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Your Ref:
Our Ref: FPS/G3300/14D/10
Date: 20 January 2017

Dear Madam

WILDLIFE AND COUNTRYSIDE ACT 1981 SCHEDULE 14

Somerset County Council

addition of bridleway on route known as Middlefield Lane, Ham Lane and Holdfast Lane in Merriott

1. I am directed by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to refer to your application on 23 September 2016 for a direction to be given to Somerset County Council under paragraph 3(2) of Schedule 14 to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 ("the Act"). The direction you have sought would require the Council to determine your application for an order, under section 53(5) of the Act, to modify the Council's Definitive Map and Statement of public rights of way for the area so as to add to it a bridleway. The route of the alleged bridleway is known as Middlefield Lane, Ham Lane and Holdfast Lane in the parish of Merriott.
2. The Council was consulted about your request for a direction on 1 November 2016 as required by the Act. The Council's formal response was received on 28 November 2016.
3. The Secretary of State takes a number of issues into account in considering how to respond to such requests and whether she should direct an authority to determine an application for an order within a specific period. These issues include any statement made by the authority setting out its priorities for bringing and keeping the definitive map up to date; the reasonableness of such priorities; any actions that the authority has taken or expressed intentions to take or further action on the application in question; the circumstances of the case; and any views expressed by the applicant.

Your case

4. You applied for a modification order on 22 September 2008. At that time you were told that cases would be progressed in chronological order. That policy has since changed, to the disadvantage of the application.

5. The County Council has stated that your application will not be processed until approximately 130 others have been considered. Eight years have already passed since your application.
6. The County Council has now said that it will not start to process definitive map modification applications for the foreseeable future.
7. The current situation in which horse riders, cyclists and walkers will be obliged to use the A356 between the A30 and the A303 will continue. Horse riders are not willing to use this major vehicular road, which means they have stopped using the connecting bridleway, Wall Ditch Lane.
8. If the application was successfully concluded, there would be a safe link from Wall Ditch Lane back to Merriott without using the A356, and a 2.5 km loop of safe bridleways, with Wall Ditch Lane, would be provided.

The Council's Case

9. Applications for modification orders are now dealt with in accordance with the County Council's Statement of Priorities, which the applicant does not criticise, although all applications received between 2008 and 2011 will be dealt with before work commences on those received after 2011.
10. The Middlefield Lane application is effectively 115th in the list of cases awaiting determination. At the current rate of progress it is likely to be more than 10 years before work begins on it.
11. Over the last eight years, an average of 39 modification order applications per year has been received. The County Council's aim is to determine 10 applications per year. It is currently making good progress with bringing the Definitive Map and Statement up to date.
12. The aim of the Statement of Priorities is that as much of the public as a whole benefits from those cases which are determined first. Although this application might result in an off-road route of benefit to horse riders, cyclists and walkers, determining it ahead of others in the queue would divert resources from these higher priority applications.
13. At the moment, however, resources are being focussed on eight applications where directions to determine have been received from the Secretary of State.
14. In the last six months the County Council has been directed to determine seven cases within twelve to twenty-four months. Should directions continue to be received at this rate there will inevitably come a point at which the County Council is unable to comply with them. While the Secretary of State will need to consider each case on its merits, it is requested that consideration is also given to the reasonableness of directing a single authority to determine a large number of applications in a short period of time.

Consideration

15. The Secretary of State has considered the way that the County Council prioritises applications for modification orders. It appears to her that it is generally well

thought out, fair and comprehensive, and she notes that its rationale is not criticised by you.

16. She understands that the essential factor in the County Council's lengthy delays in determining modification order applications is a lack of resources commensurate with the rate at which it has been receiving applications for a number of years. Because, however, the rate at which applications have been received over the past 8 years is far lower than the rate at which they are determined, she does not accept that the County Council is making good progress with bringing the Definitive Map and Statement up to date.
17. It is not for the Secretary of State to direct the County Council to increase its resources in this area of its duties, or to direct it to consider whether its current resources are being used in the most efficient way, but at the same time she does not consider that she should therefore accept as inevitable the consequent delay in dealing with applications which the public expects to be dealt with in a reasonable time. The applicant has taken the time and trouble to seek a direction. The County Council argues in effect that she should not be given one because it has chosen not to direct sufficient resources, or resource efficiency, to clear the backlog of applications in a reasonable time. Eighteen years is not a reasonable time.
18. Bearing this in mind, the Secretary of State considers that she should issue a direction in this case, although she is inclined to extend the time within which the application is to be determined beyond what she might normally allow. Such an extension should enable the County Council to consider whether it is reasonable to limit the resources it is willing to provide for this aspect of its work and whether it can use its resources more efficiently.

Decision

19. In the circumstances the Secretary of State has decided that there is a case for setting a date by which time the application should be determined. In exercise of the powers vested in her by paragraph 3(2) of Schedule 14 to the Act, the Secretary of State has directed Somerset County Council to determine this application not later than 31 December 2021.
20. A copy of the Secretary of State's letter of direction to the Council is enclosed, and a copy of this letter is being sent to the Council.

Yours faithfully

Peter Millman

Inspector

Authorised by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to sign in that behalf

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