

NORTH WALES REGIONAL COMMITTEE

NWRC2 01-06 (p2)

Date: 3 February 2006

Time: 10.00 - 13.00

Venue: Canolfan Gymunedol Cae Cymro Community Centre, Clawddnewydd, Ruthin.

Title: Brief From NFU Cymru

Modern Access to the Countryside

There has been a five-fold increase in access opportunities to the countryside following the implementation of the CROW Act 2000.

The question I would pose to the Assembly Members – has there been a five-fold increase in the access budget? I fear not.

With the exception of the Forestry Commission, access is in the main to privately owned and occupied land. This is land that is farmed and often important in conservation terms. Therefore, with no equivalent increase in the budget the increased costs have to be met somewhere. Much of it is from the landowners that have been affected by the statutory and obligatory designation of their land.

No doubt the Ramblers Association will later on remind us of the value of access to the local economy. The point always being missed in this argument is that only a minority of those with access land are able to benefit financially from increased access opportunities.

We do of course recognise the increased financial allocation by the Assembly to local authorities. However, this money is not ring fenced and there is no obligation or indeed audit on local authorities to spend this money on access at all. Can it also be right that in 2004 Gwynedd for example got £37,601 whilst Cardiff got £78,800?

Talk to the majority of walkers and I and my family are amongst them and what they want is not access to every square inch of the countryside but clearly sign posted linear routes away from settlements and farmyards.

I hope the Assembly will bear this in mind when considering any possible extension to access. You should also bear in mind that the voluntary route is open under the CROW Act through dedicated access and we oppose any further statutory rights of access.

You will understand that NFU Cymru is not against access per se. A lot of the problems are caused by our antiquated public right of way network, which do not meet modern any access needs. These include parallel paths and dead-end paths and paths through the middle of working farmyards.

We now have the ideal opportunity to grasp the nettle through the CROW Rights of Way Improvement Plans. These can be used not only to create a modern network but to also allow cost effective closures and diversions of existing paths. Many kilometres of permissive paths have been created in Wales by farmers over the last decade and these must form part of the Right of Way Improvement Plans. The Assembly must ask itself the question what do we want, a series of poorly maintained paths or a network of well-maintained public rights of way supplemented where necessary with permissive paths. This would meet the need of 99% of walkers and other users and meet the Assembly targets of Walking yourself to health.

CROW Access to open land is for quiet enjoyment on foot. Unfortunately some groups are taking advantage of this in the fact that it is not 2 feet that the problem but 4 feet. People are using CROW Access land to exercise their dogs. Dogs cause sheep and wildlife worrying and health problems from the faeces. The Act needs to be implemented much more strongly when it comes to keeping dogs on leads. Basically nowhere in Wales is not in the vicinity of livestock.

On a more positive note, we are very supportive of the local access forums and the Countryside Code Campaign. However, what is noticeable since the implementation of the CROW Act is the attitude of some walkers to landowners. They now use the excuse that they have a right of access to any land. They are aggressive towards anyone who challenges them. The spirit of co-operation is then immediately lost which does not help the majority of people who do follow the Countryside Code.

Wales is a crowded country, particularly at weekends and peak holiday periods. We are looking to the Assembly to provide a framework; supplemented with adequate funding to allow a balance of farming, conservation and access to privately owned land. After all, it is the Government who have created the new access rights and with statute comes responsibility.