

Taunton Deane Ramblers
Annual General Meeting – 25th November 2022
Footpath Secretary's Report

This is my eighth annual report as Footpath Secretary since taking over the role in January 2015.

As has now been the case for some years, there have been very few statutory consultations from Somerset County Council on changes to rights of way. There have also been relatively few consultations from Somerset West and Taunton Council on planning applications.

There have not been any meetings of Group Footpath Secretaries in Somerset since before the pandemic, so we wait to see whether these will now resume.

Proposals for the A358 continue to move forward through the statutory process. The route lies within Taunton Deane and South Somerset Groups. A further response to these was submitted by the Area Footpath Secretary, Les Stather, during the year. Unfortunately at the moment, the major concerns regarding rights of way with Taunton Deane, where several footpaths are proposed to be stopped up without reasonable alternatives, have not been addressed. It appears that the aim is simply to reduce costs by not providing bridges or underpasses, and instead to sever the paths. Ramblers will continue to object to what is being proposed, particularly in respect of footpath T22/1 at Thornwater Farm, and T31/27 at Bath House Farm.

Another proposal with significant implications for walkers, if it is allowed, is a current planning application for a solar farm at Preston Bowyer, across the route of public footpaths WG7/29 and T13/10, to which I have submitted an objection. Given the scale of the impact, I would be disappointed if this were to be permitted.

In partnership with the British Horse Society, Ramblers has decided to begin the process under Section 130A of the Highways Act to require Somerset County Council to secure reopening of bridleway T2/11 in Bickenhall parish. This has remained blocked despite the Planning Inspectorate deciding a decade ago that the route should remain on the definitive map. The Group Secretary and myself recently walked the route, as far as this was possible, and took photographs to be used as evidence.

There has also been a consultation over the proposed closure of footpath WG17/17 that crosses the railway at Longforth Farm, Wellington, although as the housing to which this relates has already been built, with its associated safety concerns over the use of a railway crossing, 'consultation' in my view serves little purpose.

As in previous years, I have been contacted on a number of occasions by people who had encountered issues with rights of way. I have been taking up these where appropriate with Somerset County Council. Unfortunately, in the absence of more resources, asking SCC to expedite an action that has already been raised with them is in my opinion, of limited value.

I have been a Committee member for 10 years, and have decided that now is an appropriate time to step down. During some of this time, I was also the Group's representative on Somerset Area, served as Area Secretary and Area Chair, and in 2019 was one of the two Somerset delegates to Ramblers General Council. Since I retired my life has tended to move in a different direction, and I feel it's time to hand the baton to those who come next.

I'd like to conclude by thanking all those who have been on the Committee during my period of service for their friendship and support.

Philip Bisatt
Footpath Secretary