Working on improving access in the future – new farming subsidies

While we are faced with a national pandemic and restrictions on access to our countryside to counteract the spread of Covid-19, the BMC is still working on improving public access beyond 2020.

For more than 40 years, the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has dictated how farmers manage their land in England. Currently farmers receive around €2.5 billion in annual subsidies which is made up of a Basic Payment Scheme and then farmers can apply to join an agri-environment scheme (currently Countryside Stewardship in England and Glastir in Wales).

Our departure from the EU now provides us with a unique opportunity to redesign agricultural policies which more affectively tackle protecting our natural environment, while supporting our farming sector. It is hoped that a new Environmental Land Management (ELM) Scheme based on the principle of ‘public money for public goods’, will put English farmers in the best possible position to do this.

The Agriculture Bill will provide the underpinning legislative framework for the scheme, but the details of how farmers will be paid and what for are still to be decided. The introduction of a new scheme presents the biggest opportunity for improvements to access to our countryside / green spaces since the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW Act): in England, 69% of our landscape is farmed. The BMC, along with many other recreational organisations, is therefore currently making the case to the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) that opportunities to integrate purely environmental benefits as part of ELM, should be viewed alongside wider public benefits such as public access.

The recent coronavirus pandemic highlights starkly just how important it is for people to access the natural environment but a large percentage still rely on their car in order to be able to do so. It is clear that an accessible network that everyone can join from their front door should be a national objective.

In February 2020, DEFRA published a policy discussion document setting out the government’s initial thinking on how ‘public money for public goods’ might be supported and sets out how farmers, foresters and other land managers could secure financial reward in return for delivering environmental benefits and public goods which currently include:

• clean and plentiful water

• clean air

• protection from and mitigation of environmental hazards

• mitigation of and adaptation to climate change

• thriving plants and wildlife

• beauty, heritage and engagement

In many agricultural sectors there has been expansion and intensification of production. This has driven significant decline in the health of our environment. This is illustrated through the 57.2% decline, on average, in the farmland bird index between 1970 and 2018. 10%3 of the UK’s overall greenhouse gas emissions also come from the agricultural sector.

The BMC welcomes the direction of the proposed ELM and recognises the real need for delivering actions that improve and enhance our natural environment but are disappointed that public access to our farming environment is not explicitly referenced in the discussion document and is not referenced in any of the design principles. This is also an important public good, allowing more people to engage and understand the natural environment around them and is set out as one of the ten purposes in the Agriculture Bill for which payment should be considered.

We have therefore strongly made this case in our draft response to the discussion document which is currently suspended as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. In essence the BMC would like to see farmers being paid for access in each of the three tiers being proposed, despite the fact that the current proposals suggest that payment for access might only be made under Tier 2:

Tier 1 should include a payment option whereby any landowner / land manager can **improve existing ROW across their land** (beyond the statutory requirements) by making simple upgrades (e.g.; improvements to gates so they are more accessible, improvements to path surfaces and clear waymarking).

Tier 2 should include a payment **for granting new access rights and enhancing public access** through a more joined up rights of way network (either permissive or permanent, the latter is preferable). There are many places which are of value for public access in general and for climbing in particular, which are currently hard to access. The BMC also believes that users groups should be consulted as they have the best knowledge of where new access is required and this would also ensure that public money is only spent on creating new access or improving existing access where there is a clear demand or need.

Tier 3 presents the opportunity for payments to make **widescale enhancements to our rights of way network across the landscape** involving multiple landowners and a landscape-scale view of improvements which are of real benefit to both the environment and to the public.

The BMC’s draft recommendations around each of the tiers may change once we learn more about the details of the future ELM. Assuming the transition period to a new system (and proposals set out in the current discussion document) will not be affected by C-19, it is the intention for ELM to be delivered in late 2024. The BMC will of course respond in full as and when the consultation re-merges.

While this consultation mainly relates to England, a similar process is also underway in Wales. Called “Sustainable Farming and our Land”, the BMC submitted a response to this back in the autumn 2019 which again highlighted the need for better support for low intensity farming, the introduction and enforcement of nitrate vulnerable zones to protect water catchments, and from the BMC’s perspective, financial inducements to landowners for improvements to existing access or to create new access with input from user groups. We also stated that landowners who are proven to block or impede lawful access to rights of ways or open access land should be penalised and not receive any state aid until those unlawful obstructions are removed.

While some of the access staff have been furloughed, rest assured that we are still working on your behalf to improve access. We are in regular contact with our colleagues at other recreational and environmental organisations and we are on weekly calls with Natural England, DEFRA and Natural Resource Wales to ensure we keep you up to date with the current C-19 situation and how this affects your ability to access our countryside. We imagine that once restrictions are lifted, access to the countryside and crags will resume, albeit with the potential for being even more popular than ever!