

Hampshire Countryside Access Plan 2015-2025

Policies and actions to improve countryside access in Hampshire

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Introduction

Hampshire's countryside access network is an extensive and diverse resource, highly valued by residents and visitors alike. It provides not only a transport network but enriches our quality of life, contributing to good physical and mental health, community cohesion and a strong rural economy.

The term "countryside access" describes the largely off-road, free-to-use network of paths and open spaces which together provide the infrastructure that connects people with the natural environment. It is used both for utility journeys (travelling from place to place) and for leisure/recreation, and comprises a mixture of statutory, permissive and informal access. The 2,800 miles (4,200 km) of Hampshire's public rights of way network (footpaths, bridleways and byways) includes both urban and rural paths and forms the backbone of the countryside access network.

During 2012-13, in an average week 41% of adults in England visited the natural environment; in over a quarter of these visits people spent money during their visit, and in Hampshire this equated to £580 million¹. The countryside access network provides a free at the point of use resource close to where people live. Studies have shown an association between walking and a reduction in deaths from all causes, ranging from 19–30% depending on the frequency and length of walking activities; a large study in Copenhagen similarly showed that those who did not cycle regularly experienced a 39% higher mortality rate than those who did². The recommended physical activity levels of 30 minutes, 5 times a week has been shown to release endorphins, reduce blood pressure, improve heart health and halve the risk of Alzheimer's³.

Preparing the Plan

Hampshire County Council recognises the importance of caring for and improving the countryside access network and published its first Countryside Access Plan in 2008. A thoroughly-researched document, it provided a very sound body of evidence on the issues and needs, enabling the Countryside Service to direct resources to best effect and leading to a plethora of partnership working.

The Plan has now been updated to respond to changes in people's experiences and expectations and to changes in context including national policy and the economic climate. A new assessment of needs was carried out as described below and this research and officers' experience of implementing the original plan have shaped the new Plan. Resources available to the County Council are now more limited and are unlikely to increase significantly during the life of this Plan. There is therefore a need to target resources more efficiently and implementation of this Countryside Access Plan will do so, focussing them where they are needed most for the coming decade.

This document and its predecessor fulfil the requirement to publish and review a "Rights of Way Improvement Plan", introduced by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. As the title 'Countryside Access Plan' implies, Hampshire has chosen to take a wider approach than solely addressing rights of way.

This document should be read in conjunction with the existing seven area plans from 2008, which are rich in detail and provide the full background on which this plan is based.

¹ Natural England's 'Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment' survey

² 'Guidance on the economic appraisal of health effects related to walking and cycling' World Health Org (2007)

³ 'The benefits of regular walking for health, well-being and the environment' C3 Collaborating for Health (2012)

Assessment of Needs

The 2008 Countryside Access Plan was based on extensive engagement with a wide range of stakeholders over several years, with an emphasis on open questions seeking qualitative input which was then tested through surveys. In reviewing the plan, these findings were re-checked in both quantitative and qualitative ways to see if they are still relevant today - and identification of new issues was invited. The assessment of needs took place between June and October 2014 and comprised the following:

- Workshops were held with the three Local Access Forums (LAFs) who together cover Hampshire, to explore the issues and what they would like to see in a revised Countryside Access Plan. The Forums were asked to think freely about what the new plan should say.
- A survey of stakeholders was sent direct to organisations that use, manage or have an influence on the countryside access network, including all those required by legislation. This asked some detailed questions about both countywide and local issues, provision for different user types and different land types and awareness of funding and advice available. A good level of detail was received from a wide range of organisations.
- A survey of members of the public was advertised through a press release, social media, via user groups and made available at Country Parks and some local shows. A large volume of responses was received and over a third of people made detailed comments as well as answering the multiple-choice questions, which enabled a fuller understanding in the analysis. This survey was effective in reaching beyond the organisations that we would normally speak to, since two-thirds of respondents were not members of user or other interest groups.
- Feedback from Parish and Town Councils at a conference provided by the Countryside Service in June 2014. Parish and Town Councils also responded to the stakeholder survey described above.

The findings from each of the above are given in more detail in the Appendix 'Assessment of Needs', available on the Countryside Access Plan website.

The results were remarkably consistent across all sources, and have driven the content and structure of this revised plan:

- The eight county-wide issues identified in the 2008 plan are still the most relevant issues today:
 - Condition of the rights of way network
 - Getting to the countryside from urban areas
 - Using roads as part of the access network
 - Connectivity of routes
 - Impacts on land management
 - Information provision
 - Meeting the needs of all users
 - Joint working with other countryside interests
- Two of the issues from the list above emerged strongly from all sources as carrying greater priority. The issue seen almost universally as being of highest priority was 'Maintaining and improving the condition of the rights of way network', conveying a clear message that respondents would like the Countryside Service to concentrate on its 'core' work. The second priority was 'Improving connectivity of the network'; whilst overall satisfaction levels are high and walkers are generally well catered for, all sources clearly stated a need for

more paths which can be used by cyclists and horse-riders and improved road connections between them.

- The research suggested that the issue “Meeting the needs of all users” be expanded to incorporate initiatives promoting the awareness of the perspectives of other users, particularly on shared use paths and on roads, and of the needs of landowners.
- The removal of limitations such as stiles was welcomed as assisting those with mobility difficulties including the elderly and people with pushchairs, and there was recognition that this group will also benefit from greater provision for cyclists and horse-riders since there is strong correlation in requirements for gradients, absence of steps, path widths and surfaces.
- Government asked authorities reviewing their plans to assess the need for access to woodland. In Hampshire, the research showed that there is no significantly greater need to improve access in any of the major land types, including woodland.
- Views on the adequacy of provision for motorised vehicle users were strongly polarised across all sources, with many respondents seeing this use as inappropriate, some objecting to devoting resources to provision, and a significant number of comments stating that motor vehicle access is detrimental to path condition. However, for a minority this access is highly valued and some users were willing to help maintain the resource themselves.
- There is a clear need to continue to work in partnership, and partners and potential partners strongly welcome this. An emphasis should therefore be placed on initiatives and specific projects which do so effectively.
- Although the seven area-based plans which together formed the original Plan had worked well and many stakeholders felt that the status quo should continue, others saw a need for a single, concise county-wide plan which could more easily integrate with other strategies.

The officer perspective

The Countryside Access Plan will direct and focus the work of the Countryside Service. The views and ideas of staff members with experience of working on Hampshire’s countryside access network over many years, and of implementing the original Plan, were sought. Staff members were keen to see the following broad areas incorporated:

- A more proactive, targeted response, concentrating on where the benefit is greatest
- Support for other organisations and/or volunteers who wish to maintain or improve paths
- More explicit links to new areas of policy such as health and well-being strategies
- An emphasis on initiatives to improve confidence of users and accessibility e.g. good signage and changing stiles to gates
- Actions which are able to respond to changes in legislation and in available funding

Examples of more detailed suggestions were:

- A response to the growth in demand for cycling routes, particularly family-friendly trails
- A recognition that circular routes from villages and urban centres are often the most important to people and similarly that, for many people, long distance routes perhaps have greater significance as a series of short sections which form part of circular routes

...and in terms of the structure and management of the revised Plan:

- Working Groups were established for each of the seven areas prior to the 2008 plan, comprising local users, landowners and organisations. These groups were pivotal in

providing information from a huge range of path users and a shared understanding of issues, considerably enhanced officers' contact with people 'on the ground' and subsequently provided a consultative group for delivering the plan. The legacy of these groups will not be lost but in future it may be more effective and time-efficient to work with project-specific groups as needed and through the Local Access Forums

- The seven area plans which formed the last Plan describe and justify the issues completely, and were the product of a thorough bottom-up approach appropriate for the first such strategy. However, boundaries do not match those of major partners such as District Councils and the wealth of information has meant that few can be familiar with it all. There is now opportunity to form one succinct, county-wide plan, more able to integrate with and influence other strategies and hence provide access to funding and shared projects. The seven area plans contain a wealth of relevant information and so should remain for reference

Rationale and Overview

This second Countryside Access Plan for Hampshire builds on the first Plan, and describes how rights of way and access to the countryside will be managed over the coming years. During the research undertaken for the preparation of this Plan three distinct policy areas have emerged. Between them, the policy areas include the eight issues that were originally identified as, and which are still regarded as, the most important issues across the county. The table on page 11 shows how the policy areas relate to the eight issues.

The primary focus of the Countryside Access Plan for 2015-2025 is to set out how these areas of work will be addressed. The seven area plans published alongside the first county wide Plan are retained, unchanged, for reference and to provide guidance on how the strategic policies may be implemented at a more local level.

One important new aspect associated with managing and improving countryside access is the increased need to develop the financial sustainability of the access network. In recognition of this need, the Plan sets out an intention to seek new opportunities to make improvements to the network to meet changing needs, in a way that provides most widespread benefit, and which ensures that the maintenance costs of adding to the network are accounted for. This includes the need to interact with the planning system, to work in partnership with others especially when seeking funding, and a requirement to work flexibly in the support of volunteers and other groups. The potential to generate income through partnerships with the private sector will also be considered. A knowledge and appreciation of the strategic importance of the network will be essential in order to maximise the potential for financial sustainability.

POLICY AREA: DEVELOPING A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO NETWORK MANAGEMENT

Objective: to focus existing and future resources on those routes which provide the most benefit to residents, visitors and the local economy

Respondents to every element of the research clearly said that the top priority should be maintaining and improving the condition of the countryside access network. There was also a strong demand for improved connectivity for cyclists and horse-riders, whose available network is often disjointed; this could include use of footpaths/ways, verges, quiet lanes and new paths. Improved infrastructure for cyclists and horse-riders will also benefit those with mobility difficulties.

In order to achieve both of these priorities, resources need to be focussed so that investment is targeted where it will have the most benefit to most people.

The existing countryside access network includes rights of way, informal paths, cycleways, permissive access and sections of road, pavement and verge. The Service will work with others to identify a strategic, county-wide network within this which incorporates the key links between centres of population and places of interest in Hampshire's countryside, both at present and looking to meet future needs.

Once these strategically important routes are defined, the Service will work with others in the County Council, and will prioritise its own resources, to actively manage the routes so that people can be confident of finding a useful network of easy to use, easy to follow paths.

In 2014/2015, for the first time, external funding accounted for over 50% of the total funding for countryside access improvements in the county. Such funding is usually short-term, capital funding specific to particular paths/areas, obtained through bids and often, but not always, becomes available at little notice. The identification of strategically important routes will assist in securing further funding for future improvements. It will form the basis of future discussions between the Countryside Service and local planning authorities, organisations delivering strategies with similar aims and those holding funds, proactively seeking opportunity to improve or add to the network. For example, countryside access forms part of the green infrastructure and sustainable transport elements required in order for new housing developments to obtain planning consent; there is opportunity not just to ensure that these requirements are fulfilled but to proactively seek routes which will add value to the network, and for which arrangements for on-going maintenance can be agreed.

The benefits to both physical and mental health are increasingly recognised - studies have shown that availability of access to natural environments results in increased rates of physical activity for all age groups and particularly benefits those on lower incomes, and that contact with nature measurably reduces physiological stress indicators, which can lead to reductions in blood pressure, heart rate and stress hormones, with consequent reductions in health spending. The 2011 Natural Environment White Paper "The Natural Choice" states that *"From April 2013, Directors of Public Health will be...ideally placed to influence local services, for example joining up activity on rights of way, countryside access and green space management to improve public health by connecting people with nature."*

Changes in legislation throughout the life of this Plan are likely to provide both opportunities and challenges. New legislation expected in 2015, for example, will introduce both greater flexibility and a set timetable in responding to requests to divert or otherwise alter the line or status of rights of way. Similarly, proposals to set an end date for adding unrecorded historical rights of way to the legal record are likely to bring a rush of applications. The Countryside Service must respond to new

legislation through appropriate changes to policy and working practices, which may require additional resources. Where possible it will seek to do so in a way which gives precedence to strategically important routes.

Policy Area: Developing a strategic approach to network management					
Action	Timescale			Cost (rough scale, £ - £££)	Staff (rough scale, S - SSS)
	Short	Med	Long		
Produce mapping which identifies strategically important routes following consultation with key stakeholders; explain and promote the concept of this network to partners.	✓			£	S
Audit the strategically important routes and develop a strategy to proactively manage them, incorporating path maintenance, improvements to surface/drainage/structures, signage and promotion of through-routes and creation of new links.	✓	✓		£	S
Revise internal policies to ensure that strategically important routes have a high priority, including for maintenance, resolving issues and changes to the Definitive Map.	✓				S
Maximise the use of external funding opportunities to develop strategically important routes. Forge connections with strategically important partners including Local Economic Partnerships, planning authorities and the Health and Wellbeing Board, and form links both internally and externally where joint objectives can be met more efficiently through working together. Develop a suite of costed schemes to call on when responding to short-term funding opportunities.	✓	✓	✓		SS
Deliver improvements to strategically important routes as opportunities arise, whether through funding availability, landowner assistance or proactive interaction with the planning system.	✓	✓	✓	£££	SSS
Examine, and update where appropriate, existing policies and working practices, and develop new policies and practices, to ensure the Service operates efficiently and responsively. To include a review of the policy on the Management of Vehicles in the Countryside.	✓	✓	✓		SS
Identify changes required following new legislation and update policies and processes as appropriate, giving precedence to strategically important routes where possible.	✓	✓	✓		SS

POLICY AREA: WORKING WITH OTHER ORGANISATIONS AND WITH VOLUNTEERS

Objective: to enable a greater response to local needs through working with others

Partnership working has become an increasingly important and effective way of meeting local needs, and actions in all three policy areas rely on working with others. Some of these will be larger-scale, capital projects to develop strategically important routes, working with larger and statutory organisations such as the National Park Authorities and District Councils. Many others are relatively small-scale, low-cost projects, resolving issues on paths which are unlikely to form part of the Strategic Network but are important in serving the needs of local communities. It is the latter to which this policy area relates, often led by local organisations and groups whose members give their time voluntarily.

Recent initiatives have included working with Ramblers to improve waymarking, with Parish and Town Councils on path surfacing, replacing stiles with gates and promotion of the local network, and with landowners to improve links. In the 2012/13 financial year, the time spent by volunteers working with the Countryside Service to improve paths equated to an additional 6 full-time rangers on the ground (to put this in context, the Service currently employs 8 rangers for the countryside access network).

Research for this document showed an almost universal willingness from organisations and volunteers to continue working with Hampshire's Countryside Service and wide awareness of the grants and advice available. The Service values this input highly and welcomes this clear expression of support.

The Countryside Service is aware that organisations and individuals are willing to do even more if guidance were available, and so it will further develop the way it works with and supports volunteers, local user groups and organisations, providing appropriate and accessible grants, advice and toolkits.

In particular, the Countryside Service will seek to build on good established relationships with Parish and Town Councils to enable them to tackle local issues directly where they are willing to do so, through regular liaison, toolkits and funding. The Service recognises in particular the need for good communication given the inevitably high turnover of Parish/Town clerks.

Policy Area: Working with other organisations and with volunteers					
Action	Timescale			Cost (rough scale, £ - £££)	Staff (rough scale, S - SSS)
	Short	Med	Long		
Provide and promote appropriate and accessible grants, advice and toolkits enabling partnership solutions to local issues. Continue to develop existing initiatives such as Stiles to Gates, the Small Grants Scheme and the Waymarking scheme, and seek to expand this where appropriate.	✓	✓	✓	££	SS

Co-ordinate and integrate the contribution of volunteers in the day-to-day work of the Countryside Service; enable groups to work independently where appropriate.	✓	✓	✓	£	S
Where there is a community or group who wish to do so, enable and support them to maintain specific routes/parts of the network in an appropriate manner.	✓	✓	✓		S
Support Parish and Town Councils through events, regular liaison with officers, promotion and review of the Parish Reference Guide, and the construction of appropriate toolkits. Seek involvement in new clerk training. Offer assistance to Parishes in setting work programmes for their lengthsman or contractors.	✓	✓	✓	£	SS
Explore the potential for further Parish & Town Council involvement in network management and improvement, e.g. extending the Lengthsman scheme, wardening, the formation of voluntary Parish working groups, path problem report protocols and providing information for 'new homeowner' packs.	✓	✓	✓	£	SS

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POLICY AREA: LISTENING, INFORMING, EDUCATING

Objective: to ensure that information on finding paths and using them responsibly, and on managing public access, is widely available and easily understood

This is a broad policy area and encompasses many of the softer measures which the research identified as being important to countryside access users and landowners as well as responses to opportunities and challenges brought by changes in technology and the wider world. Throughout, approaches to meeting these needs have been balanced against the clear message from the research that the bulk of resources should be devoted to the core work of maintaining and improving the network.

Lack of confidence in using the network can be a major barrier to use; people can be unsure how to find and identify paths, what they will be like and how to use them.

Accurate signage provides certainty for both users and landowners on the location of rights of way, encouraging use and reducing the likelihood of paths being unintentionally blocked or diverted by landowners. Missing or inaccurate signage is by far the most common reason for rights of way failing the annual 'Ease of use' survey, and is a relatively simple issue to put right. A short term investment will therefore be made to address reported signage issues, followed by a longer term approach through volunteer assistance, if possible.

Residents and visitors also want ideas about where to go and information on what they will find when they get there. The Countryside Service has a long tradition of providing printed leaflets, but there is growing potential to work with organisations who share a common interest in promoting countryside access and may have more marketing expertise to convey this material to a wider market. Alongside this, the Countryside Service will continue to provide freely available, online maps of rights of way and promoted routes.

The 2008 Countryside Access Plan prompted investment in a digital mapping system, providing easy to use, scrollable online mapping for the public and the ability for officers to log and manage issues on an 'offline' version. The research showed that people wanted to see online if issues with paths had been reported and if so when they may be resolved; the mapping system will be further developed to provide this information, which will also reduce the officer time required in responding to individual requests.

Improving understanding of how to find and use the countryside access network among children is desirable for future sustainable and responsible countryside access, although challenging to achieve given schools' curriculum and budget pressures. The Service will explore possibilities for working through existing channels such as school visits to Country Parks, the Trailblazer programme and supporting Parish and Town Councils who are interested in doing so. It will also investigate the potential for developing a bespoke module or activity, with links to the National Curriculum, which introduces countryside access to children.

Whilst recorded incidents of conflict on paths are low, the research showed that some users may inadvertently affect the enjoyment of others and there was a desire for greater understanding of each other's perspectives. For example, horses can be spooked by cyclists that they haven't heard approaching, walkers taking up the width of a path can block others, and dog owners may not realise the effect on the landowner when a dog runs into crops or interacts with livestock. The Countryside Service will work with groups such as the Local Access Forums to develop a joint approach to increasing understanding.

Finally, given increasing pressure on resources, the Countryside Service needs to develop greater understanding of the effectiveness of the actions in this Plan. New mechanisms will be designed to monitor customer satisfaction and achievements against the Countryside Access Plan objectives.

Policy Area: Listening, Informing, Educating					
Action	Timescale			Cost (rough scale, £ - £££)	Staff (rough scale, S - SSS)
	Short	Med	Long		
Deliver a programme of short-term signage improvements, followed by a longer-term volunteer initiative.	✓	✓	✓	£	S
Review the approach to promotion of routes – explore the potential for partnerships with other organisations, particularly those that have more expertise and experience in this field.		✓			S
Revise the Countryside Access web-pages to ensure that information is easy to find, up-to-date and accurate. Develop the use of social media to promote a wider awareness and to provide appropriate, timely updates.	✓				SS
Develop online mapping to show path issues which have been reported and progress in resolving them.	✓			£	S
Seek to work with volunteers to map infrastructure such as gates, stiles, steps and bridges, both for public information and to assist in asset and network management; commencing with the strategically important routes.		✓	✓	£	S
Explore possibilities for improving understanding among children of how to find and use the countryside access network, working through existing channels such as school visits to Country Parks, the Trailblazer programme and supporting Parish and Town Councils who are interested in doing so.		✓	✓	£	SS
Develop and make available to schools and other education providers a modular lesson plan, with links to the National Curriculum, about access to the countryside.	✓			£	S
Work with groups such as the Local Access Forums to increase understanding between different types of user and increase understanding of landowner perspectives.		✓			S
Collate and review existing customer satisfaction and performance data. Develop mechanisms to enable annual monitoring and reporting against the Countryside Access Plan objectives.	✓				S

Relationship between the county-wide issues and the policy areas

The research undertaken for this revision of the CAP showed that the eight county-wide issues identified in the 2008 CAP were still relevant and correct, and that two of these ('Condition of the rights of way network' and 'Connectivity of routes') are considered to be the most important and should therefore be given a high priority. The table below shows how the eight originally identified issues will be addressed within the three policy areas that form the structure of the revised CAP.

County-wide Issue	Associated Policy Areas	Example action or comment
Condition of the rights of way network (priority issue)	Developing a strategic approach to network management	Audit the strategically important routes and develop a strategy to proactively manage them, incorporating path maintenance, improvements to surface/drainage/structures, signage and promotion of through-routes and creation of new links
	Working with other organisations and with volunteers	Provide and promote appropriate and accessible grants, advice and toolkits enabling partnership solutions to local issues. Continue to develop existing initiatives such as Stiles to Gates, the Small Grants Scheme and the Waymarking scheme, and seek to expand this where appropriate.
	Listening, Informing, Educating	Deliver a programme of short-term signage improvements, followed by a longer-term volunteer initiative.
Getting to the countryside from urban areas	Developing a strategic approach to network management	<i>This policy area centres on identifying and proactively managing strategically important routes, incorporating 'the key links between centres of population and places of interest'.</i>
Using roads as part of the access network	Developing a strategic approach to network management	Deliver improvements to the strategically important routes as opportunities arise, whether through funding availability, landowner assistance or proactive interaction with the planning system.
Connectivity of routes (priority issue)	Developing a strategic approach to network management	Use external funding opportunities to realise improvements to, and development of, the strategically important routes.
	Working with other organisations and with volunteers	Provide and promote appropriate and accessible grants, advice and toolkits enabling partnership solutions to local issues.

Impacts on land management	Listening, Informing, Educating	Work with groups such as the Local Access Forums to increase understanding between different types of user and increase understanding of landowner perspectives.
Information provision	Listening, Informing, Educating	Revise the Countryside Access web-pages to ensure that information is easy to find, up-to-date and accurate. Develop the use of social media to promote a wider awareness and to provide appropriate, timely updates.
Meeting the needs of all users	<p>Working with other organisations and with volunteers</p> <p>Listening, Informing, Educating</p>	<p>Provide and promote appropriate and accessible grants, advice and toolkits enabling partnership solutions to local issues.</p> <p>Work with groups such as the Local Access Forums to increase understanding between different types of user and increase understanding of landowner perspectives.</p>
Joint working with other countryside interests	<p>Developing a strategic approach to network management</p> <p>Listening, Informing, Educating</p>	<p>Use external funding opportunities to realise improvements to, and development of, strategically important routes. Identify common aims with partners' strategies and explore potential [joint] funding.</p> <p>Work with groups such as the Local Access Forums to increase understanding between different types of user and increase understanding of landowner perspectives.</p>