



Park Wood path route changes: a summary of consultation responses

March 2022

Forward

We are the Environment Agency. We protect and improve the environment.

We help people and wildlife adapt to climate change and reduce its impacts, including flooding, drought, sea level rise and coastal erosion.

We improve the quality of our water, land and air by tackling pollution. We work with businesses to help them comply with environmental regulations. A healthy and diverse environment enhances people's lives and contributes to economic growth.

We can't do this alone. We work as part of the Defra group (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs), with the rest of government, local councils, businesses, civil society groups and local communities to create a better place for people and wildlife.

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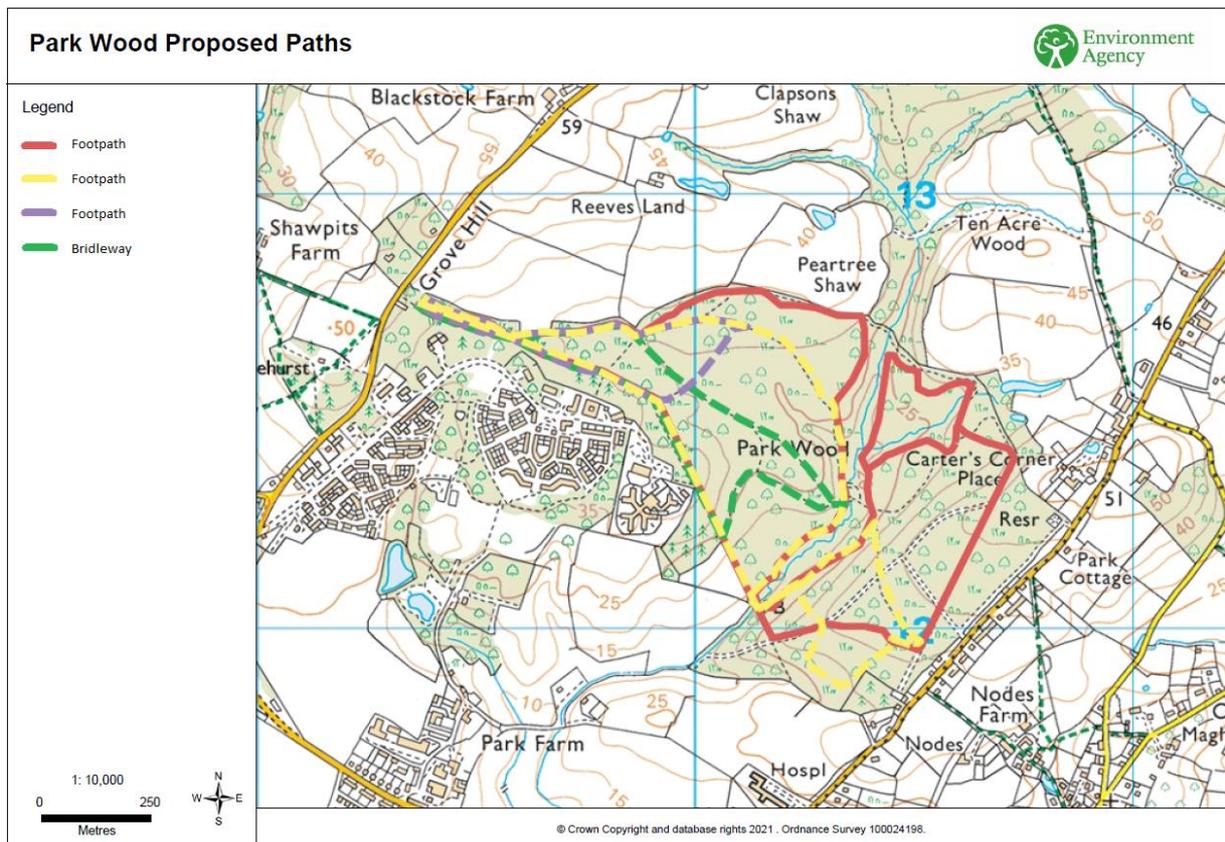
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1. Introduction

As part of the ongoing work to improve Park Wood, the Environment Agency will be installing new way markers on the footpaths within the wood.

The Environment Agency sought views on whether the proposed path routes were suitable for regular users of the woodland.



2. How we ran the consultation

We ran a formal online consultation for 8 weeks from 2 December 2021 to 27 January 2022.

The online consultation was hosted on our [Citizen Space consultation platform](#) with detailed information, frequently asked questions and an online survey. Hard copies of the survey were also available for people to download and send in.

We emailed the following interested parties: Nus Ghani MP for Wealden, East Sussex County Council Rights of Way team, Hellingly Parish Council, Wealden District Council, Forestry Commission, Sussex Wildlife Trust, The Woodland Trust, The Friends of Park Wood Hellingly, South East Water, The British Horse Society, Sussex Bat Group and Sussex Ornithological Society.

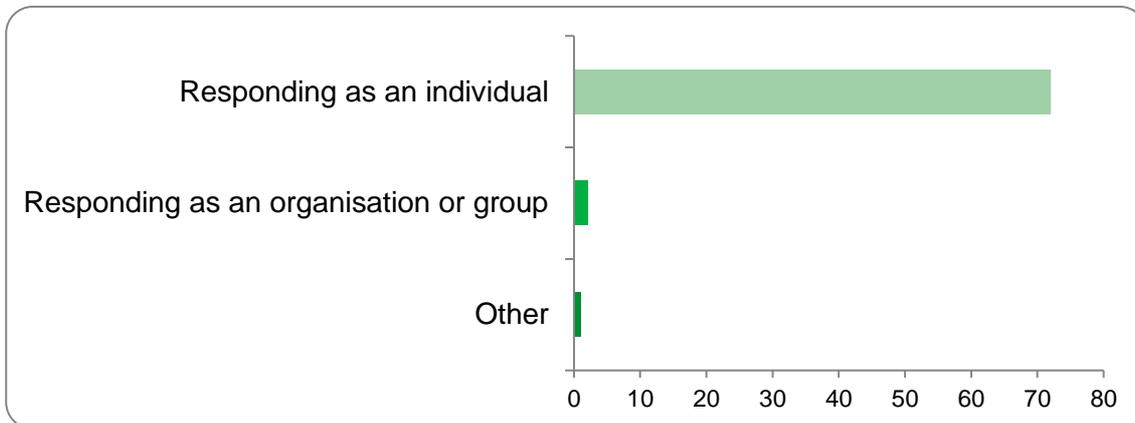
We also tweeted about the consultation on 2 December 2021 @EnvAgencySE

Posters were displayed in the car park at the wood advertising the consultation.

3. Summary of consultation responses

We received online responses from the consultation on Citizen Space, by email and post.

We received 76 responses in total, 75 via Citizen Space and 1 by post. Of these responses, 72 were from individuals, 3 were from an organisation or group 1 was from other.



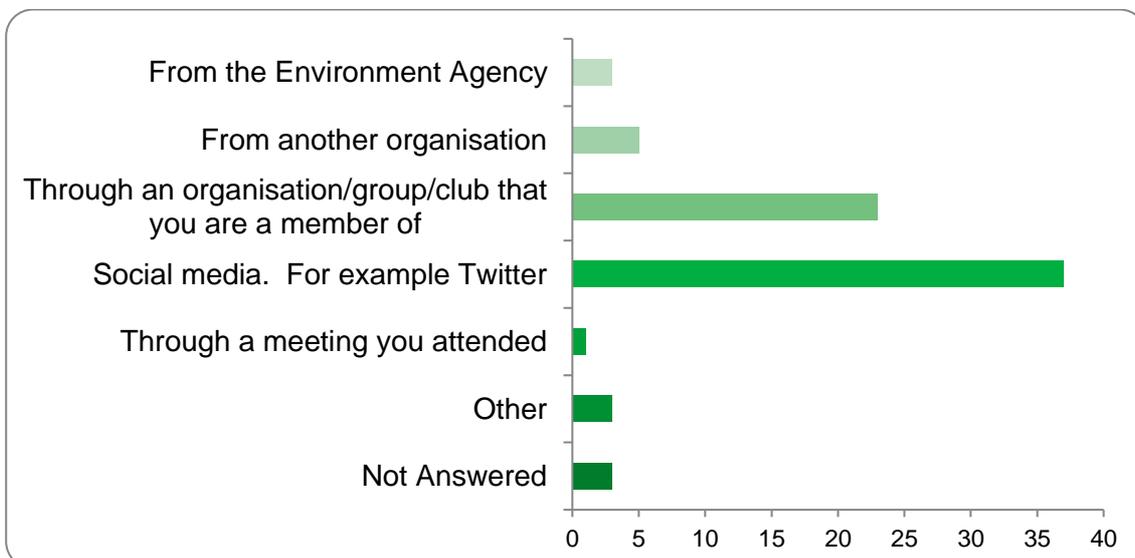
4. Responses to questions

The consultation included 11 consultation questions, as well as the opportunity to submit more general comments on the proposed approach. Questions 1 and 2 asked for the respondent's name and email address. Question 3 asked if they were responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation or group. This is summarised in Section 3. Question 4 asked if we could publish their response. Responses received to the remaining questions is summarised below.

Question 5

How did you find about this consultation?

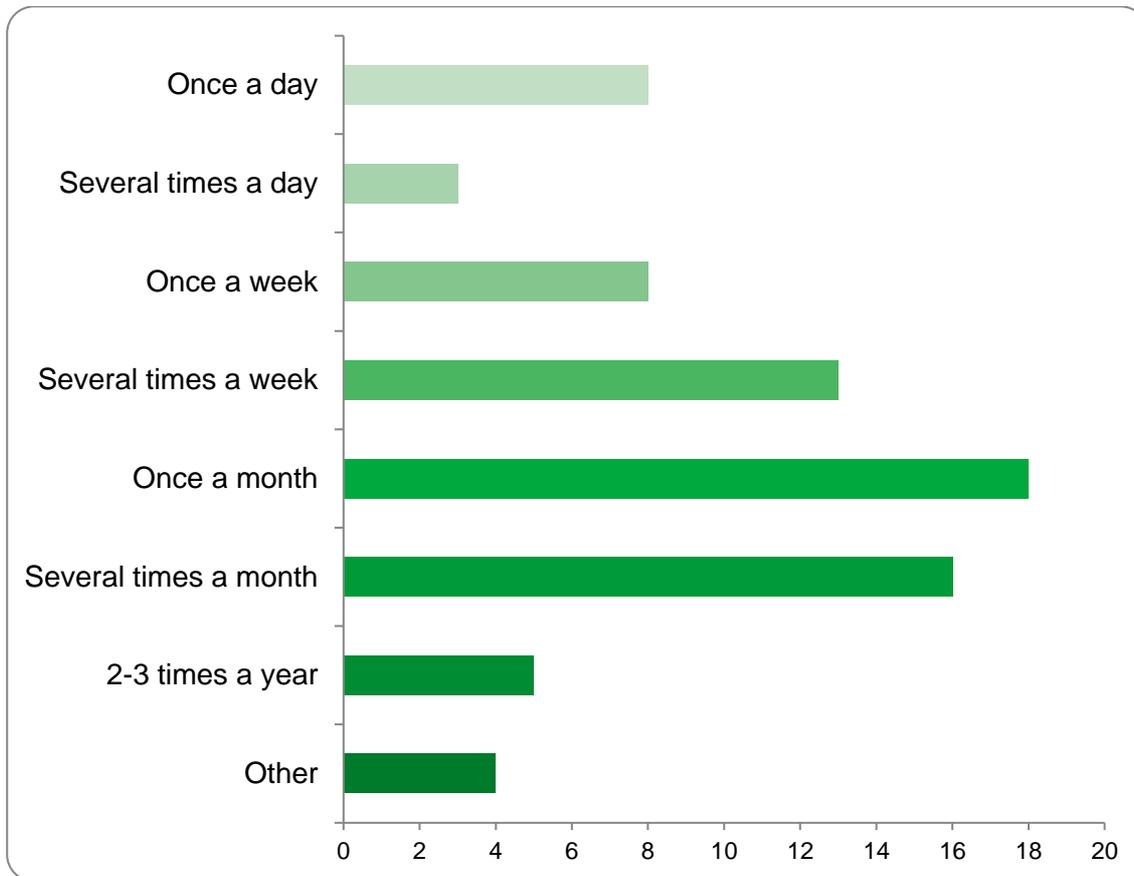
We received 72 responses to this question.



Question 6

How often do you visit Park Wood?

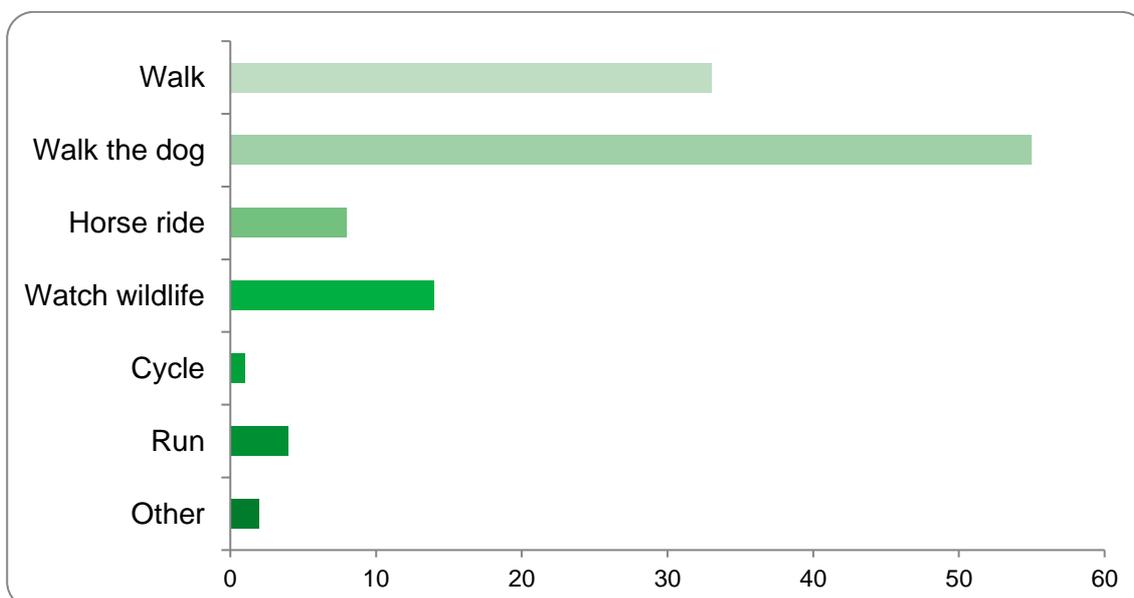
We received 75 responses to this question.



Question 7

When you visit Park Wood, is it to:

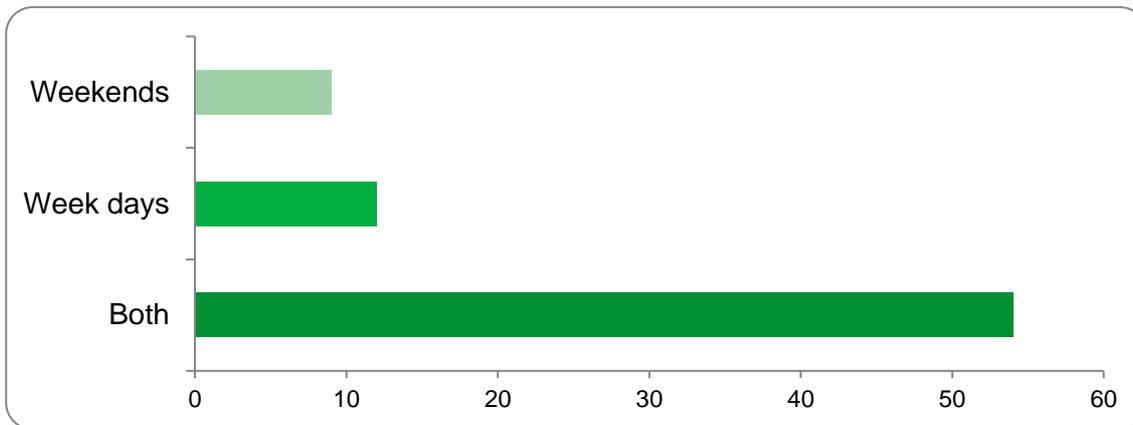
We received 75 responses to this question.



Question 8

When do you usually visit Park Wood?

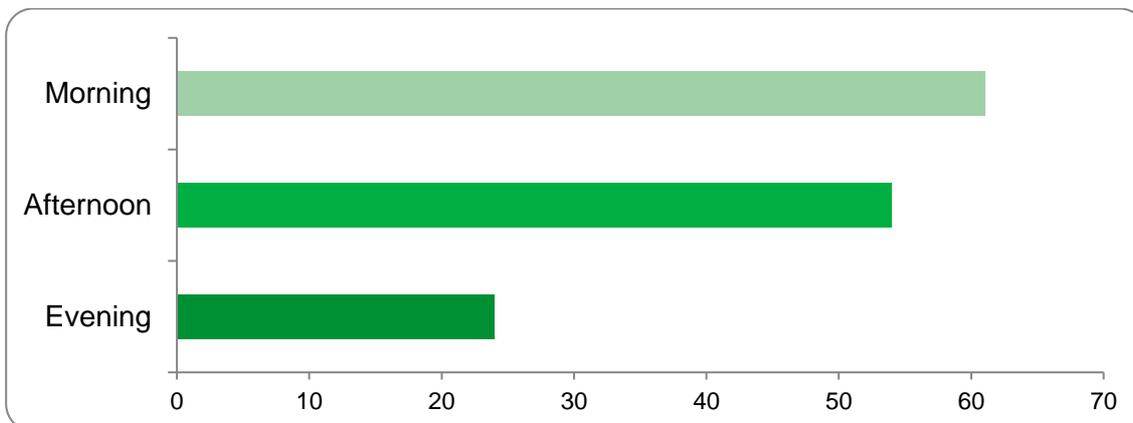
We received 75 responses to this question.



Question 9

What time of day do you visit?

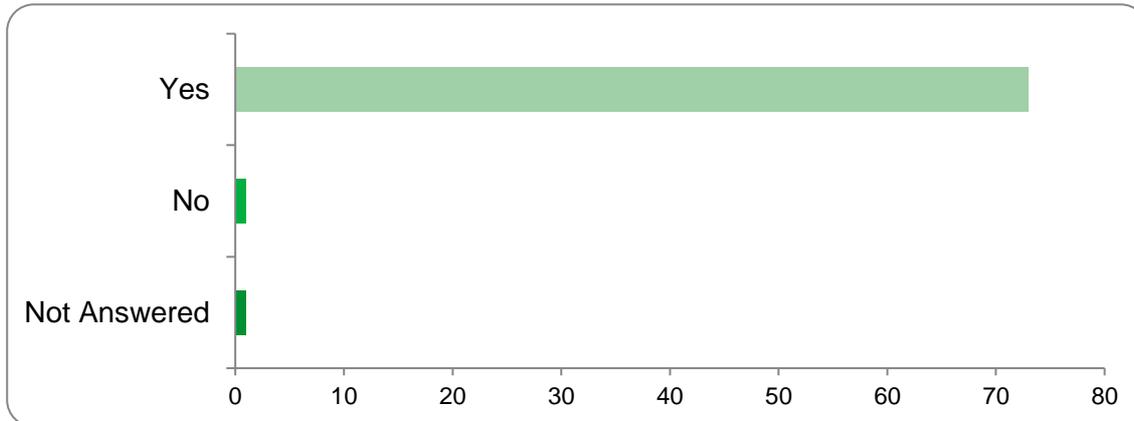
We received 75 responses to this question.



Question 10

Will you use any of the paths proposed?

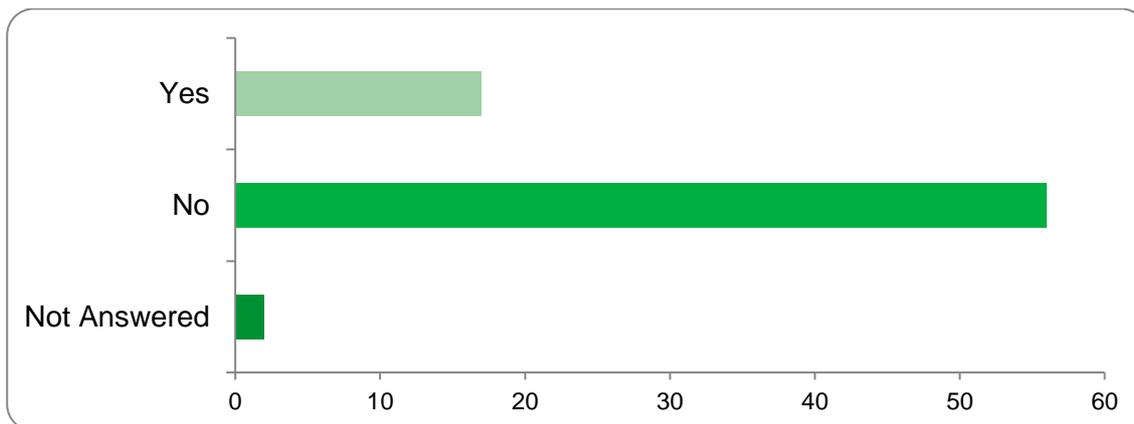
We received 74 responses to this question.



Question 11

Are you aware of any paths on this proposal which are not suitable, or are inaccessible?

We received 73 responses to this question.



If yes, which paths and why?

There were 16 written responses to this question. We have grouped these responses by theme together with the responses we received to Question 12, as they covered some of the same themes. See section 6.

Question 12

Do you have any other feedback about this proposal?

There were 50 written responses to this question. Together with the responses we received to Question 11, we have grouped them by theme. See section 6.

6. Summary of main themes and our response

Summary

- There was strong opposition to the bridges not being replaced or maintained.
- There was valuable feedback on alternative funding mechanisms for bridge replacement/maintenance.
- There was good support for the paths to be well-signposted and for the wood to be accessible for all.
- There was support for the ancient woodland to be enjoyed as a wood without too much human intervention.
- There was feedback that the path map needed to be clearer.
- There were concerns about horse access.
- There were concerns about the state of the paths particularly in relation to flooding, muddy conditions, overhanging vegetation and protruding tree stumps.

We have grouped the feedback by theme and provided more detail below.

Theme 1: Bridges

Consultees told us that they wanted the bridges to be maintained and the ones that had been removed previously, replaced. They believed this would enhance the accessibility of the wood, take the pressure off non-managed paths including private land. Many consultees did not accept that funding to restore/replace the bridges could not be found. Several people suggested exploring alternative funding options such as funding from The Friends of Park Wood Hellingly, other bodies or through local fundraising.

Our response

We have considered the feedback and the level of concern surrounding the non-reinstatement of bridges. There is currently no Environment Agency funding to replace/maintain the bridges. If the local community were interested in raising funds for a bridge, we would be open to exploring this option.

We are investigating whether additional bridges would result in additional liability and whether this is something we would be prepared to take on.

If works are considered for a bridge in the future, careful consideration would need to be given to ensure any works to install a bridge do not adversely impact the wood (for example using heavy machines). If a bridge were to be installed, it would need to be built to appropriate standards.

Theme 2: Signposting/Routes

Consultees told us that they are pleased that the paths are going to be signposted to avoid getting lost in the wood. Routes need to be well designed, easy to follow, effectively promoted and managed and meet a range of needs. We received some suggestions of how routes could be changed. Some consultees questioned whether the time and money to change the path network was worth it as people will use whichever paths they want.

Some of you told us that the map showing the proposed routes was unclear. Whilst the new paths were welcomed, some consultees did not wish to put increased pressure on the woodland's important flora and fauna. There was a suggestion that routes needed to be connected to surrounding paths to allow walkers to transit from one Public Right of Way to another unimpeded.

Our response

We completely agree that the paths should be clearly signposted, and we have undertaken this consultation process to ensure that the paths we are proposing to signpost will be used by the local community.

The signposted paths will be assessed with a Public Safety Risk Assessment, and we will maintain these paths so that everyone who uses the wood can enjoy it safely. We encourage all woodland users to use these paths, as we will not be assessing any other paths within the wood for risks to public safety.

Similarly, we understand about the pressure on flora and fauna within the woodland, which is another reason we are keen to ensure the paths are well-marked and encourage all users of the woodland to stick to waymarked paths.

We recognise that it would be good to connect the footpaths in the wood to Public Rights of Way, but the closest Right of Way joins Grove Hill approximately 100m south of the car park entrance to Park Wood, which is not Environment Agency-owned land and so this is not something we are able to do.

We have taken on board some of the suggested changes to the routes and have amended the routes accordingly.

We are sorry that some consultees found the map of the proposed paths unclear. This feedback will be noted for any future Environment Agency consultations. However, we were pleased to see this did not deter people from submitting their views. Once the way markers are in place, it should be much easier to understand the routes.

Theme 3: Horse Access

Consultees told us that they were pleased to see that we were accommodating horse riders in the wood. They liked that the proposed path is looped and finishes at the car park. They hoped the new route wasn't shorter than the old route. They told us the importance of ensuring the new path needs to be clear of trees and stumps and wide enough for horse and mount access. There were some concerns that the paths for equestrian use will be unusable for others as equestrian use will render them muddy and potentially hazardous. Some concerns were expressed that there is no access to the paths from the east side of the wood and the inability to cross the water limits where people can ride.

Our response

We have listened to the views expressed by the consultees regarding horse access. We will continue to explore options for horse access within the wood.

The horse path we have proposed is wide enough for both equestrian and pedestrian use and we will be maintaining the public safety of this path in accordance with guidance provided by the British Horse Society.

We are not currently putting in any new bridges, so there is no river crossing to access the eastern side of the wood. A ford has been considered to enable horses to cross the stream, however, this would have a detrimental impact on the sediment within the stream.

There is currently no horse access into the wood from Featherbed Lane, so we won't be reinstating the horse path on the eastern side.

Theme 4: Flooding

Consultees told us that some of the paths flood, particularly in the winter, especially the Bunny Run area and the entrance path restricting access to the wood. There were concerns expressed that the flooding could also be killing a significant area of trees and creating stagnant water.

Our response

We are in ongoing conversations with adjacent landowners, East Sussex County Council, Wealden District Council and Hellingly Parish Council about this issue and we are all working together to find a solution to this problem.

We have investigated the cause of the flooding and during December 2021 and carried out some remedial mitigation work to try and limit the amount of flooding on the affected footpath. We have further remedial works planned for April 2022 to address this issue.

Theme 5: State of the paths

Consultees told us that some of the paths proposed get very boggy and muddy, particularly in the winter making them difficult to navigate, sometimes impassable due to mud and erosion.

Several consultees commented on overgrown brambles across the paths and several protruding tree roots.

Our response

The routes have been walked by Environment Agency staff and have been chosen as they are currently accessible, take different routes through different areas of woodland and do not take woodland users to bridges which are no longer there.

Part of the nature of an ancient woodland is that the ground conditions change over the course of the seasons. We recommend appropriate footwear is worn when walking in the wood.

Our management plan for the wood includes path maintenance and we will endeavour to open up some of the paths to increase light reaching the ground. This will help paths to dry out more quickly whilst also having positive impacts on biodiversity by increasing the ground flora at path sides. We will also look at using materials sustainably harvested from the wood to help alleviate these issues.

Theme 6: All-access path

Consultees told us that they would like to see the all-access path repaired to enable as many people as possible to access and enjoy this fantastic ancient woodland. It was suggested a paved circular route for disabled users could be considered. If funding was not available from the Environment Agency, alternative funding options should be explored.

Our response

One of the core values of our organisation is inclusivity, so we will do our best to ensure the woodland is accessible to as many people as possible.

There is an existing all-access path (the purple route). Since January 2022, The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) have been working with volunteers on our behalf to maintain the all-access made track which loops from the carpark past the ponds and through a section of the wood.

This work is now complete and we will be assessing whether further improvements are needed.

Theme 7: Cyclists

Consultees told us that they would like confirmation of whether cyclists can use the paths.

Our response Cyclists are welcome to use the horse path, in line with bridleway usage elsewhere. However, we would discourage people from carrying out their own works, for example, building ramps, without authorisation.

Theme 8: Archaeology

Consultees told us they would like to have paths that take in the archaeological sites within the wood.

Our response

Our focus is on ensuring all paths are marked and signposted. We will consider a partnership project to include interpretation boards for archaeological features in the future.

7. Next Steps

We have reviewed all the responses we received from this consultation. We will:

- amend the route map to include suggested changes received during the consultation.
- put way markers up on the footpaths in the wood to ensure routes are clearly signposted, by July 2022. Only way-marked paths will be given a Public Safety Risk Assessment and appropriate actions taken when needed. For example, removing dangerous branches/brush.
- investigate whether additional bridges would result in additional liability and, if so, whether this is something we would wish to take on. Subject to the outcome of our investigations, if the local community would be interested in raising funds for a bridge, we would be open to exploring this option.
- continue to explore further options for horse access within the wood.
- continue to explore a solution to the flooding problems in the wood together with our partners. And will carry out remedial work in April 2022 to try and address this issue.
- assess whether further improvements to the all-access track are needed.

Individuals who wish to follow up their responses, or points made within this document, in more detail are welcome to contact us at Park.Wood@environment-agency.gov.uk

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