



Background:

Promotion of access in the Cotswolds has a long and rich history. Cotswold Voluntary Wardens, Ramblers, British Horse Society, the Conservation Board and Highway Authorities amongst many others have long taken advantage of the Cotswolds landscape and its dense network of paths and trails to facilitate countryside access for a wide range of people from a wide range of backgrounds.

In more recent years the wider benefits of access to the Cotswolds, particularly to the local economy and to the health and wellbeing of residents and visitors have become better understood, more widely exploited and their full financial value has begun to be estimated.

Theme:

With this history and recent developments as a backdrop, the conference held on 21st November at Witcombe and Bentham Village Hall sought to explore *how the Cotswolds brand can be used to promote access in its many forms to deliver benefits for society and the economy.*

Aims:

In exploring this theme, the conference sought to facilitate meaningful discussion and lasting partnerships between diverse user groups, managing authorities and beneficiaries in pursuance of three key outcomes:

1. The Cotswolds are better promoted as a destination for walking, riding, cycling or just enjoying the outdoors
2. There is cross-Cotswold unity in promoting access
3. Access in the Cotswolds is recognised and used as a key tool for enhanced health and wellbeing.

Attendance:

Invitations were sent to a wide range of organisations with a stake or interest in countryside access in the Cotswolds from across the AONB and beyond. Over 40 representatives from 25 organisations took part, including:

- Amey PLC (Glos Highways contract)
- Blue Badge Guides
- British Horse Society
- Cotswold Canals Trust
- Cotswold Voluntary Wardens
- Cotswolds Conservation Board
- Gloucestershire County Council
- Gloucestershire Local Access Forum
- Long distance paths (various)
- Mid Cotswold Tracks and Trails Group
- National Trust
- Natural England
- Outdoor Recreation Network
- Ramblers
- South Gloucestershire Council

- University of Gloucestershire
- West Oxfordshire District Council
- Walkers are Welcome
- Worcestershire County Council

Presentations

In order to provide background and stimulate discussion, four case studies were presented by organisations each with a different perspective on the subject [*copies of all presentations are available on request*].

1. William Reddaway, Equestrian: *'How riding and bridleways can add to the offer'*

- An exploration of riding as a sport and leisure activity, looking into the demographic of the riding community, e.g, "More than 80% of riders are women and girls"
- The requirements of riders and the barriers preventing their access, such as road safety and a disjointed bridleway network
- What the AONB could do to transcend these barriers if closer partnerships were formed, such as filling in gaps in the network to create safe circular rides.

2. John Cuthbertson, Director, Disabled Ramblers: *'How access opportunities can be communicated to disabled people'*

- How the organisation currently promotes access to both its members and disabled people across the country, including:
- A wide range of communication tools such as print and digital media and mapping applications such as Viewranger
- Similar methods could be used to cater for disabled users by access managers and other organisations.

3. Prof. Diane Crone, University of Gloucestershire / Interventions4Health: *'Exercise for health: why is being outdoors important and how to get the message out'*

- An evidence based explanation of the problem, looking into what stops people using the outdoors for exercise and the missed potential of health enhancement including apathy and low awareness of opportunities and benefits. E.g only 8% of girls in the 13-15 age group meet the recommended levels of daily physical activity
- The evidence supporting the positive impacts of 'being (active) outdoors' and the benefits both of exercise and of simply being immersed in the natural environment.
- Tips and tools for advocating outdoor recreation and the associated benefits for health and wellbeing, e.g promoting the added value of nature to exercise and specific sport related events such as fun runs and social walks etc.

4. John Sparshatt, Chair, Long Distance Walkers Association: *'Challenges facing promotion and management of long distance paths'*

- How to promote and develop long distance access opportunities using the Six Dales Trail as a case study, identifying the route, communicating enthusiasm and working in partnership to secure funding and
- How to work with a range of partners to provide access improvements such as replacing stiles with gates and effective waymarking
- The requirements of a good long distance trail including scenery, history, signing and interpretation.

Workshops:

Following presentations, delegates took part in one of four discussion groups. Each had a particular question or problem to explore, and each was tasked with reporting back to the conference with three key points from their discussions and *one achievable action* that could be taken as a result.

The reoccurring theme arising from each group was the need for greater cross-Cotswold unity in promoting the access opportunities to those we are trying to reach. Copies of the notes taken by the 'scribe' for each group are available on request, but summaries are as follows:

Group 1. 'The uninitiated' – *how to inspire new audiences to take up the Cotswolds 'access offer'*

- Promotion of wellbeing in the workplace
- Focus on secondary schools
- Use of technology and social networking
- *Work in partnership with other organisations to provide fun promotional events*

Group 2. 'The brand' – *how the Cotswolds 'brand' can be better used to promote outdoor recreation*

- The current brand sells landscape not access and exercise through the imagery it uses
- Cotswold information needs to be more integrated and easily accessible with consistent messages
- New partnerships need to be developed between the private, voluntary and public sectors
- *A single Destination Management Organisation would help to ensure the above, promoting access with a clear classification system linked to intended audiences.*

Group 3. 'The barriers' – *how to break down real and perceived barriers to the Cotswold outdoors*

- Communication is key; used correctly it is the best way to inform people of access opportunities and alter perceptions, with diverse groups linking together to target specific groups
- Cost is a barrier in the AONB. More low-cost accommodation needs to be supported with funding and assistance to overcome planning constraints. There is also a pervasive misconception that the Cotswolds is "posh and not for the likes of me", leading to the full range of excellent access opportunities being missed
- The Cotswold Way circular walks have been a very successful way of attracting new audiences onto access opportunities. The same standard of well-maintained and well signed routes could be applied to other long distance paths in the Cotswolds
- One of the main barriers to access by disabled people is the lack of walk / ramble leaders with the correct level of experience and understanding. *Disabled Ramblers to work with Conservation Board and Voluntary Wardens to provide training on how to lead walks and rambles for people with a range of disabilities.*

Group 4. 'The benefits' – *how to maximize the social, health and economic benefits of access in the Cotswolds*

- Need to reach out to other organisations, with the Conservation Board coordinating. A single DMO for the Cotswolds is a good start

- Interlinking all activities on offer, i.e riding, open days etc and not just walks. E.g change “Walks and Events” guide in Cotswold Lion free newspaper to “What’s On in the Cotswolds”
- Certain opportunities on line can be missed e.g Walks on Wheels and Cotswold Way circular walks, the lack of a strong unified brand exacerbates this
- *Review how activities are publicized, ensuring they can be easily accessed by the target audiences*

Feedback:

General response to the conference was very positive both on the day and afterwards. Delegates derived great value from structured discussion with peers from organisations with differing key interests, and the diversity of those attending helped to keep discussions and outcomes from veering towards a narrow and thus unproductive focus. A selection of post-event feedback is as follows:

- “Thank you for organising an excellent seminar last Friday. It was a good morning from a number of perspectives, especially for someone new to the area.”
- “It was so good to meet a wide range of individuals, all with the same ultimate focus and passion in mind.”
- “All who attended found it both interesting and motivating. It certainly gave me enthusiasm for implementing projects [in my own organisation]”
- “Really enjoyed the conference on Friday morning – some very thought-provoking speakers and discussions.”



ENDS