HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Decision Report

Decision Maker:	Executive Member for Culture, Recreation and Countryside
Date:	15 May 2014
Title:	Countryside Access Strategy and Rights of Way Investment Plan
Reference:	5789
Report From:	Director of Culture, Communities and Business Services

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1. Executive Summary

1.1. The purpose of this paper is to seek approval for the development of a Countryside Access Strategy for Hampshire, together with approval for a 3 year capital investment programme. The objective is to ensure that the County Council is able to continue to provide a high quality network of public access across the County, which meets the needs of the public and the requirements of the law, through using its resources to best effect.

1.2. The Countryside Service's vision is to "Connect People with Hampshire's Countryside". The Countryside Access Team contributes to this vision by providing the infrastructure, information and encouragement to help people enjoy access to the Countryside. The proposed approach focuses on three key aims for the Countryside Access Team, these being to:

- Understand and respond to the needs of our customers;
- Work with others to provide a safe, well managed countryside access network which meets current and future need;
- Encourage and support people to feel welcome and confident in using the countryside responsibly.

1.3. This report seeks to:

- set out the background and context to the proposed strategy
- describe the new approach including key aims and proposals
- propose an outline capital investment plan for 2014-2017 and specific expenditure plan for 2014-2015

2. Contextual information

2.1. The term 'countryside access' describes the largely off-road network of paths and open spaces which together provide the infrastructure that connects people with the natural environment. This network is used for utility (people travelling from place to place) and leisure/recreation, and is made up of statutory access, permissive access and informal access[1] The public rights of way network (our footpaths, bridleways and byways) includes both urban and rural paths and forms the backbone of the countryside access network in Hampshire. Public Rights of Way are highways in the legal sense – the County Council has a duty in law to record, protect, and in the majority of cases, maintain them.

2.2. Good quality access to the countryside and open spaces helps people to lead healthy, active lifestyles. A well maintained network provides both a recreational resource and an opportunity for active, off road travel. The quality of the network is directly linked to the number of people who use it – the better maintained it is, the more use people will make of it. In 2013 it is estimated that Hampshire's residents made 70.2 million visits to the natural environment, that around 30% of these visits involved expenditure and that an average of £27 was spent during these visits.[2]

2.3. The County Council has various statutory responsibilities in respect of the recording, management and maintenance of public rights of way. In carrying out these duties it has always been clear that resources will be targeted where there is most public benefit. This approach has worked well, not least because it has been developed with, endorsed, and supported by our partners (notably the three statutory Countryside Access Forum's in Hampshire)[3] and the people that use the network. However, diminishing investment in the network over time, coupled with increasing public demand for high quality, accessible countryside, means that the County Council is increasingly pressured into reactive investment, either to ensure a basic level of safety to the public, or through individuals pursuing their statutory rights to compel the County Council into action. Against the backdrop of diminishing resources the development and implementation of a planned approach to asset management on public rights of way has become crucial, as has the need to work with others to develop new approaches to the delivery of some aspects of the service.

2.4. The Countryside Access Team is developing an Asset Register which details the assets for which the County Council is either responsible or in which it has a significant interest. Through this work we have estimated that the current value of the asset for which the Countryside Access Team is

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[1] Statutory Access relates to paths and places that people have the legal right to use, often in perpetuity, permissive access is the paths and places which landowners have allowed the public to use, on the understanding that permission may be withdrawn and informal access includes all of the paths and spaces which do not fall into the previous two categories

[2] Data provided from the Natural England Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment Survey http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/evidence/mene.aspx

[3] http://www3.hants.gov.uk/hcaf

responsible is approximately £38 million. The annual replacement cost for this asset (this is the total asset replacement cost divided by the lifespan of the asset, not adjusted for inflation) is £2.2 million per year. This is a theoretical figure as, in reality, it is unrealistic to suggest that any rights of way network would be maintained to such a level. Both figures exclude staff time. The Countryside Access Team has an annual revenue budget of approximately £160,000 to spend on the management of the assets identified in the table, which is supplemented by a share of the Countryside Service's total annual capital allocation of £88,000. This significant funding gap is generally addressed by prioritising the highest risk issues and seeking external contributions where possible.

3. Proposed Strategy: "Connecting People with Hampshire's Countryside"

3.1. In order to continue to deliver high quality Countryside Access throughout Hampshire, in the face of increasing public demand and decreasing resources, it is proposed that the future strategy for Countryside Access has three key aims, these being to:

Understand and respond to the needs of our customers - Encourage the use and enjoyment of the Countryside Access Network through delivering a service which is responsive to the needs of our customers.

Work with others to provide a safe, well managed countryside access network which meets both current and future need – Develop a new approach to network management in order to provide a safe, high quality network, actively work with others to manage and improve Countryside Access in Hampshire and seek opportunities to increase inwards investment.

Encourage and support people to feel welcome and confident in using the countryside responsibly – Provide accurate and easy to use information, working with others to promote the network and supporting responsible behaviour through education and awareness.

Understanding and responding to the needs of our customers

3.2. In 2008 Hampshire County Council published its Countryside Access Plans[4]. The approach taken by Hampshire, was nationally recognised as an excellent example of good practice in access planning. The plans were developed using a highly consultative approach which enabled the County Council to develop a clear understanding of the issues most important to its customers, and prompted the Countryside Access Team to reshape its approach to service delivery in order to meet the needs identified in these plans. The extent to which the service has shaped its business around the issues has been welcomed. Fundamental to the development and delivery of these plans has been the involvement and input of the statutory Countryside Access Forum's in Hampshire.

[4] http://www3.hants.gov.uk/countryside/access-plans.htm

3.3. The plans are now at the end of their term. In 2014 the Countryside Access Team will be working with the Access Forums and others to review the success of the current plans and revise them where appropriate. As part of this a parish conference is planned for June 2014 to start to inform the review. When the review of the Countryside Access Plans is completed, a revised Plan will be submitted to the Executive Member for consideration.

3.4. Whilst the CAP review will continue our tradition of understanding the needs of those who manage, use, or want to use, the countryside, we also want to develop our understanding about the effectiveness of the measures we take to address these needs. This is a gap in our knowledge at the moment: we collect data about how easy the network is to use; the number of reports we have; and the resolution rates of these reports. We also have access to regional data about how and why people use the countryside, but there is little information available about the general public's overall satisfaction with the service that the County Council provides. This information is important in order to assess the impact of the changes that are proposed in the strategy. We propose to develop new mechanisms to ensure that we can monitor customer satisfaction and therefore the effectiveness of our work.

Working with others to provide a safe, well managed countryside access network which meets both current and future need

3.5. Whilst the County Council has a statutory duty to assert and protect the public right to use every mile of the rights of way network in Hampshire, and to maintain the majority of it, our resources need to be prioritised so that our investment can be targeted where it will have most impact and most benefit. In doing this we will further develop the way we work with volunteers and other organisations to build our capacity to deliver.

3.6. From the network of public access which already exists we aim to work with others to identify a strategic, County-wide network of paths which together form the key links between centres of population and places of interest in Hampshire's Countryside. Once this network has been defined, resources can be prioritised to ensure that this network is actively managed to ensure that people can be confident that they will find a network of easy to use, easy to follow paths.

3.7. The development and implementation of this strategic network will not only help to respond to the wider issues identified in the Countryside Access Plans, but will be designed with a view to catering for future needs, and will form the basis of future discussions with local planning authorities. This will underpin the key role played by the Countryside Service in developing and supporting Green Infrastructure improvements and policies right across the County

3.8. As well as this 'strategic' network, we recognise the importance of those routes which, though they may not form part of a county-wide network, still serve the immediate needs of local communities. We will continue to respond to issues on these paths and support others who wish to promote or improve them.

3.9. In the last financial year, volunteering in the Countryside Access Team equated to an additional 6 full-time rangers on the ground (to put this in context, the Team currently employs 8 rangers)). We want to continue to improve our volunteering offer to ensure that our volunteer programme is well co-ordinated and to reduce the reliance on officers to manage it. We also propose to work more closely with Parish Councils to enable them to deal with local issues directly.

3.10. In 2014/2015, for the first time, external funding will account for over 50% of the total funding for countryside access improvements in the county. This funding comes to an end in 2015 and, through the delivery of the strategic network and CAP review, the Countryside Access Team will be working to secure further funding for future improvements. The team will also be investigating opportunities for providing services to other authorities, particularly in light of changes to legislation which will place additional requirements on authorities to deliver specialist rights of way services.

Encouraging and supporting people to feel welcome and confident in using the countryside responsibly

3.11. The County Council has a significant role to play in encouraging people to explore and enjoy the countryside, and to promote the many benefits this brings. However, the need to prioritise resources to ensure the rights of way network is safe to use means that we need a different approach to providing information and promoting the network.

3.12. The Countryside Access Plans have highlighted the role that accurate, easy to find information plays in encouraging people to use the countryside. Over the last 3 years the team has invested in digital technology to ensure that systems which underpin our work are effective. In the future we propose to make the most of this technology to provide further information to our customers about the issues they are interested in, and to reduce the officer time required in associated casework.

3.13. Accurate signage is important as it gives the public the confidence to use the countryside and land managers the certainty about the location of rights of way, thus reducing the likelihood of paths being unlawfully blocked or diverted. Signage problems are by far the most common reason for paths failing the annual ‘Ease of use’ survey, and are a relatively simple issue to put right. It is proposed that a short term investment is made in reducing the backlog of signage issues and that in the longer term, more use is made of volunteers to resolve signage issues. The development of the strategic network offers further opportunity to revise the County Council’s approach to the provision of information in the countryside.

3.14. As well as signage on the ground, we know that our customers want ideas about where to go and what they will find when they get there. The Countryside Service has a long tradition of providing printed leaflets which have proved popular. However, there is growing potential to work with other organisations who share a common interest in promoting access to the Countryside and with more expertise in marketing and promotion to provide this material to a wider market, and to generate an income from this.

Education and awareness play an important role in ensuring the countryside is used responsibly, and can be an effective way of preventing problems from developing into big issues which require legal intervention to resolve. The Countryside Access Team proposes to continue to work with the Access Forums in Hampshire to develop a joint approach to education and prevention.

3.15. It is proposed that, provided the Executive Member supports these aims, a strategy is developed which sets out a detailed plan of action for the future priorities of the Countryside Access Team. Following appropriate consultation (specifically including input from the Countryside Access Forums and other relevant parties) and scrutiny, this strategy will be presented to Executive Member for his consideration. This would be done following the full involvement of the Culture and Communities Select Committee.

4. Capital Investment Programme 2014-2017

4.1. A detailed action plan will be included in the strategy which will highlight the actions which are required in the short, medium and long term. Hampshire County Council has made £800,000 of Capital available in order to address some of the most urgent problems on the rights of way network, and deliver the aims of the strategy.

4.2. In investing this capital, emphasis will be given to projects which reflect needs identified in the current and future Countryside Access Plans and implement the delivery of the aims proposed in this report. However, in the short term, there are also projects which require urgent funding in order to protect the safety of the public. In all cases, officers will seek to maximise opportunities to work in partnership with others and seek match funding where possible. It is proposed that capital for the current financial year be allocated to four priority areas of work, these being:

- Audit/feasibility – This work is required to survey the condition of the proposed strategic network prior to developing a network management plan in support of the strategy. This will identify a package of proposals which are necessary to inform future investment including bids for external funding.
- Bridge works – the poor condition of many bridges across the whole network is a significant risk for the County Council and this investment is necessary to address the emergency works which are currently required. This investment is even more pressing following the recent extreme weather which has accelerated damage to bridges which were already nearing the end of their usable life.
- Surfacing, drainage and traffic management – extreme weather conditions and the volume of use that some important paths are subject to has led to a deterioration of the condition of routes across the County. Investment is needed to put these routes into a safe and useable condition, and to prevent further damage from occurring. In some cases, where paths cannot sustain high volumes of use, it may be necessary to take other measures to manage use.

- Local engagement projects – as well as physical improvements, our customers highlight the importance of good information and accessible paths. Funding will enable a programme of information and accessibility improvements to be made, and emphasis will be given to projects which encourage partnership or community involvement.

4.3. In addition to Hampshire County Council's own investment, a further £1.7 million match funding has been secured for the 2014/15 financial year, and work is currently taking place to secure external funding for future years. This investment comes largely from 2013-15 Department for Transport funding for sustainable transport initiatives including the Local Sustainable Transport Fund and 'Linking Communities' initiative and section 106 Developer contributions. Whilst the projects that will benefit from this funding will each address the aims outlined in this report, and issues outlined in the Countryside Access Plans, the two DfT funding streams are time bound and geographically limited (to projects within the New Forest National Park and South Downs National Park). Furthermore, as is the case with any of the grant schemes available to the County Council to bid to, bids may only be made for 'improvements' to countryside access and may not be for works which are the statutory duty of the County Council, such as basic maintenance and asset replacement.

4.4. A general outline of the proposed capital allocation over the next three years is as follows and the proposed strategy will address the ongoing priorities and actions requiring financial support over subsequent financial years:

	2014/15 £000's	***2015/16 £000's***	***2016/17 £000's***
Audit/Feasibility work	20	10	0
Bridge works	100	120	120
Surfacing, drainage and traffic management	70	130	150
Ease of use improvements	20	30	30
Total £000's	**210**	**290**	**300**

4.5. In order to meet the immediate needs set out in section 4.2 of this report, it is proposed that the following expenditure is approved for the current financial year:

Area of investment	Project	Total Project Costs	External Funding	HCC Capital Allocation
Audit Feasibility works	Strategic network definition and condition survey	£20,000	£0	£20,000
Bridge Works (Urgent repairs)	Urgent repairs and replacements to priority bridges	£100,000	£0	£100,000
Surfacing/ Drainage (Urgent repairs)	Writers Way, Alton	£125,000	£75,000 (LSTF, EHDC section 106, HCC section 106)	£50,000
	Byway Improvements – East Hampshire	£20,000	£0	£20,000
Surfacing/ Drainage (Externally funded sustain-able transport projects)	Meon Valley Trail	£412,000	£412,000 (LSTF, Linking Communities)	£0
	Bordon Gap	£270,000	£270,000 (Linking Communities, Shipwrights Way)	£0
	QECP-Petersfield Cycle Link (project lead – ETE)	£800,000	£800,000 (Linking Communities, EHDC section 106, Shipwrights Way)	£0
	New Forest Community Routes	£120,000	£120,000	£0
Ease of Use schemes (Piloting better local engage-ment)	Parish Lengthsman Scheme Pilot	£15,000	£0 (wider scheme funded through ETE)	£15,000
	Parish Conference and associated materials	£5,000	£0	£5,000
Total		1,887,000	1,677,000	£210,000

4.6. The funding identified in the column entitled “Externally funded projects” has been allocated and approved by the relevant authority. Expenditure in the column entitled “HCC Capital Allocation” is subject to approval by the Executive Member for Recreation and Heritage, and it is for these projects (with a total cost of £210,000), which Executive Member for Recreation and Heritage approval is currently sought.

5. Conclusions

5.1. The County Council aims to work with others to provide a high quality Countryside Access network across Hampshire which is safe, welcoming and meets the needs of the public. In order to do this, whilst complying with our statutory duties with regards to public rights of way, it is necessary to adopt a new approach to network management which understands the needs of the public and recognises the particular strategic importance of some routes and the local importance of others.

5.2. Officers propose to develop a Countryside Access Strategy which is based on the aims proposed in this report and, following appropriate consultation, present this strategy to the Executive Member in the latter part of 2014.

5.3. In order to develop and implement this proposed strategy, and to address specific emergency works, a capital investment plan has been proposed. This investment plan will help to establish a cohesive network of high quality, easy to use paths across the County.

6. Recommendation(s)

That the Executive Member for Culture, Recreation and Countryside:

- Endorses the proposed approach and supports the key aims to:
  - Understand and respond to the needs of our customers.
  - Work with others to provide a safe, well managed countryside access network which meets both current and future need.
  - Encourage and support people to feel welcome and confident in using the countryside responsibly.
- Approves the outline capital programme for 2014-2017 and the specific capital expenditure plan of £210,000 for 2014-15 which will tackle urgent practical works and support the development of the Access Strategy.
- Supports the preparation of, and consultation on, the detailed Countryside Access Strategy to be developed and presented to the Executive Member in the latter part of 2014.
- Requests that the Culture and Communities Select Committee considers establishing a task and finish group to support the development of the strategy and the consultation underpinning it.

CORPORATE OR LEGAL INFORMATION:

Links to the Corporate Strategy

Hampshire safer and more secure for all:	no
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	
Maximising well-being:	yes
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	
Enhancing our quality of place:	yes
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	

Section 100 D - Local Government Act 1972 - background documents

The following documents discuss facts or matters on which this report, or an important part of it, is based and have been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of this report. (NB: the list excludes published works and any documents which disclose exempt or confidential information as defined in the Act.)

Document	Location
None	

IMPACT ASSESSMENTS:

1. Equalities Impact Assessment:

1.1. The intention of the strategy itself is to improve the availability of good quality countryside access and as such will be an improvement for all.

2. Impact on Crime and Disorder:

2.1. No significant impact.

3. Climate Change:

3.1. How does what is being proposed impact on our carbon footprint / energy consumption.

The strategy aims to improve safe and easy access for the public to the countryside close to where they live. For some, the improvements to paths and trails, together with some increased car parking charges with a better enforcement regime, may persuade people to travel by means other than by car.

3.2. How does what is being proposed consider the need to adapt to climate change, and be resilient to its longer term impacts?

No significant impact.