

HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**Report**

Committee:	Culture and Communities Select Committee
Date:	19 January 2015
Title:	Draft Hampshire Countryside Access Plan
Reference:	6404
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 report on the preparation of a revised Countryside Access Plan, to seek endorsement of the draft plan and authority to consult the public on this plan. The plan has been prepared in consultation with a Select Committee Task and Finish Group. 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 draft plan is appended to this report at Appendix 1, along with supporting documents giving greater detail on the legal background to the plan and the needs assessment which has been undertaken at Appendix 2.

2. Context

- 2.1. 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. 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.
- 2.2. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 placed a duty on Highway Authorities to publish and review a Rights of Way Improvement Plan. Statutory Guidance was provided by Defra in 2002, which remains in force.

¹ Natural England's 'Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment' survey 2013

- 2.3. In 2008 Hampshire County Council fulfilled this duty by publishing its Countryside Access Plans². 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.
- 2.4. In a report to the Executive Member in May 2014, it was noted that the Countryside Access Plans were at the end of their term and that officers would carry out the necessary research to prepare a new plan for the Executive Member's consideration. The Executive Member requested that the Culture and Communities Select Committee consider establishing a task and finish group to support the process, which it subsequently did.
- 2.5. The Countryside Service has, under the guidance of the Task and Finish group and in accordance with the legislation, carried out a needs assessment as described below. A draft revised plan for 2015-2025 is now presented for consideration, prior to public consultation.

3. Assessment of Needs

- 3.1. In accordance with statutory guidance, in order to prepare a revised plan, an assessment of needs took place between June and October 2014 and comprised:

Workshops with the three Local Countryside Access Forums, who together cover Hampshire. The workshops explored the issues and what the forums 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, sent directly to organisations whose members 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. 78 responses were received (35 Parish Councils, 9 District Councils, 10 user groups 24 other organisations).

A survey of members of the public, asking about their own experiences advertised through a press release, social media, via user groups and made available at Country Parks and some local shows. 875 responses were received.

A Parish and Town Council conference, hosted by the Countryside Service in June 2014.

Workshops with the Countryside Access Team. These workshops looked at the strengths and weaknesses of the existing plans from a practitioner perspective and considered operational aspects of the plan.

² <http://www3.hants.gov.uk/countryside/access-plans.htm> This comprises seven detailed area based plans and one over-arching Countywide document which draws together the themes from each of the plans.

An oral evidence session of the Task and Finish Group, where members of the three Local Access Forums and of Hampshire Association of Local Councils explained their views directly to Councillors and responded to questions.

3.2. The findings of the needs assessment were discussed by the Task and Finish group. The results were remarkably consistent across all sources, and provided a strong mandate for the revised plan:

- The eight countywide 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’. The second priority was ‘Improving connectivity of the network’.
- Overall satisfaction levels are high. Nationally, Hampshire has the 2nd highest public satisfaction rating for rights of way amongst comparable authorities³ and 75% of responses to the public survey described above stated that the current network meets their needs reasonably or very well, and. Results indicate 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 the needs of landowners.
- 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.

³ National Highways and Transport Survey 2014.

3.3 Officers and Members welcomed the high levels of response and officers acknowledged the validity of the findings as reflecting day-to-day discussions with contacts. From experience of implementing the 2008 plan, officers requested that the following be considered in a revised plan:

- A more proactive, targeted response, concentrating on where the benefit is greatest.
- Continued and increased 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 flexibly to changes in legislation and in available funding.

4. Structure of the draft plan

4.1. It is pivotal to the success of any such plan that it is widely understood, becomes incorporated into the strategies of other departments and organisations and provides effective evidence of need in order to secure external funding. It is proposed that the attached draft plan replaces the 2008 countywide document but that the seven area-based plans, which are rich in detail, continue to be available for reference.

4.2. The needs assessment suggests some clear priorities. However, in preparing this plan, both Members and Officers have been mindful of the statutory duties of the County Council, the limited resources available to manage countryside access and the associated need, therefore, to develop a strategy which offers a financially sustainable approach to the future management of Countryside Access. It is therefore proposed that the revised plan comprises the following three policy areas.

4.3. **Developing a strategic approach to network management:** This policy area gives precedence in the revised plan to the two highest priority issues identified in the research: 'maintaining and improving the condition of the rights of way network' and 'improving connectivity'. In order to achieve this, resources need to be focussed so that investment is targeted where it will have the most benefit. Therefore, it is proposed that the Service will work with others to identify, from the exiting Countryside Access Network, the strategically important routes, which will then be actively managed and prioritised accordingly. It will also provide the basis for discussion with those organisations holding funding, seeking to provide improvements. Together, this will ensure that people can be confident of finding a network of easy to use, easy to follow paths.

- 4.4. Members noted that this is a departure from the current prioritisation in place and, in consideration of the financial constraints, will need to be carefully managed and monitored to ensure that the routes identified can be maintained at the required level. However, it was also recognised that there had already been considerable success in piloting this strategic approach, most notably in the development of the Shipwrights Way, which was delivered through a Partnership using an initial contribution of £277,000 s106 funding from East Hampshire District Council and subsequently attracting £640,000 match funding by March 2014. This in turn led to further satellite projects. The Enterprise M3 LEP, for example, has recently approved a further £220,000 grant to implement a cycle route adjacent to the A325 between Bordon and Greatham. Members of the Task and Finish Group fully supported the proposed prioritisation approach.
- 4.5. **Working with other organisations and with volunteers** Partnership work has become an increasingly important and effective way of meeting local needs, particularly for relatively small-scale, low-cost projects on paths which have local value rather than strategic importance. Actions within this policy area reflect the strong desire identified in the stakeholder survey to work with the Service. It is proposed that existing partnership initiatives providing grants, advice and toolkits continue and are further developed to respond to opportunities to achieve more with these resources.
- 4.6. Members fully welcome and acknowledge both the current and future contributions needed by volunteers in delivering access work. Members recognised the importance of the gearing effect associated with the grant support given to the Small Grants Scheme through the Local Access Forum, both in terms of financial leverage (as described in the table below) and through the shared knowledge, skills and understanding this provides.

Year	Projects	HCC Funding (£)	Additional External Contributions (£)
2011/12	34	55,209	68,105
2012/13	20	49,340	52,941
2013/14	39	51,487	61,625
2014/15*	26	50,000	31,015.55
2015/16**		47,550	

*Part year figures, indicating number of projects and match funding up to December 2014.

**Proposed allocation.

- 4.7. Members would like to see this funding, and an additional grant of £12,415 which supports volunteering across the Service, secured and ring fenced for crucial enabling works linked to volunteer projects directly supporting the aims of the Countryside Service across the County. Members recommend that this budget of £59,965 is transferred to the Countryside Service and ring fenced to help volunteer work with an annual report on the outcomes achieved.
- 4.8. **Listening, Informing, Educating:** Encouraging the use and enjoyment of the countryside access network, providing accurate and easy to use information, working with others to promote the network and supporting

responsible behaviour through education and awareness. This policy area incorporates the 'soft' measures which the research identified.

- 4.9. Members particularly noted the value and importance of engaging with children and young people, and specifically requested that consideration be given to developing an approach to education which linked with the national curriculum and could be delivered by a variety of education providers.

5. Public consultation

- 5.1 It is proposed that the draft Countryside Access Plan 2015-2025 is made available for public consultation from late January until 31st March 2015. The consultation will abide by the Rights of Way Improvement Plan legislation and the standards agreed for County Council consultations. Following the consultation, the final plan will be returned to Executive Member for further consideration and endorsement.

6. Conclusions

- 6.1. The County Council is legally required to revise the Countryside Access Plan. Under the guidance of the Task and Finish sub-group of the Culture and Communities Select Committee, a draft plan has been prepared for the coming decade which aims to deliver what people have told us is most important through the most effective, efficient use of resources including, opportunities to work in partnership.

7. Recommendation(s)

That the Culture and Communities Select Committee recommend to the Executive Member for Culture, Recreation and Countryside that he:

- Notes the Assessment of Needs, the work of the Culture and Communities Select Committee and its Task & Finish Group in guiding the process
- Endorses the draft Countryside Access Plan 2015-25, pending the outcome of public consultation
- Supports the proposal from the Task and Finish Group to transfer the current existing grants of £59,965 to the Countryside Service, in direct support of on-going volunteer projects in the Countryside Service.
- Approves the proposed public consultation on the draft Countryside Access Plan

CORPORATE OR LEGAL INFORMATION:

Links to the Corporate Strategy

Hampshire safer and more secure for all:	no
Maximising well-being:	yes
Enhancing our quality of place:	yes

OTHER SIGNIFICANT LINKS:

Links to Previous member decisions:

Title	Ref	Date
Countryside Access Strategy and Rights of Way Investment Plan	Exec Member for Culture, Recreation and Countryside	15 May 2014

Direct Links to Specific Legislation or Government Directives

Title	Date
Countryside and Rights of Way Act sections 60 and 61	2000
Rights of Way Improvement Plans; Statutory Guidance	2002
Letter dated 30 th June 2014 to all Local Highway Authority Chief Executives from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Water, Forestry, Rural Affairs and Resource Management	2014

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. Equality Duty

- 1.1. The County Council has a duty under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 ('the Act') to have due regard in the exercise of its functions to the need to:
- Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited under the Act;
 - Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic (age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, gender and sexual orientation) and those who do not share it;
 - Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

Due regard in this context involves having due regard in particular to:

- 1.2. The need to remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons sharing a relevant characteristic connected to that characteristic;
- 1.3. Take steps to meet the needs of persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic different from the needs of persons who do not share it;
- 1.4. Encourage persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.

Equalities Impact Assessment:

- 1.5. The intention of the plan 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.