ANNEXE B

Map Modification Orders – Legal Guidance

The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 placed a duty on all Surveying Authorities in England and Wales to produce a definitive map and statement, indicating and describing public rights of way within their areas.

The '49 Act also required Surveying Authorities i.e. County Councils, to keep their definitive map and statement under periodic revision. The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 completely changed the way in which the definitive map and statement is updated. Under this Act Surveying Authorities have a duty to keep their map and statement under continuous review.

Certain specified events can trigger that process and one of these is an application under Section 53 of the Act for a map modification order (MMO). Section 53(5) enables any landowner, occupier or user to apply for a Map Modification Order to modify the definitive map. Landowners and occupiers may believe for example that a right of way should never have been shown on the definitive map at all, or is shown on the wrong line or that its status is incorrectly shown, for example, as a bridleway instead of a footpath.

Claims may also be made for routes to be added on the basis of evidence from historical documents or of evidence of public use, either for a continuous period of 20 years, as provided for by the Highways Act 1980 (s31) or for a shorter period under Common Law.

Both at common law and under Section 31 of the Highways Act 1980 the public's enjoyment of the way must have been "as of right" in order to form the basis of implied dedication. "As of right" was interpreted in Merstham Manor v Coulsdon and Purley UDC (1937) as acts done openly, not secretly, not by force and not by permission from time to time given. The House of Lords has held in R v Oxfordshire CC ex p Sunningwell Parish Council (1999) that subjective state of mind of the user does not have to be proved. Users over a long period may have been "subjectively indifferent as to whether a right existed".

Deciding who "the public" are can sometimes be difficult. In general it should be people other than those working for the landowner(s) concerned or who had the permission or licence of the landowner(s) to use the route. The period of 20 years is counted back from the date on which the public's right to use the way was first brought into question or from the date at which an application is made to modify the Definitive Map and Statement. In order to bring the public's right into question, the landowner must challenge it by some means sufficient to bring it home to the public, for example, through the erection of a fence or locking of a gate across the way, however long ago that date was.

Statute Law

"Section 31 of the Highways Act 1980 provides that the claimants' evidence must show that the route has been actually enjoyed for a 20-year period. The use must be without force, without secrecy and without permission".

Although 20 years uninterrupted use by the public establishes a presumption that the way has been dedicated to the public, this can be contradicted by evidence showing that the landowner did not intend to dedicate public rights during that time. Evidence of interruption of the public's use of the way, would have to be shown to have been both effective in preventing public use and clearly known to the public. The turning back of the occasional stranger will not be a sufficiently positive act - at least where the way continues to be used by locals. Notices clearly displayed and maintained on the way, indicating that it was private, or plans deposited with the surveying authority or its predecessors can prove sufficient evidence of an intention by an owner not to dedicate. Section 31(6) of the Highways Act 1980 enables landowners to protect themselves against claims based solely on use by depositing a map, statement and statutory declaration with the surveying authority showing which rights of way they acknowledge to be public on their land.

It is not possible to claim a route by presumed dedication over Crown Land such land being exempt from the provisions of the Highways Act 1980. Byelaws for some National Trust Land and other open spaces may also prevent the acquisition of rights.

Under Section 53c (i-iii), documentary evidence alone, may be sufficient to establish the existence of public rights and however old the document, the rights recorded will still exist unless there is evidence of a subsequent legally authorised change.

In May 2006, the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act was brought into commencement. The main effect of sections 66 and 67 of this act was to significantly curtail the scope for recording further public rights of way for mechanically propelled vehicles (MPVs) on the definitive map and statement. This was done in two ways. Firstly, any existing unrecorded public rights of way for MPVs (with certain exceptions) were extinguished, so that they cannot then be added to the definitive map and statement as byways open to all traffic (BOATs). Secondly, the act also ensures that no further public rights of way for MPVs can be acquired unless expressly created or constructed. Typically, where such rights had been acquired but were thereafter extinguished, this results in a restricted byway.

Common Law

A highway is created at Common Law by the dedication by the owner of a right of passage across his land for the use by the public at large coupled with acceptance and use by the public as of right. Dedication may also be inferred at Common Law where the acts of the owner conclusively point to an intention to dedicate. In Poole v Huskinson (1843) it was held that "2 things to be made good, that the user has been sufficient in is duration and character and that the presumption then arising has not been rebutted. The length of user evidence is also important but there is no fixed minimum or maximum period of use which must be proved in Order to justify an inference of dedication. Under Common Law it is possible to claim a route by presumed dedication over Crown Land.

Schedule 14 Applications For Definitive Map Orders

The procedures for the making and determination of an application are set out in Schedule 14 of the 1981 Act. Anyone making an application must serve notice on every owner and occupier of land affected by the application. In cases of difficulty in tracing the owner or occupier, the authority has the power to direct that a notice be placed on the land instead. The procedures include the right for applicants to appeal to the Secretary of State for the Environment against the surveying authority's refusal to make an Order. In such cases the Secretary of State can direct the authority to make the Order even when the authority considers the evidence does not support the making of the Order.

Once the authority has received the certificate of service of notice it has a duty to investigate the application and consult with every local authority concerned, i.e. District, Parish/Town Council. The authority should make a decision on the application as soon as reasonably practicable. Where the authority has not come to a decision within 12 months of receiving an application, the applicant can appeal to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions who can direct the authority to determine it within a specified time.

An authority can act on evidence without a Schedule 14 application being made and should do so on discovery of relevant evidence. There is no requirement to investigate the claim within 12 months and no right of appeal to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in these cases.

Order-making procedure

If it is established that, on the balance of probabilities, public rights have been acquired, a MMO is published and advertised on site and in a local newspaper. If no objections are received the Order can be confirmed by the County Council. If there are unresolved objections it must be referred to the Secretary of State who will probably decide to hold a Public Inquiry to resolve the matter.

If the authority has been directed by the Secretary of State to make a MMO after it has decided not to do so and objections are made which result in a Public Inquiry being held, the authority may adopt a neutral stance or oppose the Order.