Agenda item:

HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Report

Committee:	Culture and Communities Select Committee
Date:	20 November 2014
Title:	Update on the Countryside Access Strategy Task and Finish Working Group
Reference:	6279
Report From:	Director of Culture, Communities and Business Services

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1. Executive Summary

1.1. This paper updates the Select Committee on the work of the Countryside Access Strategy Task and Finish Group. The primary objective of the Strategy is to ensure that the County Council is able to continue to provide a high quality of public access across the County which meets the needs of the public and the requirements of the law, through guiding the use of the Council's resources to best effect.

1.2. Integral to the Strategy is a review of Hampshire's current Countryside Access Plan. It is proposed that the draft revised Countryside Access Plan will be presented to the Executive Member for approval in January 2015 before being published for public consultation, in accordance with legislation.

2. Contextual information

2.1. The Countryside Service's vision is to:

"*Connect People with Hampshire's Countryside*"

The Countryside Access Team contributes to this vision by helping people access the countryside through providing and maintaining infrastructure such as public rights of way, and providing information and encouragement to the public and to those who own or manage accessible land.

2.2. The Executive Member for Culture, Recreation and Countryside has approved in principle the key aims of the Access Strategy, which are 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

The Executive Member requested that the Culture and Communities Select Committee should consider establishing a task and finish group to advise officers on the development of the Access Strategy and Countryside Access Plan review.

2.3. This Task and Finish Group was established by the Select Committee on 8 May 2014.

3. Summary of the Task and Finish Group progress

3.1. The programme of Task and Finish Group meetings is detailed in Appendix 1. The Group has met twice to date.

3.2. The Group's first meeting set the scene for the review and outlined some of the challenges and opportunities facing the County Council. The existing Countryside Access Plans were considered, and their strengths and weaknesses were discussed. Members were also provided with performance data relating to Countryside Access.

3.3. At its second meeting the Task and Finish Group received Oral Evidence from representatives of the four key stakeholder organisations: local communities (as represented by Town and Parish Councils); and the county's three statutory Local Access Forums whose members represent those who use and those who manage publicly accessible land, plus other relevant interests such as conservation, youth and local business. Key issues highlighted by those giving evidence included:

- Keeping the existing network of access routes open is thought to be the highest priority area of work. There is a general understanding that improving the network, by adding new routes or upgrading existing ones, uses a lot of resources. When resources are limited it is better to devote them to maintaining paths and keeping them usable and free from obstruction
- Parish Councils, the Ramblers, and other interested groups and individuals are willing to help with the maintenance and improvement of access. More, and clearer, information about what they are allowed to do, and guidance on how others can help, is needed
- There is a desire for people to be able to get from towns and villages to the countryside more easily on foot or cycle, rather than by driving. There is a need for more connectivity of 'through routes', and roads

could become more usable connections between rights of way, for example by changing verge management regimes and road markings

- More education would be helpful. Education was identified as being a way of reducing impacts on land use, such as interactions of path users with livestock, and also encouraging users to have more consideration for each other. Education could also be provided to land managers to help them better understand how they can influence user behaviour and meet their own responsibilities

Further details on this session are included at Appendix 2.

3.4. Throughout this period, following approval from the Task and Finish Group and in accordance with statutory requirements, the County Council has consulted the public and key stakeholders on the review of the Countryside Access Plans. The consultations opened on 15 September and closed on 26 October. At the close of the consultation period responses had been received from 875 members of the public and 78 stakeholders. Some early headline findings from the consultation are:

- 71% of the public think the access network meets their needs well or very well
- The condition of the rights of way network is seen as the highest priority issue by stakeholders and the public
- Walking is the activity that is seen by stakeholders as having the best provision at the moment, with provision for cycling needing most improvement

3.5. The results of the 2014 National Highways and Transport Survey of local authorities were published in October. The survey results show that Hampshire is now ranked second for the Key Indicator on customer satisfaction with rights of way. This continues an upward trend, showing an improvement from 9th place in 2013, and 13th in 2012.

3.6. The third meeting of the Task and Finish Group is scheduled for November, when officers will present the findings from the consultations and the Oral Evidence session. Proposals for the structure and content of the revised Countryside Access Plan will be tabled for discussion.

3.7. It is intended that a fourth meeting to finalise the draft Countryside Access Plan is held in December, with this plan then being presented to Select Committee in early 2015. Following Committee approval, the draft plan will be presented to the Executive Member, with a view to it being published for public consultation in the spring.

4. Recommendation

4.1. It is recommended that the Select Committee notes the progress made by the Task and Finish Group.

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:

No Impact Assessment has been prepared for the setting up of this Group. However, any decisions taken following the recommendations of the Group will be undertaken subject to the usual Impact Assessments.

Appendix 1 – Programme of meetings:

Date	Main focus	Purpose/Summary
10/07/14	Introduction and Terms of Reference	• Context of Countryside Access within Countryside Service, and requirement for the Access Strategy • Overview of extent of Access Team's work • Current resources – people, maintenance costs • Access Strategy: SWOT Analysis and Indicative Action Plan • Countryside Access Plan: Requirement to revise and update the current 2008-2013 Plan, including stakeholder consultation and proposed public survey on assessment of needs • Outline content of future meetings • Communications
15/09/14	Oral Evidence Session	• Key stakeholders invited to present their ideas on: o main issues for countryside access in Hampshire o how these issues might be addressed o what the stakeholders themselves think their role could be • Q&A session • Key stakeholders present: o Hampshire Association of Local Councils o Hampshire Countryside Access Forum o New Forest Access Forum o South Downs Local Access Forum
20/11/14 @ 10am	Select Committee	Progress Report
Nov 2014	Survey Results	• Analysis of results of stakeholder and public surveys on Countryside Access Plan revision • Agree format of revised Plan
Dec 2014	Draft Countryside Access Plan	• Amendment and approval of Draft Plan • Agree publication and communication methods
19/01/15 @ 10am	Select Committee	Approval of Draft Plan
19/01/15 @ 2pm	Executive Member Decision Day	Executive Member Decision

Appendix 2 – Summary of findings from Oral Evidence Session:

Hampshire Association of Local Councils
Key Issues:

- Need for more information about how to resolve problems – e.g. what a Parish Council is allowed to do; what a landowner should do; where to go for guidance
- There is a lack of knowledge about land ownership – many PCs are prepared to approach landowners if they know who they are
- The process for claiming new rights of way is lengthy and onerous; this can lead to stress between the community and the relevant landowner(s)

South Downs Local Access Forum
Key Issues:

- Need to keep the network of paths in good condition i.e. properly recorded, reasonably passable, full width available, properly marked, and cross-boundary routes managed consistently as through routes
- Use of roads as part of the access network is helpful, but busy roads can also be a barrier to access. Use of cars to get to the countryside should be discouraged as cars can be visually and aurally intrusive
- The existing rights of way network doesn't necessarily meet modern needs. Some routes that may have historic importance are not as important now, and there are gaps in the network. There may be scope to promote some minor and unmetalled roads as part of the access network

Hampshire Countryside Access Forum
Key Issues:

- The existing network of paths should be kept in usable condition for all users, although the high cost of this was recognised especially on byways where damage has been caused by vehicle use. Enforcement of landowner responsibilities is important – but less important than regular maintenance. Some temporary closures, particularly where they relate to bridge repairs/replacement, are perceived as being too lengthy
- The most effective way of improving the network would be to improve connectivity, including getting out of towns and villages on foot and by bike. Some connections could be made by using road verges and permissive paths
- Rights of way, and their use, have a significant impact on land management – both in terms of landowner responsibilities and irresponsible or ill-informed use by the public. More could be done to address this through education and the provision of information, including on-site information provided by the land owner

New Forest Access Forum
Key Issues:

- The condition of the rights of way network affects the use it gets. The more usable the network is the wider the use is spread. It is important to have up-to-date information about the condition of routes so that people can decide where to go to walk, cycle and ride. People would be willing to help address some of the problems if there was guidance to follow about what they could do
- Better access to the countryside from urban areas is needed. For example, more crossing places on major A roads. Too many people use cars to travel relatively short distances to go for a walk or bike ride
- There is an opportunity to use quieter roads as part of the access network. Roads could be promoted as an integral part of the path network by using signage and road markings. Education about sharing the roads is needed, especially in relation to speed of travel when passing