

08 OCT 2010

Powys Local Access Forum c/o
Swyddfeydd Sant Ioan / St John's Office
Pumffordd / Fiveways
Llandrindod / Llandrindod Wells
Powys
LD1 5ES

Rhodri Glyn Thomas AM
Rural Development Sub-Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff

Dear Chairman,

I am writing as the Chairman of Powys' Local Access Forum which has only recently been made aware by CCW of the inquiry into Rural Tourism by the Assembly's Rural Development Sub-Committee.

It is the overwhelming view of this Forum that a well managed, promoted accessible countryside is a critical ingredient to genuine sustainable tourism in rural Wales.

As the most rural part of Wales, working to achieve an open and well managed rights of way system is key to a sustainable tourism economy in Powys. The Council's Countryside Services, supported by grant-aid from WAG, has made very considerable in-roads into opening and managing the path network raising the level of network considered in good condition from 39% to 60%. It is important to note that this is the most extensive path network in the country.

The last two year's work by the County Council to open and improve access to Powys' countryside have only been possible through the recent 3-year WAG grant aid for rights of way work in Wales. I have no doubt that once the grant is removed at the end of this year, that this will lead to a reversal in path condition across Powys, and throughout Wales, and all too quickly lead to a quick decline in paths that are open and easy to use.

Keeping the county's huge path network open and easy to use requires significantly more resources that we can afford to invest, although the benefits this investment can bring are well documented. The example of Offa's Dyke Path, of which a considerable part runs through Powys, highlights the return to the local economy from direct expenditure on rights of way. The 1999 DETR report 'Appraisal of options on access to the open countryside of England and Wales' reveals that for Offa's Dyke Path, visitors spend around £1.3 million each year, and past work carried out by CCW and Countryside Agency has showed that for every pound spent on management, around nine pounds is generated as a multiplier effect within the local economy.

Peter Midmore's 2000 report into the 'Economic value of walking in Wales' estimated that walking tourism alone accounted for £550 million to the Welsh economy and that it supported 3,000 jobs. In 2003, the Ramblers Association published 'The economic and social value of walking in England' suggest that walking in England alone generates around £6 billion and supports up to 245,560 full-time jobs.

The Wales Audit Office 2006 also stated that the percentage of people accessing the Welsh Countryside has risen from 40% to 45% in 2006. This is expected only to continue to rise, as more people holiday at home.

IT must be noted that WAG investment in the PRoW network also brings large health benefits and opportunities to improve the health of Wales, and free for participants. WAG allocated £7.8m for 2007/8 alone for actions highlighted under its Next Steps programme, such as free swimming. It is estimated that ill-health costs Wales around £650m a year, which undoubtedly could be reduced through the continued and very modest current grant invested of £1.6m by WAG on the Welsh PRoW network.

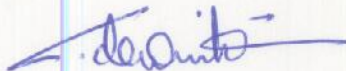
Climbing Higher notes the importance of walking and cycling, yet for schemes other than a few associated with safer access to schools, there are very few alternative means to access funds for either form of recreation. Powys does not have access to Objective 1 funds, and has no realistic means to obtain support for opening and managing its massive path network other than from WAG.

The Powys Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2007, showed that nearly half of accommodation providers near to Powys' recreational trails believe that well managed and promoted trails were essential to their businesses and 69% of all TICs in Powys open at the time were asked for walking information on a daily basis.

Over the first two years of the WAG grant, the joint resources have allowed Powys County Council to open and maintain 781kms of PRoW, including the installation of 24 bridges; New cycleways and 30 circular horse-riding trails have been designed and will be completed by the end of the year; Work has also taken place to start to address the many hundreds of anomalies on the Definitive Map; in 2009, 12 kms of byway were improved; the Council's target of developing access to 95% of the 150,000has of Powys access land was completed.

In considering the evidence placed before the Sub-Committee, on behalf of the Powys LAF, I would ask that an urgent recommendation be placed before the Welsh assembly Government to find resources to support Powys in continuing to open and maintain its huge PRoW network. Sustained large-scale investment remains urgently needed if the estimated 3,300kms of currently blocked and unusable PRoW network in Powys is to be made available for future visitors and locals to enjoy.

Yours sincerely



Charles de Winton
Chairman Powys Local Access Forum