

Footpath and Local Access Forum Report 2011

The South Downs National Park Authority took full control of the National Park on 1st April 2011 which, together with government cuts, has caused several changes to the way matters are handled in the future.

West Sussex – The regular visits by R.o.W officers to the footpath network have ceased and the use of contractors to repair stiles and signs and clear undergrowth will be severely curtailed. The Council now intend to recognise voluntary work and will support groups such as Monday Group to carry out work on footpaths. The R.o.W department has recruited Parish Path Inspectors who will report on problems in their area and, hopefully, newly recruited voluntary workers will correct any problems.

East Sussex – A full survey of all footpaths and bridleways has been carried out and the complete network has been recorded online which can be accessed using link: <http://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/rightsofway/rightsofwaymap/intro.htm>. The map covers the whole county and allows the zooming in to any area to show the footpaths, bridleways and byways in that location. It is possible to find out if there are stiles, gates or bridges on the paths. It is also possible to click onto a particular point to gain the stile, gate or finger post, which have their own designation ref which defines the footpath number and furniture ref i.e gateG0674. This system allows any person to accurately report faults but funding may limit the ability to remedy the problems.

Brighton & Hove – The majority of countryside footpaths are now the responsibility of the SDNP in so far as access is concerned but B&HCC is still responsible for carrying out maintenance. A few paths, especially in East Brighton, Ovingdean, Rottingdean and Saltdean remain fully within B&H control as they are outside the SDNP. As these changes reduce much of the work carried out by the Rights of Way Officer, this post has been declared redundant and the remaining functions will now be carried out by the team of Countryside Rangers.

Brighton & Hove Local Access Forum – Most of future interest will involve urban issues, including the network of twittens, gating orders and similar problems. However, the B&H R.o.W improvement Plan will still be a continuing process but this will be in conjunction with the SDNP LAF.

Specific issues occurring during this year have been the Stanmer Park footpath, Farman Street Gating Order, Ditchling Road Fields footpaths creation, Wild Park Development and the loss of the R.o.W officer and its implications.

Stanmer Park House – There is a footpath across the lawns, close to the house, this path has been used by many people over the years since the park was opened to the public in 1953. The council agreed to sell the house to Mike Holland's Cherrywood Investments for £1.00 as it had fallen into disrepair. CI had to agree to carry out extensive repairs to the building which is a listed property, they signed an agreement which included a clause to keep the garden open to the public. In 2010, an application was made by CI to the council to allow a fence to be erected around the garden. This application was granted by the casting vote of the committee chairman of the then conservative led B&H council. The Stanmer Park Preservation Society ran a

campaign to oppose the loss of the footpath, when locked gates closed off access to the footpath. The Open Spaces Society and the Ramblers supported the SPPS and requests were made of the general public to raise a DMMO (Definitive Map Making Order). The DMMO is a tool to claim a path as a right of way, where it had not previously been a recognised footpath. This process of upgrading necessitates many people making use of the access regularly over a period of at least 20 years. Over 150 users filed their DMMO claim forms, forcing the council to follow a prescribed process to consider the claim. The change of control of B&H council will probably assist this claim but apparently the process takes a long time to conclude. In the meantime, the fence together with locked gates prevents access to the Stanmer Park House lawns but a longer route around the outside of the fence has been adopted.

Farman Street Gating Order – Following the third application by residents and opposed by the Ramblers and the B&H LAF as well as many other bodies, the gating order has been granted. This will entail a gate being erected, closing off access to Farman Street from the Western Road end. The cost of this provision being borne by the B&H council from Council Tax funds and giving the loss of access to the general public. The gate should be closed at night and open during the day but may be closed all the time unless the residents comply with the rules.

Ditchling Road Fields – Footpaths have now been added to the network and access is afforded through gates at strategic points. Several paths on each side of Ditchling Road are now available, giving additional off-road access from North Brighton between Hollingbury Hill Fort up to the A27 Brighton by-pass and therefore provides new walking routes leading from Brighton into Stanmer Park and beyond.

Wild Park – Chalk grassland restoration, which caused widespread dissent last year, has been amended. The latest plans are considerably reduced following public consultation. The loss of further trees along the top of the hill surrounding the Giant's Foot will cease.

Rights of Way Officer – This post in Brighton has been deleted as most countryside paths are now within the SDNP where the Authority will be responsible for access issues. Reports were circulated that Brighton & Hove Council were abandoning their responsibilities for footpaths by their actions in discontinuing the role of RoW Officer have been denied by Council Officers. Since B&H council has only the duty to repair and replace stiles and signs on footpaths, it is considered that the Countryside Ranger Service can provide this function. However, at the Ramblers Local Footpath Secretaries' meeting, the Brighton RoW Officer was invited to attend. Between the invitation and the meeting, the Officer was declared redundant and the Parks Manager was sent to represent the Council. The Parks Manager made a presentation on control of Allotments, which caused consternation as the meeting was expecting a report on the state of the footpath network, which he had to admit that he had little knowledge. Your representative was forced to come to his rescue and report that all paths, except one, were open for access and most furniture was in reasonable repair. This early example of sharing out the duties of the RoW Officer, indicates that the Council's aims may not be so easily achieved.