

Environment and Infrastructure Select Committee

10 May 2018

Capital Investment and the role of volunteer and parish council input in maintaining public rights of way



Purpose of report: For Discussion

Introduction:

1. Surrey's public rights of way network comprises around 3,400km of publicly maintainable highway. The County Council's responsibilities include legal definition and changes to the path network, maintenance and enforcement. In recent years the total budget from the County Council for this work has been reduced by around 50% as a result of the funding pressures, against a background of increasing public demand for access to the countryside.
2. This report aims to outline some of the significant issues facing the County Council in respect of public rights of way at the present time including capital investment and the role of volunteers and parish councils in helping to maintain the network.

Financial and resource background

3. For 2017/18 the public rights of way revenue budget was £628,000 and the capital budget was £175,000. This is approximately 50% less than the total available budget 10 years ago. Increasing contractor and material costs over the same period has effectively reduced the resource further.
4. Demand from the public appears to be increasing with an average of 100 new reports being received by the team each week and a total of over 3,000 live issues/reports being in the system at any one time.
5. Annual capital funding of £175,000 currently provides replacement bridges and larger surface repair works, where paths would otherwise have to be closed on safety grounds.
6. Following an assessment of priorities across E&I management of all public rights of way bridges has been transferred to the Countryside Access Team. Approximately 30 bridges were replaced each year in previous years, but current capital funding allows for around 10- 15 bridges to be replaced each year. The effect of this reduction will be an increasing amount of paths closed

due to dangerous bridges, a reduction in the overall condition of the asset and an increasing maintenance backlog.

7. A priority statement for both Legal Definition and Maintenance and Enforcement is used to support staff on dealing with significant workloads and to target resources at high priorities such as public safety and significant financial or legal risks. These are attached as annex A.

Volunteer and parish council input

8. The Countryside Access Team currently supports a large and diverse volunteer work programme, with groups and individuals undertaking a wide range of tasks, such as: vegetation clearance, repairs to stiles/gates and path surfaces, bridge repairs and path condition surveys. Groups from the Surrey Ramblers and other interest groups, special needs groups and parish councils undertake tasks supervised by the Countryside Access Team. A Volunteer Path Warden scheme has been running successfully for around 4 years, with individual volunteers being trained and equipped with tools to undertake smaller maintenance tasks under their own supervision.
9. To expand the volunteer programme is likely to require resources such as tools, materials and staff supervision, as well as an increasing pool of willing volunteers.
10. The Countryside Access Team have recently invested in an interactive web form that allows work to be allocated out from the council's internal database to trained volunteers and for them to 'accept' or 'reject' tasks if they choose. The system will be rolled out over 2018/19 and it is hoped that this will allow more, smaller scale tasks to be completed by volunteers without significant extra resource required from SCC.
11. The new system will also allow parish councils to view all outstanding issues/reports in their areas, so that local funding can be targeted towards this work, if available and considered a local priority.

External Funding:

12. The Countryside Access Team has managed in recent years to attract funding for specific projects and in 2017/18 £415,900 was spent in Elmbridge and Redhill with additional smaller sums equalling over £10,000 on local access work and a further £4,000 spent by the Ramblers on gates. The latter is part of their ongoing programme to replace stiles with gates on the network. In addition £20,000 was received from the North Downs Way Officer for work on the paths that form the North Downs Way National Trail.

13. These are relatively small sums but show the scope to potential attract more, The sources included CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) Parish Councils, District and Borough Councils and larger scale transport infrastructure projects. Member involvement and support for local CIL funded schemes is important to raise the profile and potential of projects of the public rights of way network.
14. It should be recognised that there is an increasing backlog of statutory rights of way work that the Council is simply unable to complete given the current level of resources. The estimated cost of the current backlog of maintenance tasks is around £3,600,000. The team have set out priority statements to ensure the public are aware of what can be done, timescales and the order of that work. These will need to be reviewed annually in line with budgetary changes.
15. Working within the priority statements means many lower priority issues/reports will remain unresolved for significant lengths of time.
16. The team continue to seek efficiency improvements in all aspects of the teams work, such as the new web form for volunteers and will seek additional funding sources where available.
17. In addition the Strategy for the Countryside Estate, will set out the direction the overall service is going in to achieve financial self-sufficiency.

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| Recommendations: |
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18. The Committee are asked to note the report and input ideas on how the service and members can encourage and facilitate closer working with Parish Councils and local volunteer groups to support local input and increase funding.

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| Next steps: |
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Report contact: Steve Mitchell, Countryside Access and Operations Manager, Place Development Service.

Contact details: 020 8541 7040 steve.mitchell@surreycc.gov.uk

Sources/background papers: N/A

Annex A

GUIDANCE ON HOW SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL ASSESSES PRIORITIES FOR DEALING WITH MAINTENANCE AND ENFORCEMENT PROBLEMS ON THE RIGHTS OF WAY NETWORK

There are over 3500 km of public rights of way in Surrey which we divide into 4 areas, each with a countryside access officer. Due to the number of reports we receive it is essential for operational reasons that that we deal with certain issues first.

All maintenance and enforcement problems reported to Surrey County Council or

identified through inspections will be allotted a priority when they enter our on line system. We will consider the following factors when allocating a priority to a report:

- Level of danger to the public.
- Degree of hazard, obstruction, encroachment or inconvenience.
- Level of use, or likely use, of the path and the type of path (eg strategically important, route to schools, stations, town or village centre etc, SCC promoted route or National Trail).
- Inclusion as part of the County Council's promoted route network or National Trail.
- Volume of complaints received from different sources.
- Likely duration of problem.
- Cause of problem and whether it is within the County Council's powers to rectify.

This list is in no order of importance, nor weighting given to any factor.

Priorities will be assigned with consideration to the effect upon all public users of the rights of way network. Normally the order of priorities for dealing with problems will be as follows.

Priority 1

- Accident/incident where serious injury has occurred.
- Any matter that poses an immediate, significant danger to the public.
- Matter requiring immediate engineering attention (eg bridge, retaining wall, dam, large void in surface of path etc).

Priority 2

- New permanent obstruction **with no** alternative route.
- Live planning non-compliance that would lead to an irredeemable loss of path.
- Surface damage/disturbance preventing use by public.

- Obstructing/ fallen/ leaning trees or surface vegetation that prevent use on strategic routes (not already included in the annual vegetation cutting list programme).

Problems that would normally be allocated either a priority 3 or 4, if on a strategically important route will move up a priority number.

Priority 3

- Serious fault with non-County Council structure i.e stile or gate.
- Electric fencing without crossing aid.
- Repeated harassment and intimidating behaviour or notices.
- Temporary or significant obstruction **with no** alternative route.
- New permanent significant encroachment..
- Obstructing crops or ploughing which affect the use of the path.
- Surface/side/overhanging vegetation severely limiting path use (not already included in annual vegetation cutting programme).
- Surface conditions making access inconvenient (where previously maintained).
- Wilful removal of signpost in order to mislead the public.
- Replacement of missing roadside signs.
- Failure of adjacent fence/structure compromising public access

Priority 4

- Misleading Notice (other than those in Priority 3 above)
- Non-County Council structure making access inconvenient (eg high or ageing stile)
- Technical (legal) obstruction/encroachment.
- Surface vegetation/conditions spoiling enjoyment of path (not on annual vegetation cutting programme)
- Path maintenance requests not covered by higher priority (eg heavy vegetation)
- Path surfacing where not previously maintained, etc)
- New requests for handrails/steps/boardwalks/etc.
- Misuse of a public right of way by animals or other users so as to affect the use of the path.

Priority 5

- Boundary or private access issues that do not affect the public users of a path
- De minimus obstruction/encroachment

Pro-active and Cyclical Work

Certain matters will be dealt with pro-actively or cyclically outside the above priority

Guidelines. These include:

- Roadside sign replacement, waymarking and non roadside signposting (mainly during winter)
- Annual vegetation cutting programme (spring/autumn)