioned the presentation on this subject given at the previous KCAF meeting and the feedback received.

**GR** will now redraft the guidance and forward to members for further comment. **ACTION 3.**

**e) Changing landscape – vineyards:**

**GR** spoke about the increasing number of vineyard applications for diversions in relation to these.



There was a follow discussion around the change from conventional agricultural land use to viticulture which is happening throughout the County. This change of use often impacts PRow and Countryside Access where the diversion of paths around field boundaries are sought and wineries and bottling plant buildings are being built on the land.

**RP** noted that, some time ago, following an application to divert PRow around a new orchard was approved on condition that if use changed back to arable farming or grazing the diverted routes would revert to their original line and perhaps this could also apply to new vineyards?

Members and **GR** felt that the Forum should have a Standard response/ guidance for all applications for new vineyards.

#### **8. King Charles III England Coastal Path (*standing item*):**

**GR** updated the Forum members on the progress of work on the King Charles III England Coast Path (KCIIECP), with work in Sheppey almost complete with the installation of a boardwalk near to the Kingsferry Bridge, as well as more boardwalk further round the coast where the saltmarsh comes up to the bank where the path is routed.

The reinstatement of the Gravesend section of the KCIIECP is awaiting funding to repair the swing bridge over the Canal basin.

#### **9. Correspondence (*standing item*):**

**RD** advised there was nothing to note relating to correspondence.

**SMB** advised that the KCAF letter to Rt Hon Steve Reed MP regarding the Deregulation Act cut-off date of 2031 has been sent from the PRow mailbox on a KCAF letterhead and would be published on the KCC website as soon as the document has been accessibility checked and approved for publishing.

#### **10. Any Other Business:**

##### **a) Annual Report:**

**GR** advised that as a Local Access Forum KCAF are required to produce annual reports for publishing, but it has been several years since the Forum produced one.

**RD** asked if this could be added to the next meeting agenda for discussion.

**ACTION 4.**

##### **b) KCAF Meeting Dates and Venues for 2025:**

**RD** advised that he would speak to **JBox** regarding prospective dates for the 2025 KCAF meetings, and then agree these with **GR**.

**ACTION 5.**



c) **AR** to be congratulated for organising an event to get KCC Members out on horses in the hope they can better understand equestrian issues in the countryside.

**Next meeting:**

Date: **To Be Confirmed**

Time: **2pm to 4pm**

Venue: **MS Teams**