

A Vision for Underground Access in the South of England

Although I do recognise it is very easy to comment on work that others have done and in this case Ed has obviously done some significant work and such effort is to be applauded.

I am however putting forward a viewpoint, the message of which needs I believe careful consideration before making any decision to change the 'control' of the current status quo in CSCC.

We have been kicking the cave access 'football' around for years and we will never move forward in a coherent one voice for cave access whilst there are several different caving entities involved in the south of England cave access. There should only be single entity of cave access interest, that is CSCC, ACB's (Access Controlling Bodies) should be wound down, they are not ultimately necessary and will always hold back a holistic approach to cave access.

There seems to have been an inordinate amount of C&A work undertaken in the last year and there are a few outstanding matters to be completed. It appears though it has taken an AGM handbook to be able to assess how much work has been done and even then some officers appear to have not submitted reports.

It should not take an AGM yearly cycle to find out what has been done. More timely information on how people can help and get involved with access projects that need a helping hand. CSCC will never have the resources nor the ultimate commitment to deal with and meet the ever growing demand of cave access without wider help and it is time we tipped on its head the issue of access and the role for CSCC moving forward.

We have to have mutual trust in people and offer to help one another on the perceived failures, not constantly challenge. I can say with some certainty though that only by an individual knowing how to share responsibility and accept delegation and those delegated too accepting that delegation without question or challenge other than reasoning as the way forward, that there will never be enough time in the day to do what is really required. The word 'transparency' makes it sound as though certain things have been held back. It should be embodied in CSCC that if anyone offers help towards achieving a specific objective that that help is to be valued and accepted.

Communication all round is what needs to be improved, not making things just more transparent and we are all responsible for lack of communication and most importantly clear communication sometimes. I think we need to take a step back and look inwardly as to where we really want CSCC to be in 5 or even 10 years, we have forged forward pretty much always doing the same things but we will not keep up unless we look at what we really can do, before we say we will do.

If Graham says, and I have no reason to disbelieve him, that he spends 2 days on access works, that should be applauded (the CSCC job description identifies 10 hour a week is reasonably expected, a tall order for a volunteer in any event) yet we are

complaining that is not apparently enough clearly to get the job done. This fact though highlights that we will never keep up no matter who does it. The only way as I see it is to get the landowners/farmers and government agencies to step up and be more involved in delivering the practical elements. CSCC will be there with support and expertise offered where possible. We need to manage expectations and up our game significantly on communication all round. What we then need is continuity of the person in post. The job of C&A Officer should be in place without contestation for at least 7 years.

I know it means fundamentally changing the way things are done and may result in other access issues but we need a radical change in our thought processes or everyone will eventually be let down. We are not some kind of corporate business that attends hi-powered meetings and negotiates complex issues, nor should we be.

The impasse with Cheddar Caves is an example. Just walk away! I fail to see how we should be involved in the first place, we are not cave police. We have no hope of managing any agreement we might end up with on such a large tract of land. We are not a controlling body of other peoples behaviour and we must realise this. If people want to go caving that is an issue solely between the landowner and the individual caver, not the CSCC. My guess is that people will not be obstructed in their pastime by Cheddar Caves if they do go caving and it is up to Cheddar Caves to get any message they want across regarding access to those individuals.

The really important thing is to Communicate, Communicate and Communicate and Involve, Involve and Involve. Negotiate is not a word that we should use, just talk to others, listen, have a conversation and share some knowledge, that is all that is needed. I think currently the only problem with the 'most important job' in is there is not enough of either conversation or listening and I am not convinced in the long run that will change in a reasonable way knowing cavers. This is a failure not of an individual person but CSCC as a whole and everyone standing for office or attending meetings needs to consider how to communicate better within the organisation first, this will go a long way to sorting out the outward communication.

As far as outward communication on cave access it will always be over complicated whilst there are both ACB's (access controlling bodies) and CSCC, there needs to be only one point of contact and ACB's should be slowly run down. Unless there is only one body, CSCC or NCA to really support all cavers there will always be confusion and dross. The objective of improving underground access will always be stymied.

Thank you for reading.

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