

REPORT OF ACCESS & RIGHTS OF WAY MANAGER

SUBJECT: REVIEW OF PUBLIC RIGHTS OF WAY AND ACCESS FURNITURE SUPPLIED BY THE NATIONAL PARK WOODLAND CENTRE

Purpose of Report

For information, to advise members of the outcome of the review of public rights of way and access furniture supplied by the National Park Authority Woodland Centre. The report also outlines the new design and specification of furniture and indicates associated cost savings.

Introduction

In 2011 the Members of this National Park Authority and the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority (BBNPA) initiated a joint scrutiny review of the public rights of way service. The Members' Joint Scrutiny Panel published its report of the review in 2012 together with an Action Plan. The Recreation and Tourism Review Committee has been monitoring the implementation of the report recommendations.

Following further meetings with officers of BBNPA to investigate in more detail comparative management and expenditure on public rights of way, it was decided to mount an internal review of public rights of way management to see where efficiencies could be made, particularly in respect of the supply and design of access furniture (stiles, signposts, gates, etc.).

Review of Access Furniture Design & Specification

A review of the specification and design of access furniture has now been completed and a revised specification has been attached as an appendix to this report. As explained at a previous meeting of this committee, green oak is still the main material used because of its durability, especially in contact with the ground; untreated larch is also used where ground contact is not an issue. The use of green oak also accords with the National Park Authority's policy for sustainable use of native hardwood timber.

Each year the National Park Authority sources most of its access furniture from the Woodland Centre at internal discounted rates. The savings achieved by the new design and specifications range from 5% for gateposts; 6% for signposts; 7% for kissing gate kits; 20% for stile kits and a major saving on way marker posts.

While some of the savings may appear to be modest, they will yield significant savings when consideration is given to the volume of furniture that is ordered each year. At present a typical annual order for access furniture is worth just under £16,000.00 and is itemised below. It demonstrates that an overall saving of 12% can be achieved on design modifications alone.

Inland Public Rights of Way; Typical Annual Timber Requirement					
Item	Number	Unit cost	Total	Revised Unit Cost	Revised Cost Total
Sign post (1mortice)	70	£37.00	£2590.00	35.00	2450.00
Pedestrian Symbols	60	£5.00	£300.00	5.00	300.00
Horse rider Symbols	15	5.00	£75.00	5.00	75.00
Way marker	60	£25.00	£1500.00	2.00	120.00
Inland Stile Kit	10	£109.00	£1090.00	87.10	871.00
Stile grab post	5	£3.00	£15.00	3.00	15.00
Gatepost 5"x 5"	45	£38.00	£1710.00	36.00	1620.00
Gatepost 6"x 6"	45	£52.00	£2340.00	50.00	2250.00
Larch Gate Basic 4'	3	£77.00	£231.00	77.00	231.00
Larch Gate Basic 5'	20	£79.00	£1580.00	79.00	1580.00
Larch Gate 10'	3	£149.00	£447.00	149.00	447.00
Oak gate 5'	16	£146.00	£2336.00	146.00	2336.00
Kissing gate kits	5	£103.00	£515.00	96.62	483.10
Step board	110	£10.00	£1100.00	10.00	1100.00
Stile Grab post	5	£3.00	£15.00	3.00	15.00
Softwood pegs	5 packs	£25.00	£125.00	25.00	125.00
		TOTAL	£15,969.00		£14,081.10

The above table does not account for the savings that can also be achieved where the dimensions of standard items are reduced. These would include:

- Savings of 20% can be achieved where shorter lengths of signposts can be ordered. Signposts are currently 2.5m in length and could be 2m lengths if installed on hedgebanks and slopes.
- Similarly, pedestrian gates can also be ordered at minimum widths of 1m (3'6") rather than 1.53m (5') where local circumstances permit and access for mowers is not an issue.
- Natural, round gate posts (an oak trunk with a pointed end) could account for up to 20% of future orders and cost only £12 each, they do, however, require a tractor and post knocker for installation.

The degree of these additional savings will only become apparent once surveys have indicated where it would be practical to install such furniture the landscape.

Comparisons

Other National Park Authorities and local authorities in Wales use a variety of materials for PROW furniture. It is common for gates to be of galvanised steel rather than timber. Treated softwood is also used for stiles, signposts and gates with many highway authorities in particular opting for metal poles and plastic signs. Recycled plastic has also been used but has tended to be too expensive by comparison to other materials such as railway sleepers. The National Park Authority tries to avoid using treated softwood, plastic and metal for PROW furniture as this does not accord with our Timber Procurement Policy which seeks to minimise the environmental impact of the timber used and to maximise the benefits of using locally sourced sustainable timber. The use of native timber in a largely unspoilt natural landscape also adds to the quality of the visitor experience.

Options

The scrutiny review provided officers with an opportunity to review the use of oak for access furniture and the merits of using treated softwood as alternatives. Oak is roughly three times more costly but is considered more durable than treated softwood and provides a good use of Welsh timber from sustainably managed sources. The consistent use of timber on PROW also complements the high quality of our natural landscape and adds to the visitor experience.

Financial considerations

Staff salaries account for the majority of costs in managing PROW and are generally static so any saving that can be made on the procurement of materials is to be welcomed. Within the context of the Authority's Timber Procurement Policy it is evident that a significant saving of at least 12% can be made on the annual timber purchase for PROW. The use of timber from Welsh woodlands benefits the local economy and creates a market for oak in particular, value adding to small diameter timber that may otherwise be sold as firewood.

Compliance

The Members' Scrutiny Review of PROW demonstrated close compliance of this function with the second Park purpose and associated duty, providing unrivalled opportunities for enjoyment and helping to foster socio-economic wellbeing of communities. The management of PROW is also fundamental to the National Park Management Plan and specifically Outcome 2 of the Corporate Strategy. The sustainable use of native hardwoods also helps to implement Outcome 1 as it is directly related to the conservation of woodlands and complies with the Park Authority's Timber Procurement Policy.

Risk considerations

The management of PROW relies on sustained funding in order to meet the Authority's statutory responsibilities. There is an element of risk in reducing PROW expenditure – particularly in relation to safety and the quality of the walking experience. Signposts are a legal requirement where PROW meets roads and way marking guides visitors along routes and helps to minimise trespass. Well maintained gates and stiles balance the ease of access of users with the need to ensure that farm boundaries remain stockproof. The importance of the PROW network to local residents, visitors and the local economy is evident and a major consideration when allocating resources.

Human Rights/Equality issues

The Authority has made great progress in adapting the network of public rights of way for use by people with mobility problems. By making paths easier to use we can encourage greater participation and the demand for gates in particular now greatly exceeds that for stiles.

Biodiversity implications/Sustainability appraisal

By only sourcing timber from sustainably managed woodlands of Wales the National Park Authority is reducing its carbon footprint in terms of the transport of materials and also helps to assist the management of nature conservation in woodlands.

Welsh Language statement

The proposals comply with the requirements of the Authority's Welsh Language Policy.

Conclusion

This review of the design and specification of access furniture has been a timely and useful exercise. It has clearly demonstrated that efficiencies can be achieved in terms of reduced costs, without compromising the standard of access furniture and importantly, such revised practice fully complies with the Timber Procurement Policy. The full extent of cost savings will only become apparent once the revised specifications have been adopted and the choice of materials and design will now be kept under continuous review.

Recommendation

That Members note the report and recommend to the National Park Authority that the new design and specification of PROW furniture be adopted by officers.

Background Documents

*Report of Scrutiny Panel 2012
National Park Authority Timber Procurement Policy*

(For further information, please contact Anthony Richards 4849)

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Revised design & specification of PROW access furniture supplied by National Park Woodland Centre; October 2013
(Please note that this does not apply to the Pembrokeshire Coast Path National Trail)

1. Signposts

Currently oak; weather topped; 4"x4" and 2.5m, unplanned and morticed. Cost £37.00

Continue to use oak signposts as they are much cheaper than highway road sign (metal pole/plastic finger).

New revised spec:

- Use only oak (more durable in ground)
- 4"x 4"
- Single slant cut, draining away from mortice rather than weather topped.
- Variation in lengths between 2 & 2.5m (Area Warden Managers to determine quantity)
- Continue unplanned
- Continue morticed (rebate discounted as not as durable and just as much labour involved).
- Cost £35.00

Justification – cost saving & ability to utilise welsh origin timber

2. Waymarker posts

Currently oak unplanned, 4"x 4", weather topped and 1.8m length. Cost £25.00

New revised spec:

- Chestnut
- Half round unplanned fence post
- Lengths vary between 1.5 & 1.8m
- Cost £2.00

Justification: significant cost saving, durable in ground, easy to install (driven in rather than dug in) more suited to rural landscape.

3. Step boards

Currently unplanned oak. Cost £10.00

Continue with oak and same dimensions.

Continue to use stock of recycled plastic. Stone steps are ideal in some locations where suitable stone is available in immediate vicinity of path.

Justification - oak still much cheaper than recycled plastic boards; good use of native oak.

4. Gates

Currently various widths in larch and oak. 5' width for bridleway is generally used on public footpaths as well (to allow mower access). Range of costs depending on widths.

New revised spec:

- Presumption will be that all PROW gates are to be made from untreated softwood (douglas/larch) unless otherwise stated in purchase order.
- Public footpath gates will be 1m (3'6") width (British Standard minimum width compliant) unless otherwise stated in purchase order to accommodate mowers, etc.
- Bridleway gates will be 1.53m (5') width and be made of oak to ensure they can close under their own weight.

Justification: cost saving, ability to utilise variety of timber, softwood and hard wood.

5. Gate posts

Currently oak weather topped; cut and unplanned on four sides; 6"x6" hanging posts and 5"x5" latch posts. Cost £52.00 and £38.00 respectively.

New revised spec:

- Continue to use oak due to ground contact.
- Single slant cut rather than weather topped.
- Retain dimensions of 6"x6" hanging posts and 5"x5" latch posts as standard but order 5"X 5" hanging posts for 5' wide gates and smaller widths.
- Costs £50.00 and £36.00

Where access can be arranged for a tractor and post hole knocker, the following gate posts can be used:

- Unfinished, in the round, oak pointed posts of varying dimensions.
- Cost £12.00

Justification: cost saving, durability in ground, good use of native oak.

6. Stiles

Currently oak, weather topped posts; 4"x4" and morticed; oak rails, step supports and step boards. One post longer to act as a grab post. Cost £109.00.

New revised spec:

Posts:

- Oak
- 4"x4"
- Single slant cut rather than weather topped, one longer to act as grab post.

- Continue morticed (rebate discounted as not as durable and just as much labour involved).
- Continue oak step supports

Rails and step board:

- Same dimensions
- Softwood rather than oak
- Cost £87.10

Justification: cost saving, avoids waste of oak by milling smaller lengths of timber for rails.

7. Kissing gates fences

Currently oak morticed posts and oak or softwood rails. Cost £103.00

New revised spec:

- Continue with oak morticed posts
- Use only softwood rails
- Cost £96.62

Justification: cost saving, avoids waste of oak by milling smaller lengths of timber for rails.