

# ***Countryside Access: Strategic Planning, Co-ordination and Agri-Environment Schemes.***

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Photo courtesy of John Bentley

***Voluntary access agreements can work, although many currently provide little access for disabled visitors***

## **Introduction**

Access to the countryside has never been far from the headlines over the past three years, with Parliament passing The Countryside and Rights of Way Act in November 2000 (CROW Act), allowing a qualified "right to roam" over open countryside and providing an overhaul of the rights of way system.

Central to the debate over whether a right to roam should be introduced was the issue of whether 'voluntary' provision of access to the countryside could be relied on to open-up new access or whether legislation was required. In the final event, of course, the Government decided that legislation was required, although voluntary access by agreement will continue to play an important part in access provision, because many areas (most lowland farmland) will remain outside the boundary of open countryside access land defined in the CROW Act and because the Act only provides for this access on foot.

A major element of the Country Landowners' Association case against the imposition of legislation was that the amount of land available for access under agreements was already substantial and underestimated (CLA 1998). The CLA evidence stated that around 30% of all written access agreements in England and Wales were provided under Agri-Environment schemes (eg. Countryside Stewardship). In other words, Agri-Environment Schemes seemed to play a major role in voluntary access provision in the countryside.

EC Council Regulation 2078/92 (the Agri-Environment Regulation) allowed member states to implement voluntary schemes which included payment to landowners for managing land for public access and leisure activities. The main schemes under which this new public access has been provided in England are Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) and Countryside Stewardship (CSS) (and Tir Cymen and Tir Gofal in Wales). It has to be remembered that with all the English schemes the primary purpose of agreements is conservation - to secure environmentally friendly farming. Access is an option for the farmer and only around 12% of CS schemes include access. The schemes are normally administered by MAFF (or rather in practice, at the time of writing, by the Farming and Rural Conservation Agency (FRCSA) and there are also agency agreements with National Park Authorities).

Against this background, an analysis was made of the contribution made by these agri-environment schemes to access provision in the countryside. Monitoring of Agri-Environment schemes has been commissioned in the past, but these monitoring exercises have tended to focus on evaluating

agreements against the MAFF criteria for the schemes, rather than looking in detail at individual schemes to investigate the nature of the contribution they are making to access provision (see, for example, LUC 1996 and Garrod *et al.*, 1998).

### **What Type of Access is Being Provided by Agri-Environment Schemes ?**

The research on which this article is based was undertaken in two stages: the first stage was to carry-out a detailed analysis of a sample of access schemes under CSS and ESA Agreements. Thirty schemes in Shropshire, Staffordshire and Derbyshire/Peak District National Park were analysed and an assessment made of the contribution the schemes made to access provision.

A major area of interest in the study, given the CLA evidence above, was the extent to which Agri-Environment schemes were providing new and 'useful' access to the countryside. For example, were schemes contributing towards opening-up new areas of countryside to ramblers, were they acting as interlinks in the rights of way network or were they simply allowing the public to view some of the Agri-Environment schemes for which they are paying?

The general findings from analysing the 30 schemes was as follows:

#### ***(i) Circular Walks and Linkages with Rights of Way.***

57% of the agreements provided a 'link' (of varying length) in the existing rights of way section to enable walkers to complete a circular walk of some description. 'Providing circular walks' is perhaps a rather misleading description, as often the resulting 'circular route' was not particularly obvious, even to those with an Ordnance Survey map, and had little publicity.

#### ***(ii) Purpose of Access.***

It was found that a significant proportion of access agreements provided access to viewpoints, archaeological or historic sites and conservation sites (usually allowing the public to view conservation meadows, hedges, etc which were part of the

scheme). Looking at the overall purpose of the individual schemes access to about 23% of the sites could be seen as allowing public viewing of the site, while a further 23% of agreements could be seen as serving to provide an access through-route, with the remaining 53% of agreements serving a combination of these two purpose).

#### ***(iii) Provision of access next to a settlement and facilities for the disabled.***

Perhaps surprisingly, only 33% of agreements provided access reasonably close to a village, with very few providing access actually adjacent to a village. This is perhaps surprising given that this is specifically mentioned as a criterion by MAFF. Also no sites in the sample catered for disabled people, despite this being a CSS criterion.

#### ***(iv) Access of Interest to 'Serious Walkers'.***

Very few sites provided lengthy routes into areas of the countryside not previously accessible: one site in the sample which did this relatively effectively was "The Onny Trail" at Cheney Longville in Shropshire, which provided a 3 km route along an old railway line and contained a wide range of interest, but this route is clearly an exception. Few agreements provide access to deeper, otherwise inaccessible countryside or provide interest to more serious walkers seeking wider ability to roam the countryside

#### ***(v) Access Prior to the Agreement.***

Of the 30 agreements examined at least 33 seemed to have already had some form of previous access. (This situation is changing as FRCA now take a more critical view of access applications)

#### ***(vi) Availability of Information and Marketing.***

Schemes are poorly advertised and consistent and accurate information is difficult to obtain. Most, but not all, sites can be found on the MAFF website, but information is difficult to interpret. Maps are also deposited with highway authorities, but (as with the website) this is not necessarily complete or up-to-date information. Little attention is given to marketing and 'packaging' - for example, the public are not generally made aware of this.

**What Contribution are Agri-environment Schemes Making to Local Access Provision?**

The second stage of the research involved a questionnaire to rights of way (ROW) officers, countryside staff (at local authorities, AONBs, national parks and heritage coast projects) and FRCA agri-environment team managers. The questionnaire sought information about what contribution access under agri-environment schemes was making to overall access provision in their areas.

The questionnaire asked respondents to assess the contribution of agri-environment access schemes to overall access provision in the local area. As shown in Table 1 (below) most of the respondents considered that the schemes made a negligible or small contribution to local access provision. Countryside officers on the whole considered that the schemes made a greater contribution than did ROW officers. This is probably because several countryside officers were directly involved with agri-environment schemes (as will be discussed later), unlike ROW officers who generally had no pro-active involvement apart from being consulted by FRCA on agri-environment access schemes.

On the positive side some respondents saw potential for agri-environment access to be better used in the future, with particular examples being the possible use of the schemes to provide links to major access routes (eg. County trails) and to provide access links to the 'island' areas of access land which will be opened-up under the new CROW Act.

Respondents saw a number of drawbacks with agri-environment access schemes. The main points made were: lack of publicity and information for schemes;

the lack of permanence (several ROW officers questioned putting resources into these schemes when they were so short-lived); the schemes were often remote from areas of need and they were where landowners wanted them, rather than users; and in some cases the access agreements were merely formalising de facto access.

Many respondents were also very critical of the FRCA consultation procedures with ROW / countryside officers, which were generally felt to be inadequate and inconsistent.

**Targeting of Access Provision.**

Another area of interest for the study was the question of targetting of access provision. A major problem is that access is not necessarily being provided in the places where it is most needed. The agri-environment access agreement system is almost entirely supply-driven - that is schemes only come forward in places that the farmer or landowner chooses to offer a scheme to the FRCA. A more effective system would therefore need to identify levels and areas of need for access and target landowners in that area.

The questionnaire sought information about what access surveys had been carried-out and what strategies were in place. The responses to the questionnaire confirmed that there is a paucity of information as to where (in spatial terms) the need or demand might be or how much there is. Local authorities do not generally have this information, they rarely attempt any kind of comprehensive survey of access need or demand and often merely respond to outside pressures (eg. from the Ramblers Association or landowners) or opportunities (eg. the

**Table 1: What sort of contribution do you see agri-environment access schemes making to overall access provision in your area ?**

	No contribution	Negligible	Small	Medium*	Large
ROW officers	2	11	10	0	1
Countryside officers	0	4	8	1	3
Both	2	15	18	1	4

\*Extra category inserted by one respondent

**Table 2: Does access currently provided under agri-environment schemes fit-in with your strategies / policies for access ?**

	Not related	Some relationship	Quite well related*	Well related
ROW officers	15	6	0	0
Countryside officers	5	5	1	2
Both	20	11	1	2

\*Extra category inserted by one respondent

offer of land or access). Countryside Strategies are often vague on this and contain general policies such as the need to provide access next to urban areas.

Another problem with effectively assessing and targetting access is that there are a wide range of access providers, who do not necessarily co-operate and co-ordinate their activities. These include local highway authorities (rights of way); local planning and recreation departments of local authorities (eg. trails along old railway lines, country parks); National Park Authorities; countryside management projects (often run by local authorities); conservation, amenity and recreation trusts ('CARTS'), including The National Trust, The Woodland Trust and many others; The Forestry Authority; water companies; and of course MAFF through agri-environment agreements.

The questionnaire asked respondents to assess whether access provided under agri-environment schemes fitted-in with their strategies or policies for access provision in the local area. As Table 2 shows, the majority of respondents considered there was little or no relationship, but again, countryside officers had a slightly more positive view of the schemes. However, it should be noted that many respondents' organisations lacked a formal access strategy against which to assess schemes.

The FRCA response indicated that better targetting of access could be achieved if there were a co-ordinated access strategy between groups, with a shared information service, covering both rights of way and permissive access routes. An FRCA officer suggested more local surveys were needed, as was someone "to talk to farmers".

Finally the questionnaire asked respondents to give examples of what they considered to be 'good practice' with agri-environment scheme access provision. As guidance, 'good practice' was said to be examples of schemes where access was provided in a targetted, pro-active way to fulfil an identified local need. A number of good practice examples were found and three diverse examples are given below.

**Case Study 1: Kenilworth Castle Millenium Trail, Warwickshire.**

This 1.5 mile trail covers the historic landscape around Kenilworth Castle. Warwickshire County Council were keen to establish an official trail and ROW officers suggested the landowner apply to the FRCA for access under CSS and supported his application.

**Case Study 2: Purbeck Heritage Coast, Dorset.**

This section of heritage coast, which contains well known coastal features such as Durdle Door, is under considerable pressure, especially west of Lulworth, and the coast path is walked by over 0.5m people per annum. The land is owned by Lulworth Estate who want to allow access in the coastal area and recognise that is a need to relieve pressure on the over-used areas. The area was targetted for new access by The Estate and Dorset County Council Countryside Service and new access has been provided through CSS schemes. There is a partnership between the estate (who produce walks leaflets), the tenant farmers (who farm and manage the land) and the Dorset Countryside Service (who provide gates and stiles). The access provided under CSS is both open area and linear path access and access is available over a depth of two fields from the

cliff edge in certain areas. This helps to draw visitors more inland from the pressured coast path and it provides linkages between inland and coastal paths.

**Case Study 3: The Lincolnshire Wolds AONB.**

Particular access targets in the AONB are to obtain link paths with The Viking Way long distance trail and to develop more circular routes. The AONB officer has worked closely with the local Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAG) in pro-actively targetting landowners to obtain the necessary access links: the AONB Officer and FWAG act as informal agents for farmers by putting together CSS applications and submitting them to the FRCA. This approach has resulted in a number of new permissive link paths to The Viking Way and also circular walking routes. These priorities have been discussed with FRCA at annual liaison meetings and incorporated in FRCA's access strategy.

**Some Conclusions: How Can a More Planned and Co-ordinated Approach to Access Provision be Introduced and How Can Agri-environment Access Schemes be more Effectively Integrated into Access Provision?**

The studies suggest that agri-environment schemes as they stand are not well suited to a targetting approach. CSS and ESA schemes are voluntary-based and depend on landowners and farmers coming forward and offering access. Also schemes are primarily conservation-based, so that a site suitable for access may not fulfil the conservation criteria or vice versa.

Clearly there are a number of obstacles to overcome, particularly with regard to co-ordinating the work of different access providers and targetting CSS / ESA access schemes, if agri-environment schemes are to play a more positive and useful role in access provision in the future.

The 'good practice' examples show that it is possible to utilise the schemes to provide targetted access where it is needed, but in order to do this the right 'local circumstances' are required: local ROW or countryside staff need to have appropriate

knowledge and skills to capitalise on opportunities (for example, a knowledge of farming and conservation to enable a dialogue with farmers), local landowners must be amenable (or even pro-active as in the Purbeck example) and local FRCA staff must be supportive.

If more access is to be delivered by agri-environment schemes there will need to be some major changes. These could include: allowing local countryside/ROW staff to negotiate a new type of access agreement with landowners, which would be paid for from agri-environment rather than local authority/national park budgets; achieving better integration of agri-environment access into local needs by improved liaison, which would include bringing the schemes fully within the remit of the new Local Countryside Access Forums, to be set-up under the CROW Act, and ensuring local access strategies are produced to inform access decision making; training of local countryside and ROW staff on the workings of agri-environment schemes to enable them to more readily capitalise on access opportunities; and the preparation of best practice advice and policy guidelines on access by The Countryside Agency.

The new CROW Act presents an opportunity to achieve a more integrated and targetted approach to access provision and the opportunity should not be missed. The Countryside Agency is aware of the need for a new approach and has established six regional 'Integrated Access Demonstration Projects' to consider how best to achieve this: the projects "will encourage people to work together across traditional professional and organisational boundaries" and "will consider the demand for access from all types of user, including walkers, horseriders, cyclists and people with physical difficulties". Finally "they will investigate new sources of funding for access and look at ways of improving information and advice for visitors" (Countryside Agency 2001).

This new approach is much needed as there is a real possibility that the CROW Act could continue the 'compartmentalism' of access interests: in particular the new Act requires the preparation of 'rights of way

improvement plans', but it would surely be more appropriate if 'access improvement plans' were to be produced, taking account of the full range of types of access available to the public?

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