

CHAPTER 11 - Informal Recreation And Leisure

Aims:

- Improve access to woodlands, open spaces and the countryside, in particular near to where people live.
- Extend and promote to all sections of the community the use of open spaces, recreational routes, woodland and the countryside.
- Ensure that relevant information is available at key points in the Forest for all potential users.
- Encourage people to use alternatives to the motor car as means to gain access to the Forest.
- Integrate the implementation of the Forest with Local Transport Plans.

11.1 Much of the Forest is in private ownership and will remain so, with no right of public access. There is very little mountain, moor, heath and down in the Forest, most of the countryside is in active agriculture. However, the public rights-of-way network, public open spaces, permissive access agreements and new access agreed under grant aid for woodland and land management together can provide an extensive network covering the Forest. This network, when properly maintained, managed and promoted can provide local people with an easy way of getting or keeping healthy, through regular exercise, as strenuous or relaxed as required. The network also has the potential to provide the means to link city to country.

11.2 The Forest of Avon already has a number of sites and facilities where the community can enjoy open spaces, and woodlands and gain access to the countryside. For example, an exciting opportunity exists at Stoke Park to provide a new facility of open space in a high-quality setting to the north of the city. There are, however, areas where few facilities exist; many popular sites could be significantly improved. In addition, many people are excluded from using and enjoying the countryside and greenspaces due to physical disability, age or simply having to take young children in a pushchair. The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) affects both physical infrastructure (by 2004) and access to information and will require providers of services in the Forest to address compliance with the requirements of the Act. A useful starting point is

provided by the BT Countryside For All standards and guidelines.

11.3 Walking, cycling and horse riding are excellent and enjoyable ways of getting and keeping fit and healthy, thereby reducing the burden on health services and improving people's quality of life. Walking and cycling are also excellent ways of commuting, thereby reducing car use. Forest partners will assist in promoting walking, cycling and riding in conjunction with health practitioners as well as ensuring a network of paths, trails and cycle routes.

11.4 The public rights-of-way network extends into all Forest areas, though it is not universally open or accessible. Despite the hard work of the councils' public rights-of-way teams and local communities through for example the Parish Paths Partnership, many footpaths have poor or non-existent waymarking, blockages and stiles in poor repair or have simply fallen out of use. The problem is largely one of scale; there is over 1000 km of paths within the Forest area. Open spaces, commons and village greens all perform a major role in providing access and recreational space, and are fiercely defended by local people. The Quiet Roads initiative may also help extend the network of routes with the priority given to non-motorised users.

11.5 When paths are clear and marked, trespass is reduced significantly, creating less friction for walker and farmer alike. Land immediately adjacent to housing is most prone to trespass, often because dog walkers are unaware that there is no right of way over the land.

11.6 Bridleways are not frequent or well linked, leading to horses and riders having to mix with road traffic and sometimes with walkers. Walkers and horses rarely mix well without considerable investment in gates, segregation and appropriate surfacing. Some conflict exists with casual mountain biking, which can cause localised problems. Better interpretation and alternative sites would help.

11.7 Local authorities have been pursuing policies of creating greenways linking towns and inner city areas with the urban fringe and countryside, serving a dual purpose as wildlife corridors. These links should extend seamlessly beyond local authority boundaries, as with the Frome Valley Walkway into Yate and Bristol. The Forest is fortunate in having a number of well-established routes both within and beyond the urban edge, which allow for extensive

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walks and cycle and horse rides in the countryside, effectively bringing the Forest into the towns and city. Considerable opportunity exists to extend these major routes as well as to create short circular routes close to where people live, using existing rights of way. Many urban parks can act as focal points for information and access links. Care must be taken not to smooth out and urbanise byways and similar tracks in the countryside. Clear information on routes and waymarking will assist users and reduce conflict with landowners.

- 11.8** A key to people's enjoyment and use of these facilities is the ease of finding out where they are, what they are seeing and how long it will take to get from one place to another. A number of leaflets and sign boards exist, but there are not enough to make people feel welcome and confident during their enjoyment of paths and open spaces. A balance needs to be struck between giving sufficient information and scattering signs, boards and markers everywhere, urbanising the countryside. Interpretation and information need not be uniformly distributed. The greatest density should be at access points indicating destination, with themed waymarking on key routes and paths; more distant areas can be simply marked and accessible. This gives both keen and casual users equal opportunities to find an experience appropriate to their needs. The Forest will give a unifying theme and purpose to information, interpretation and waymarks whilst allowing for local distinctiveness. Information about opportunities for countryside recreation needs to be available in urban areas, near to where people live e.g. parks, to help them decide where they can go and what they can do in the Forest.
- 11.9** Many people using the Forest will need clear points of access with a range of facilities and options of informal recreation easily available. The concept of Forest gateways has been applied elsewhere and provides for a planned approach to access points and information. Gateways should aim to facilitate access to the countryside and open spaces, without the use of cars. Public transport links and easily accessible timetable information will be necessary. Gateway sites will also provide a clear and easy focus for tourists.
- 11.10** Larger gateway sites should incorporate, as a minimum, high quality information and interpretation and have at least one link directly on to a greenway or major recreational route, links to public transport, and car parking nearby
- (acknowledging that many people will still use cars for the foreseeable future). They may also include toilets, refreshments, a visitor centre, craft centre and education facilities. Such gateway sites already exist in a simple form at Willsbridge Mill and at Ashton Court and Blaise Castle estates.
- 11.11** Smaller gateways would incorporate basic information, links to public transport and interpretation and link at least with a well-marked circular walk.
- 11.12** Possible locations of gateways are indicated on strategy area maps and at this stage are indicative only. Any proposals for gateways will need to comply with planning policies and, where applicable, planning permission. More detailed appraisal of need and location will be carried out as part of refining the strategy area plans in consultation with local communities.
- 11.13** Large gateways could be themed for special interests, for example history and heritage, wildlife and river-life, and farming. Large gateways should also take the lead in being exemplars for equal access to the countryside, with facilities and links specifically tailored to the needs of less mobile and disadvantaged groups.
- 11.14** The reclamation of the rights-of-way network under the targets set by the Countryside Agency, its maintenance, promotion and liaison with landowners and local groups will be a substantial task and can involve local communities, volunteers and landowners. However, the responsibility for the network would still rest with the highways authority.
- 11.15** The Agri-Environment and Forestry grant aid schemes allow for and encourage the establishment of permissive access to areas within the schemes. Where landowners are agreeable, the creation of rights of way can be sought. These measures can be used to encourage landowners to link existing paths and create more enjoyable walks. Routes for horses have been created through permissive agreements and by toll rides, allowing more extensive off-road riding. Areas with high concentrations of horse-based activity may lend themselves to a co-ordinated approach with landowners.

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11.16 The Community Forest Path has been created (Figure 17.1) and it encircles Bristol, following a route close to the edge of the city, yet providing attractive and interesting walks. It will also serve to focus links between urban Bristol and nearby towns with attractive countryside nearby, using existing public rights of way and in many areas using existing routes, e.g. the Dramway and the Two Rivers Way. Circular walks to and from local areas will be developed from it, as will connections to public transport.

11.17 Public and community transport operators have been consulted on information about walks and connections to the bus and train network. Continuing, extending and promoting this will be critical in giving people an opportunity to leave their cars at home. The Unitary Councils' draft transport plans identify the development of walkways and cycleways, the enhancement of public transport and the promotion of cycling as environmentally sustainable ways of enjoying the countryside. These measures along with park-and-ride and future Light Rail Transport schemes may offer opportunities to enjoy the countryside without taking cars into it.

11.18 It is important for Forest partners to balance engineering and 'hardware' solutions with promotion and encouragement or 'software' solutions. The success of the Community Forest Path, the Frome Walkway and other routes is their active promotion through publications, press and events to foster awareness, understanding and participation.

Proposals

11.19 The Forest partners will aim to:

- ensure the recreational network complies with the Disability Discrimination Act and adopt the BT Countryside For All guidelines and standards in improving and developing routes, public access and information;
- set targets for achieving a fully mapped, usable and promoted rights of way network.
- work with farmers, tenants and landowners to create new permissive access (both linear and area-wide) using grant aid schemes and, where practicable, new rights of way; solutions to problems will be sought, including the provision of practical alternative routes and diversions where appropriate and in the public interest; initiatives

such as toll rides and management agreements will be encouraged where this is necessary to make a scheme viable;

- agree a strategy for the creation, management and promotion of key access routes, linked to Gateway sites;
- identify gateway sites as a focus for appropriate recreational access, sports, arts projects, events, play areas, information and interpretation; investigate the theming of gateways; all large gateways should have facilities and links specifically tailored to the needs of less mobile and disadvantaged groups and be exemplars of 'access for all'.
- play a role in helping to develop green tourism by linking facilities to walks and cycleways, for example accommodation and cycle hire, thus providing opportunities for employment and farm diversification;
- work closely with public and community transport providers to develop and promote access to the Forest without using cars and concentrate on identifying interchanges linking transport routes to the off road recreational and commuter network. Also to link gateways, key access routes, the public rights of way network and urban commuter cycle and walking routes, providing secure parking and cycle-hire facilities;
- identify further key routes based on existing rights of way for walkers, cycles and horses, some multipurpose and some segregated, as appropriate, providing a recreational infrastructure for the Forest;
- promote with relevant partners, including health practitioners, the benefits of cycling, and walking particularly for personal health and fitness and traffic reduction;
- identify a range of circular walks that can be waymarked and promoted in consultation with local communities;
- establish and promote the southern route of the Round Avon Ride;
- co-ordinate and develop themes for information and interpretation to identify with the Forest and to foster a sense of continuity and confidence in customers;