

NEW ARGUS

I'm not being rude but...this was wasted opportunity

South Downs National Park Authority spent £35,000 of public money on a campaign to encourage walkers to be polite to one another. NATALIE LEAL says the money could have been better spent



Have you been nudged into saying "hello" while out in the Sussex countryside?

This week we learned that the South Downs National Park Authority hired a consultancy firm to encourage people – or "nudge" them in advertising speak – to be nice to one another while using the park.

In response to this brief the consultants came up with an initiative called Share the Path, a campaign to get people who already say hello to each other... to say hello to each other.

The Park Authority set about sending people on to the hills wearing brightly coloured jackets and waving placards with suggested greetings. Alongside the everyday "Hello" and "Hi", they had "Cheers" "What-ho" "Ta very much" and "Morning!"

A two-minute film was also made, presumably for people sitting at home wanting to venture out but too scared in case people were rude to them.

On their Facebook page introducing the film the Park Authority said: "Most people say 'Hello', 'Thanks', 'Cheers' or even 'Much obliged'. Britain's friendliest walkers, George and Dean, show us how it's done."

The film features a middle aged man (George) wandering around the South Downs voicing his anxieties about his conversational abilities to his bemused dog (Dean).

Luckily everyone is nice to George and Dean.

At the same time as launching Share the Path, the Park Authority admitted that courteous and friendly interactions were the norm and that there were next to no incidents of conflict on the South Downs.

This is not a plot line for the sitcom, *The Thick of It*, this actually happened and at a cost to the taxpayer of £35,000.

It hasn't gone down well. The campaign was widely panned in the national press and people who use the park were bemused as to

the point of it all. As someone who spends a lot of time walking on the South Downs I found the whole thing patronising.

Why is it necessary to teach people to say hello? And what is the point if they acknowledge that people already do so?

Having grown up in London I'm still surprised by how many people smile and talk to you while out in Sussex. In the capital you are deemed a weirdo if you smile at a stranger let alone strike up a conversation on the pavement.

If you go on to the Downs on any Saturday afternoon it's a different story altogether. People talk to you whether you like it or not – about the weather, birds, their dogs, your dogs. One man even asked if he could draw a picture of me once – I declined, politely of course!

If you are looking for solitude you would probably be better off going up to London and riding the tube for a few hours.

The chief executive of the Park Authority defended the campaign

against the onslaught of negative press this week. He told the Argus that the big aim of Share the Path had been to widen the range of people who have access to the countryside.

It's not clear how teaching people how to say hello would achieve this but improving access does seem like a good idea because there are people who don't share the path. Not because they are rude or aggressive but simply because they are not there.

When I go walking I see mainly middle aged, middle class, white people and if they are lone walkers they are usually men – in fact people who look suspiciously like George from the video.

There is a noticeable absence of disabled people, mums with young children, people from ethnic minorities, elderly people, teenagers, to name a few.

So it seems if you want to widen the range of people who have access to the countryside there is plenty of work to be done. And if there is money to spend on this



then surely there are more inspiring ways to go about it.

How about improving paths and routes to give more access to disabled people or mums with buggies for instance? The range of walks for people in wheelchairs is depressingly small. Or what about encouraging people from ethnic minorities or deprived backgrounds to enjoy the park? Why not create cycle routes to encourage teenagers and young people to get outside more?

Instead we have a film about a middle aged, middle class man in waterproofs and posters showing a string of stuffy greetings. The idea that everyone on the South Downs is wandering around saying "what-ho" and "much obliged" to one another will surely just reinforce the idea to most people that the countryside is not for them.

So more than a waste of money, Share the Path seems like a wasted opportunity. It patronises the people who use the South Downs already and it's in danger of discouraging the people who don't.

"People walking the South Downs invariably talk to you whether you like it or not. In London you are considered weird if you strike up a conversation. If it's solitude you want, you would be better off riding the Tube for a few hours."

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SATURDAY
GUEST
By Minesha
Agnihotri

Happy
of children
wonder

AS I walk my dog from the car park to the restaurant, I look at the changes around me and reminisce about my childhood in Brighton and my summer in India with my family.

I find myself thinking of my dad, who got here, my dad a haematologist, living in 1968 and then following me to London in 1970 with my two brothers.

It was an unfamiliar territory, times quite hostile for my mother, the children to school in her not speaking much English. From the streets of Jamnagar to the streets of London, it was a very different place then.

My dad founded a small group, a Bengali family, a Sikh family and a Muslim family. They used to get together at our house and used to cook her famous chicken for everyone and he would be stacked up fresh vegetables just as quickly.

They used to play cards, matchsticks as the currency would be up till the early morning.

Today the Indian community is made up of hundreds of families and the popularity of real Indian food goes from strength to strength.

In the early days my dad was known in the Bangladeshi restaurant between calls and when I was in work. He would pop into the restaurant and always ask the chef's home-style food – not dishes that were marketed for the public.

He would then bring some food and say to my mum to take it home. She would always make much better at home than the dialogue would continue.

My dad's passion for good food would start early in the morning. He would always have to have his prepared Indian tea made with crushed ginger and cardamom, ladles of sugar. And if this was late – all hell would break loose. He loved entertaining and