

Calderdale Council
Draft Rights of Way Improvement Plan

Submission from Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action



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1. Introduction to Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action

This submission is being made by Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action, in response to the draft Rights of Way Improvement Plan prepared by Calderdale MBC and currently under public consultation.

1.1 Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action is a community organisation established in 2006. Its constitution states the following aims:

- *to encourage recreational walking in the Hebden Bridge and Mytholmroyd area, both for local people and visitors*
- *to campaign for better facilities for walkers, including the adequate maintenance of existing footpaths/bridleways and the creation of new footpaths*

In meeting these objectives, Hebden Bridge Walkers Action will as much as possible seek to encourage the use of public transport.

1.2 Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action has direct interest in that part of Calderdale MBC covered by the Hebden Royd Town Council, Erringden Parish Council, Blackshaw Parish Council, Wadsworth Parish Council and Heptonstall Parish Council areas. This comprises a significant area of the borough, stretching, for example, out to the border with Lancashire between the Long Causeway and Crow Hill (near Boulsworth Hill), the boundary with Bradford City Council south of Haworth and Oxenhope, and the boundary with Rochdale metropolitan council at the head of Cragg Vale. It includes the settlements of Hebden Bridge, Mytholmroyd, Cragg Vale, Heptonstall, Old Town and Blackshawhead.

1.3 Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action is concerned to encourage and support walking by both local residents and visitors to the area, and both for recreation and for 'utility' purposes.

In this, we see our role not only as representing the committed ramblers and day-hikers for whom this part of Calderdale offers magnificent walking opportunities

but also in encouraging strolling and short walking, for example for those with mobility difficulties or who want to take gentle exercise as a means to health.

1.4 Since its launch last year, Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action has undertaken a number of concrete actions, designed to further its objectives.

1.4.1 *Walkers are welcome* status. This new community-based accreditation scheme has been pioneered in Hebden Bridge, and has received considerable national attention. A *Walkers' Day* conference held in February 2007 and attended by over 100 participants marked the formal launch of Hebden Bridge as a *Walkers are Welcome* town. *Walkers are Welcome* towns commit to meeting six criteria, including demonstration of local support, demonstration of council support, work to maintain facilities for walkers and encouragement of public transport.

Hebden Bridge's status as a *Walkers are Welcome* town is overseen by the Walkers are Welcome Advisory Board, which has representatives among others from Calderdale MBC, Hebden Royd Town Council, Heptonstall and Blackshaw Parish Councils, Hebden Bridge Business Association, Ramblers' Association and Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action. It is currently chaired by Pam Warhurst, chair of Pennine Prospects.

Mytholmroyd will become a *Walkers are Welcome* town in its own right at a launch event on September 29th.

Currently two other places elsewhere in the country (Moffat and Prestatyn) have also become *Walkers are Welcome* towns. A national conference of towns and villages planning this status is to be held in Hebden Bridge on October 28th.

1.4.2 *Waymarking of three easy to follow routes*. With the active support of Calderdale MBC, Hebden Bridge has developed a set of three waymarked trails from the centre of the town, to Hardcastle Crags, Heptonstall and Stoodley Pike. These trails are intended both for local people and visitors, and have been designed so that they can be followed easily by less confident walkers, without recourse to maps or guides. A map and guide is available, however, from the

Tourist Information Centre for purchase if necessary. Details of the trails are also on the HBWA website.

Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action plans to undertake a field survey shortly, to assess the usage of these trails.

A similar initiative to waymark three trails from the centre of Mytholmroyd is currently underway, and should be completed by the Autumn.

1.4.3. *Marketing Hebden Bridge as a centre for walking.* 25,000 copies of a marketing leaflet *Get out for a walk in Hebden Bridge* have been produced and distributed, primarily in urban areas in West Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and Lancashire.

1.4.4. *Community photographic project.* With grant funding from the Big Lottery Fund, Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action is currently running a schools project, in three local primary schools, to encourage young people to use local rights of way. The project encourages participants to take photographs of flights of stone steps (a distinctive feature of rights of way in the upper Calder valley).

Other members of the community – of all ages - are also encouraged to take part in this project, by submitting their own photographs. At time of writing, half way through the project, over 300 photos have been submitted. All will be displayed in a public exhibition in Hebden Bridge from July 21st-29th.

1.4.5 *Gentle walking.* A project aimed at encouraging walking and strolling as a means to better health is being launched in the summer of 2007.

1.4.6. *Action on rights of way.* Hebden Bridge Walkers Action also sees its role as monitoring local rights of way for problems and obstructions. It has, for example, advised Calderdale Environmental Services of illegally dumped vehicles on the Pennine Way (now resolved by Calderdale). It has also made a detailed submission calling for historic footpaths in Eaves Wood, Heptonstall to be added to the definitive map.

Plans for a major Adopt-a-path initiative, whereby local groups and individuals will be encouraged to monitor path conditions in 1 km grid squares are currently being finalised.

2.1 Response to draft RoW Improvement Plan – general comments

Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action welcomes the work undertaken to produce the draft Rights of Way Improvement Plan. It commends the work of the officers responsible for a comprehensive and detailed report.

2.1.1. Vision statement

Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action welcomes in particular the Vision Statement for Rights of Way, particularly the pledge to develop “a sustainable approach to Rights of Way management, thereby increasing everyone’s opportunities to enjoy access to many parts of Calderdale”.

2.1.2 Implementation of RoW Improvement Plan

Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action notes that, whilst preparation of RoW Improvement Plans is a statutory duty under the Countryside & Rights of Way (CRoW) Act, there is no obligation on councils to fund the improvements identified in the plans.

Response 1: Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action calls on Calderdale MBC to ensure that adequate new funding is made available, to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the RoW Improvement Plan.

2.1.3 Partnership

Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action commends the pledge by Calderdale MBC to work in partnership with stakeholders. It welcomes the promise that “more efficient working and greater access to information in the future will build and maintain good relationships between all concerned in the improvement of our public rights of way”. Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action considers itself one of these stakeholder groups.

Response 2: Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action believes that in the past liaison between Calderdale MBC and rights of way users has not always been as satisfactory as might be desired. It supports the recommendation to relaunch the Countryside Access Liaison Group.

3.1 Response to draft RoW Improvement Plan – detailed comments

3.1.1. Access to information: definitive map

The definitive rights of way map is the key tool in enabling the public to know where they may legally walk. Whilst the public can access the latest version of map (showing recent changes etc) at the council offices, this is by its nature limiting.

There seems to us no technical reason why the definitive map cannot be made available to all users on-line. Since the map includes the official numbering for rights of way, this would also help members of the public wanting to report problems/obstructions.

Response 3: Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action urges that, as a major priority, the definitive rights of way map is as soon as possible made available for consultation on line.

3.1.2 Maintenance and enforcement

Walkers, particularly occasional or unconfident walkers, need to be able to set off using rights of way confident that the footpath or bridleway is in adequate condition for their walk to be completed successfully.

The condition of rights of way is monitored as part of the Best Value process (performance indicator BV178) and submitted to the Audit Commission. Figures for BV178 for 2005-2006 unfortunately show Calderdale MBC in a disappointing light, when compared with most other metropolitan councils. Latest figures place Calderdale in 27th out of 36 authorities, with 45% of rights of way in the borough

deemed to be 'not easy to use'. Calderdale's performance has improved considerably since 2003-4, though the latest figures show a decline on 2004-5.

Whilst the routine maintenance and enforcement work on existing rights of way is not in itself an issue for the RoW Improvement Plan, clearly steps do need to be taken to remedy the condition of those paths and bridleways deemed 'not easy to use' as part of the more strategic work in improving the rights of way network. Maintaining rights of way in usable condition is, of course, a statutory obligation on the council.

Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action hopes that its forthcoming Adopt-a-path initiative will help, by utilising the resources of the broad walking community in identifying and reporting problems. It hopes to work closely with the Rights of Way team at Calderdale, to ensure that this work is done in the most helpful way.

There are a number of practical steps which, in the opinion of Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action, Calderdale could take.

Response 4: An easy to use form for submitting problems/obstructions on rights of way should be made available on the Calderdale website. Printed versions of the form should also be made widely available, for example through libraries and information centres.

Response 5: Identified problems/obstructions on individual rights of way should be notified on line on the Calderdale website, together with any steps being taken to deal with them, so that members of the public are able to be fully aware of the progress being taken in rendering the rights of way fully usable again.

Response 6: Members of the public submitting details of problems/obstructions should receive an initial acknowledgement by post or email within ten working days. They should be notified of progress at least every three months, as well as when the problem identified is deemed to have been overcome or rectified.

3.1.3 Other users of rights of way

Whilst primarily concerned with walkers' needs, Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action in general supports where appropriate the upgrading of footpaths to bridleways, to enable cyclists and horse-riders to benefit from a wider choice of routes.

We can confirm that the illegal riding of motor bikes (trail bikes) is a problem in several parts of the borough, including to our knowledge Black Hameldon (Hoof Stones Height) and Dove Stones (Boulsworth plateau) both on the Lancashire border and Rishworth moor. Hebden Bridge Walkers Action is pleased to see this problem highlighted in the RoW Improvement Plan and would welcome better enforcement measures taken.

3.1.4 Reviewing the definitive map

Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action warmly welcomes the pledge that "Calderdale Council will continue to actively encourage claims from members of the public" for additions to the definitive map of rights of way.

Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action has already led a workshop (as part of the Feb 2007 Walkers' Day) on unrecorded paths (lost ways), and is now working with HB Local History Society with the view to undertaking research work, which we hope to be able to undertake in partnership with Calderdale's own specialist staff.

Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action has already submitted a detailed dossier (March 2007) drawing attention to a number of well-used paths in Eaves Wood, Heptonstall parish, which are not currently shown as rights-of way. The land in this instance is owned by Calderdale MBC. We hope that the status of these paths as rights of way can rapidly be confirmed.

Response 7: Calderdale MBC should set a positive example in relation to paths used by the public on its own land which are not on the definitive map, and should move to ensure that these paths are designated as rights of way, simply and quickly by landowner agreement.

Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action is aware that in most cases designation of new rights of way cannot be undertaken simply by landowner consent, and that the process is necessarily a legalistic one. However, the very lengthy delays (often of several years) from the time when a formal claim is lodged until the time when the claim is finally met or rejected is an enormous disincentive to members of the public and community groups, particularly as the process of making a claim in the first place usually involves lengthy work in collecting evidence of past usage.

Response 8: Details of claims lodged for paths to be included as definitive rights of way should be available on the Calderdale website, together with regularly updated information on progress being made to investigate the claim.

We wish to credit the work undertaken by Calderdale officers who do the work of investigating claims and we acknowledge the heavy workload they currently face. However we are aware of at least two cases in the Hebden Bridge area where claims for designation of paths have already been 'held in the queue' for several years. We are concerned to ensure that people in this situation feel adequately updated by Calderdale on the progress of these claims.

Response 9: Individuals and organisations who lodge claims should be contacted at least every four months, to advise them of what progress if any is being made in relation to the claim.

3.1.5 Creating new paths

The extensive network of footpaths and rights of way in Calderdale is an important part of the history and culture of the area. Paths enjoyed today were in many cases created as packhorse routes across the moors, as short-cuts used by mill-workers to get to and from work, and as routes for farmers and local residents in times past going about their everyday lives.

It is important that the rights of way network is not preserved 'in aspic', but remains a living and changing reality. Whilst existing rights of way need to be

looked after and maintained, it is also important to pro-actively seek opportunities to create new rights of way, meeting the needs of today's residents in Calderdale.

Response 10: Research should be taken to identified 'missing links', where efforts can be taken to create new rights of way. Adequate funding should be sought to enable ground work to be undertaken and , if appropriate, compensation to be paid.

Response 11: There should be particular focus on opening up as much as possible routes along river valleys, particularly Hebden Water (extension of riverside walk in town centre, better access to Hardcastle Crag) and Elphin Brook in Mytholmroyd.

Response 12: Appropriate use should be made of the opportunities for planning gain when planning applications for developments are received.

Response 13: It is particularly important that schoolchildren are given every opportunity to walk to school, and attention should be given to ways of improving access on foot to schools. Colden school in particular would benefit from the creation and improvement of footpaths in its immediate vicinity.

3.1.6 Permissive paths

Hebden Bridge Walkers Action supports the RoW Improvement Plan aim to "review all permissive path agreements, and get legal advice about how best to formulate a more satisfactory agreement for future use".

Response 14: Whilst permissive paths are better than nothing at all, we are strongly in favour wherever possible of such paths being formally designated as rights of way. We encourage Calderdale to work with landowners to arrange, where possible, for existing concessionary paths to be reclassified as formal rights of way. We note that this will involve

Calderdale taking on responsibility for maintenance of these routes, and we note that this has funding implications which need to be met.

3.1.7 Open access land

Many of Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action members were actively engaged in lobbying for the access rights to open country introduced by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act. We commend Calderdale for the work it has already done in signing access land. We are concerned that grant aid from Natural England via the Access Management Grant Scheme has recently not been available.

The CRoW Act permits landowners to voluntarily dedicate land as access land, and we note that this power has been used, for example, by the Woodland Trust and Forestry Commission to give public access to their woodlands.

Response 15: We encourage Calderdale wherever possible to dedicate the woodlands it owns itself as access land, using the CRoW Act powers. In particular, we would like to see Eaves Wood and the woods bordering Colden Water dedicated.

Response 16: Calderdale should also seek to work with other landowners, particularly owners of woodlands, for land in the borough to be dedicated as open access land under CRoW.

3.1.8 Registered commons

We agree with the RoW Improvement Plan that there is little information available about which land is registered urban or rural common.

Response 17: We propose that registered common land in Calderdale is identified on Calderdale's website.

Response 18: We are concerned that fencing work in recent years has had the effect of severely restricting public access to some urban common land. We are particularly aware of problems with fencing between the Hebden Bridge/Oxenhope road and the urban common land of Cock

Hill/Flaigh Hill. Calderdale should have procedures in place to remedy problems of public access to urban common.

3.1.9 Other proposals

Hebden Bridge received national attention some years ago when an area of hillside near Windsor Rd, used for the public for many years for recreation, was formally dedicated as an urban 'village green'.

Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action believes there is considerable potential for other areas of urban land used in this way for public purposes to become 'village greens'.

Response 19: The RoW Improvement Plan and strategy should include specific reference to the potential of designating new 'urban village greens'.

The Countryside Agency (now Natural England) has encouraged the designation of minor country roads as 'Quiet Lanes', with motorists advised to drive slowly and look out for horse-riders and walkers. This idea has been followed, for example, by Lancashire CC (in the Forest of Bowland area) and by Derbys CC/Peak District National Park Authority.

Response 20: Whilst where possible it is preferable to separate walkers and horse-riders from motor vehicles (for example by creating new paths close to roads), Calderdale should also investigate the potential of designating little-used country roads in the borough as 'Quiet Lanes'.

4.1 Priorities

The RoW Improvement Plan asks for responses on the most important actions.

Of the nineteen formal Responses outlined in this paper, we would identify the following as our top four priorities, in broadly equal importance.

- *Response 1: Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action calls on Calderdale MBC to ensure that adequate new funding is made available, to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the RoW Improvement Plan.*
- *Response 3: Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action urges that, as a major priority, the definitive rights of way map is as soon as possible made available for consultation on line.*
- *Response 4: An easy to use form for submitting problems/obstructions on rights of way should be made available on the Calderdale website. Printed versions of the form should also be made widely available, for example through libraries and information centres.*
- *Response 10: Research should be taken to identified 'missing links', where efforts can be taken to create new rights of way. Adequate funding should be sought to enable ground work to be undertaken and , if appropriate, compensation to be paid.*

5.1 About this submission

This submission is also being made publicly available, on Hebden Bridge Walkers' Action website www.hbwalkersaction.org.uk, to members of the town and parish councils, and to members of Hebden Bridge Walkers are Welcome Advisory Board.

[Photo on cover shows part of the newly waymarked trail between Hebden Bridge and Heptonstall]