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| **Direction Decision** |
| **by A Behn Dip MS MIPROW** |
| **an Inspector on direction of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs** |
| **Decision date: 12 January 2023** |

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| **Ref: FPS/G1440/14D/28 (ROW/3299136)****Representation by Caroline Wood****East Sussex County Council****Application to add a bridleway from Park Wood, Grove Hill to Featherbed Lane, Hellingly (Council ref. RWO219)** |
| * The representation is made under Paragraph 3(2) of Schedule 14 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (the 1981 Act) seeking a direction to be given to East Sussex County Council (the Council) to determine an application for an Order, under Section 53(5) of that Act.
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| * The representation is made by Caroline Wood, submitted on 16 May 2022.
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| * The certificate under Paragraph 2(3) of Schedule 14 is dated 2 August 2018.
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| * The Council was consulted about the representation on 23 August 2022 and the Council’s response was made on 29 September 2022.
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Decision

1. The Council is directed to determine the above-mentioned application.

Reasons

1. Authorities are required to investigate applications as soon as reasonably practicable and, after consulting the relevant district and parish councils, decide whether to make an order on the basis of the evidence discovered. Applicants have the right to ask the Secretary of State to direct a surveying authority to reach a decision on an application if no decision has been reached within twelve months of the authority’s receipt of certification that the applicant has served notice of the application on affected landowners and occupiers.
2. Current guidance contained within the Rights of Way Circular 1/09 Version 2, October 2009 and published by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs details the following: The Secretary of State in considering whether, in response to such a request, to direct an authority to determine an application for an order within a specified period, will take into account 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 already taken by the authority or expressed intentions of further action on the application in question, the circumstances of the case and any views expressed by the applicant.
3. Initial checks have been made by the Council to validate the application and the case currently awaits its turn for full investigation to begin. The Council normally investigates applications in chronological order of receipt, unless prioritisation is justified by one of the exceptional circumstances listed in their Statement of Priorities – where a successful order would significantly enhance public safety; where the claimed route is threatened by imminent development; or where demand for the claimed route is particularly high, or it would form part of a recognised strategic link in the network. However, applications subject to a determination date provided by the Planning Inspectorate are usually worked ahead of these, where possible, in chronological order of the determination date.
4. The application was submitted on 4 April 2018 and is ranked at 13 of 79 on the Council’s list of outstanding Definitive Map Modification Order (DMMO) applications, however other cases currently awaiting direction decisions may mean that this application descends further down the list. The Council is unable to give an accurate timescale as to when this case will be investigated but has estimated a timeframe of 2-4 years at the earliest, depending on where the case is positioned on the list once other direction requests have been decided. The Council submits that there are no special circumstances that would require this case to be prioritised and there is nothing to suggest that the system employed is unreasonable, or that the application has been ranked incorrectly.
5. The Applicant states that the claimed route is at present restricted by a dismantled bridge and is concerned that it may not be taken into account by the landowner who is currently considering the protection of the woodland and the mapping of routes for public access. The applicant believes that the claimed route provides an important link to surrounding public rights of way and is worried that significant housing development in the area may force equestrians onto the increasingly busy roads, should the case not be determined in a timely manner. The Council feel that the extent of these threats is currently unclear and that should rights have been established across the route, they would not be lost if the route was no longer available, albeit a diversion would then be required.
6. I recognise that there are a large number of applications awaiting determination and that the Council has a Statement of Priorities to ensure fair ranking. I also appreciate that the resources allocated by the Council to work on DMMO applications in recent years has restricted its progress in determining outstanding applications, resulting in an accumulation of cases being taken out of turn as a result of being directed to determine them. I note that the issue of a direction in this case would further disadvantage those applications that have been waiting longer, as well as those that rank higher on the priority list.
7. However, the applicant is entitled to expect their application to be determined within a finite and reasonable period and the Council have a statutory duty to keep their Definitive Map and Statement up to date. Difficulty complying with this due to insufficient staff and a backlog are not exceptional circumstances, as proportionate resources should be in place to deliver this statutory duty.
8. An applicant’s right to seek a direction from the Secretary of State gives rise to the expectation of a determination of that application within 12 months under normal circumstances. In this case, more than four years have passed since the application was submitted and no exceptional circumstances have been indicated.
9. Correspondingly, I have decided that there is a case for setting a date by which time the application should be determined. I accept that the Council will require time to carry out its investigation and make a decision on the application and I also recognise that the restrictions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic halted the process of determining DMMO applications, creating the backlog. I am mindful that the Council have requested any new directions do not jump ahead of those already issued and I have noted the determination dates for these. However, some of the directions issued have been for claims received later than this application and in view of this, a period of 12 months has been allowed to determine this claim.

**Direction**

On behalf of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and pursuant to Paragraph 3(2) of Schedule 14 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, **I HEREBY** **DIRECT** East Sussex County Council to determine the above-mentioned application not later than 12 months from the date of this decision.

A Behn

INSPECTOR