

England Access Forum – SUSTRANS meeting 20/8/10

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Sustrans objectives and achievements

Martyn outlined Sustrans' history plus current aims and objectives. He stressed that the organisation now focussed on cycling and walking and was thus more multi-user orientated than in the past.

The National cycle Network, which Sustrans manage, covers some 12 600 miles – one third traffic free and has over 400 million user journeys a year. 57% of the population live within 1 mile of the network and they have successful access projects including Connect 2 and Links to Schools.

Off-road routes depend on land manager negotiation commonly via long-term leases

Maintenance of the 15 year old network is the major concern for the organisation. Sustrans encourages Local Authorities to take this on if possible but in current economic climate this is increasingly difficult. Many routes are developed in partnership with LA's who typically help fund new routes. Funding and support is decreasing – particularly for new routes. Funding usually in form of grant (e.g. National Lottery) and charitable donations

Utility covers both day to day transport (e.g. to/from work/school) and recreational journeys.

Sustrans is divided into regional areas with the regions having a fair amount of autonomy but national standards exist and strategic direction is more centrally directed. Individual projects tend to have a financial threshold above which central approval is needed.

2) Description of EAF and LAFs and their objectives

Matthew gave an overview of EAF and LAF purposes and relationships emphasising that that they were forums which represented a wide range of users who could offer advice on a wide range access matters drawing on the huge amount of expertise and experience of their members. He stressed that LAFs were consensual and not a forum for the promulgation of single interest group agendas.

Natural England's current position was outlined by Andrew referring to NE's Outcome Two commitments to promoting multi-use routes and equality of use. It was also stressed that NE is uncertain how much support it will be able to give to either LAFs or other access interests and more fundamentally what shape its involvement will take in the future.

3) Areas of mutual interest between Sustrans and LAFs

It was agreed that EAF and Sustrans are both players in the access field and thus have areas of mutual interest but that there were also well-known issues such as shared-use problems to resolve and manage.

How much contact does Sustrans have with LAF's? Variable but there are proscribed contact protocols that include LAFs plus most new routes were consulted upon as part of LA consultations (so partly dependant on that particular LAF/LA relationship) It was agreed that it would be a good practice to contact LAFs at an early stage of a Sustrans project e.g. for potential user feedback and advice..

4) New scheme planning and consultations (see 3) / 5) Areas of concern to EAF and LAFs

Equestrians/shared-use issues/surfacing: The lack of sufficient national provision for horse-riders was raised. Only 400 mile of the National Cycle Network is unavailable for riders (due mainly to land owner wishes) but a high proportion of the remainder may not be suitable and/or has shared use issues e.g. surfacing, speed of cyclists, access furniture etc. Where there is adequate width (usually beyond 3 metres) many issues resolve themselves. Sealed surfaces also an issue as they are not liked by horse riders plus are potentially inappropriate in rural areas. There can be scope for part-tarmac but examples exist of complete width tarmac on bridleways.

Sustrans are now sympathetic to horse use and where practicable will accommodate them. Where there are sealed surfaces Sustrans are usually responding to predicted usage and long-term maintenance considerations – they have no desire to tarmac everything and will consider other surfaces.

There are similar issues with other users e.g. people with impaired mobility who may have issues with bikes and horses. Adequate width is one potential solution either as mixed usage or separate tracks (preferred by some users)

Management of user behaviours is a key tool - Sustrans volunteers have a role here on specific routes plus role for NE to produce and disseminate good practice and evidence.

EAF and Sustrans could press together for changes in highways law to make creation, diversion and management easier e.g. there is no requirement for a HA to advertise the 'upgrading' of a bridleway whereas there is for a footpath.

6) Way forward

Good reasons to continue dialogue at local and national levels.

Most LAFs have a cycling contact but it would be a good idea for LAFs and regional Sustrans offices to establish and maintain relationships. (Martyn will talk to Andy Whistow who co-ordinates regional activity)

Important to include LAFs at an early stage in new projects and utilise their expertise e.g. in feasibility studies

Possible joint EAF/NE/Sustrans work/publication on code of conduct/best practice to tackle shared-use/surfacing issues etc.

Useful to meet again fairly shortly (after the autumn spending review) with a more specific agenda to address certain issues and areas of commonality but it was agreed that this meeting had been a valuable foundation for future relationships between EAF/LAFs and Sustrans.