

Langport Cycleway Report

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Purpose of the Report

To update members on SSDC's work with local stakeholders to ensure a sustainable future for the Langport Cycleway, and its continued use by the community.

Public Interest

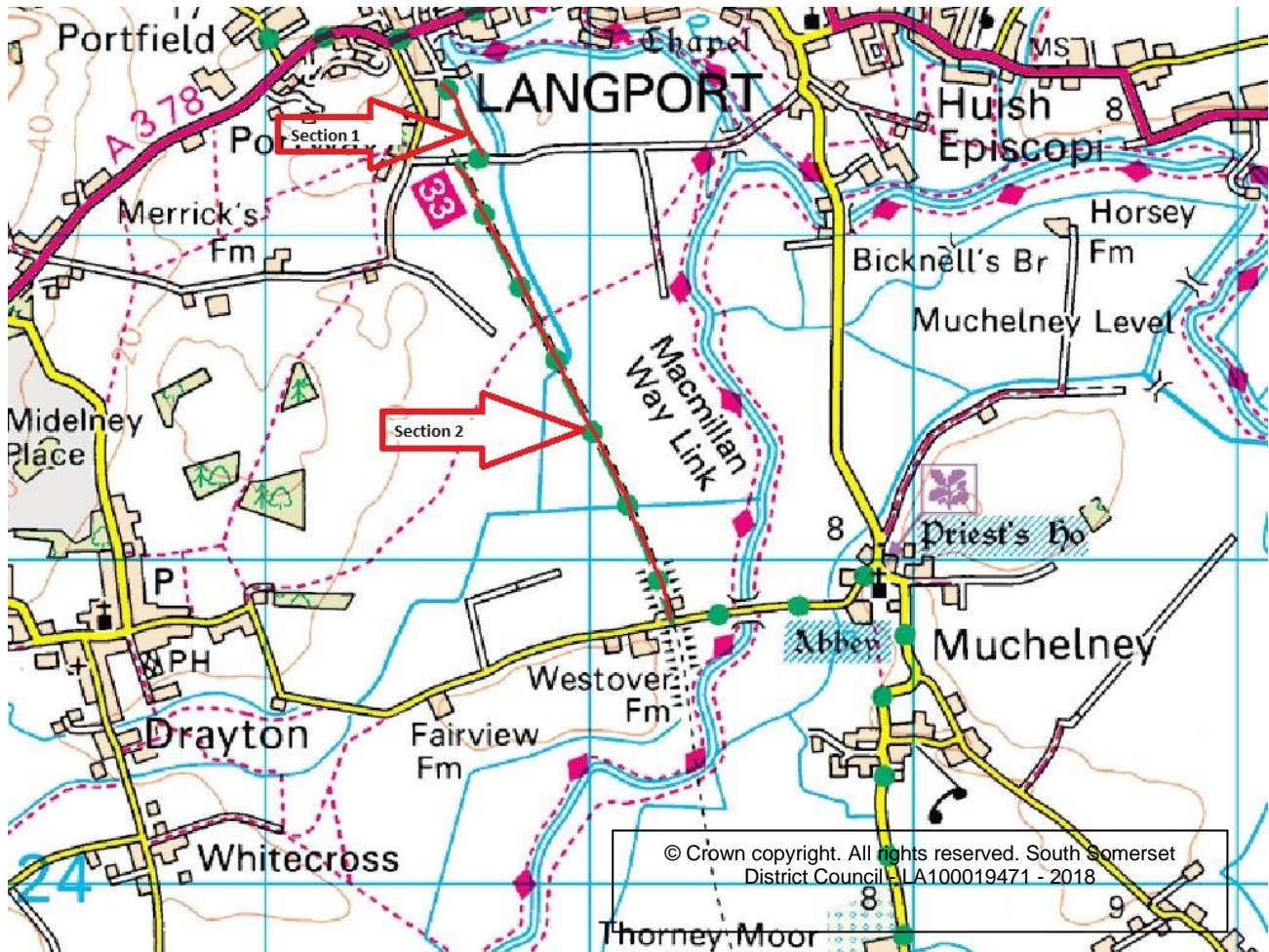
The cycleway runs from the edge of Langport through the parishes of Huish Episcopi and Drayton towards Muchelney. It follows a former railway line and provides a leisure facility for cyclists, walkers, horse riders and mobility vehicles. Initiated as part of the River Parrett Trail project, the cycleway has been managed by SSDC under license to two landowners; increased burdens on resources put the ongoing arrangement at risk, so officers are working with the community representatives to find a local, more sustainable solution.

Recommendations

1. That members note and comment on the report, including the appendix, which indicates that the cycleway is a well-used and popular resource for both the local community and for visitors to the area, and recognise the commitment of the parish and town councils to ensure its future use.
2. That members agree to accept a further report in June 2018, confirming local commitment including financial contributions, which will seek agreement for an Area North grant as part of an "invest to save" strategy.

Background

The Langport Cycleway is a 2.5km stretch of gravel surfaced amenity route (for walkers, cyclists and horse riders) that starts in Westover in the Parish of Huish Episcopi and runs southwards, crossing Huish Drove to join the former railway line. The route is in two parts; the first section is 500m adjacent to a ditch leading south from Westover. The route then crosses Huish Drove before heading southwards along the former railway line for 2km. Both sections cross privately owned land and are not designated Public Rights of Way (RoW). Access agreements were originally set up in 1998 with the land owners to allow for public access on foot, bicycle and horseback. Annual license fees are paid to the landowners, with an increase every three years linked to the Retail Price Index.



Section 1, 500m, £700 per annum, current license ends September 2018
 Section 2, 2km, £2,006 per annum, current license ends December 2018.

The route was originally negotiated as part of the River Parrett Trail (RPT) project when SSDC owned and operated (through a business tenant) the RPT Visitor Centre, linked to the regional River Parrett Trail. Although the RPT is still negotiable on the ground, it is not currently actively promoted. The River Parrett Trail is maintained by Somerset County Council (SCC) to the same standard as other Rights of Way as part of SCC's standard Public RoW maintenance programme. Most of the RPT follows public footpaths, with only small bridleway sections, and so is not available for cycle use.

The RPT Visitor Centre closed in 2012. The cycle business that had operated from the building was established to include cycle hire for use along the licensed route and was a key part of the business.

Current use is mainly local walkers, with some cyclists and occasional local horse riders. Recently a new cycle hire business has been established in Langport and future tourism proposals include recreational access to the water; all forming part of the tourism offer for Langport.

The Langport Cycleway section features in the National Cycleway Network as part of route NCR339 (previously NCR30).

The Langport Cycleway is currently paid for and maintained by the SSDC Countryside Service. Rangers attend four times a year to cut vegetation, repair gate furniture and carry out tree safety

surveys and associated works. The annual license fees are charged to the Countryside budget. This budget historically covered the RoW team who transferred to SCC in April 2010. When SSDC ended the 1974 RoW Maintenance Agency this budget was removed. The final year of an unavoidable budget pressure that covers only the cost of the license fees ended in March 2017. A report to Area North Committee at this time sought agreement for funding to allow officers time to ascertain current use of the cycleway, its strategic value and to investigate options for a more sustainable, local solution for its future management.

Summary of Consultation to Date

A range of individuals, groups & organisations have been consulted over the period and a public consultation was widely circulated. A summary of the results are below.

Public Health, Somerset County Council

Officers supported the retention of the route citing various evidence from NICE on the broad health benefits of walking and cycling. <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ph41>.

The value of cycling: rapid evidence review of the economic benefits of cycling. Easy (and free) access to a traffic free route is also key to encouraging children's cycling and healthy activities for families. <https://travelwest.info/essentialevidence/children>. There is also increasing evidence that access to the countryside and natural open spaces is good for your mental (as well as physical) health. <https://travelwest.info/project/ee-122-best-dose-nature-green-exercise-improving-mental-health>

Sustainable Transport (Sustrans)

Sustrans confirmed that the route is part of the National Cycle Route (NCR339) as an alternative to NCN33 (which is not complete to its final alignment: Bridgwater and Ilminster). Sustrans are currently reviewing the National Cycle Network (NCN) and producing plans for the future of all the NCN including this section and so at this time were not in a position to comment further.

Sustrans do manage a nationwide volunteer programme of volunteers. On routes such as this, complete reliance on volunteers would be too much to expect, but they can supplement routine maintenance contractors' efforts and reduce costs. Sustrans do not have the resources to manage this at Langport, but there may be local bodies well placed to do so. They suggested a 'Friends of the Path' organisation could be established to take on some of the burden and raise funds for rent and maintenance.

Tourism and Local Business

Cycle tourism remains a growth area and in Langport a new cycle hire business has established taking over the gap in the market when the original visitor centre closed. Langport acts as a gateway to the Levels, providing flat, easy cycling which can be appealing to visitors. <http://www.funding4sport.co.uk/downloads/cycle-tourism.pdf>

Langport is a recognised destination and stopping off point for cyclists and walkers; the local cafes, shops and restaurants benefitting from the increased business they bring to the town. Short breaks continue to be the most popular type of tourism visit to South Somerset; the offer of a variety of attractions and activities in and around the distinctive countryside and market towns is firmly supported in the Local Plan.

Local Plan

“Langport/Huish Episcopi is located within a sensitive and rural landscape, largely defined by its proximity to the Somerset Levels and Moors. Much of the town is surrounded by areas of high flood risk due to its proximity to the River Parrett and its flood plain, much of which forms the Somerset Levels and Moors. The Somerset Levels and Moors are highly valued both in terms of wildlife, with parts being internationally recognised for its wildlife presence as a Special Protection Area (SPA) and Ramsar, and cultural and recreation opportunities. Tourism is important for the town with many small businesses being linked to providing facilities and attractions for visitors attracted by the opportunities to walk, cycle and ride horses in the Somerset Levels and Moors and particularly along the Parrett Trail.”

The Local Plan is currently under review however the adopted plan (2006 – 2028) is very supportive of the development of appropriate tourism facilities; particularly those that are close to market towns (to provide a workforce) and are sustainable in nature. The tourism short breaks market continues to be important in South Somerset and attractions that provide sustainable activities are welcomed.

Somerset County Council (SCC) Rights of Way Department

SCC has confirmed that Langport has both a Parish Paths Liaison Officer and an Adopt a Path Coordinator. The Adopt a Path coordinator role may be willing to discuss helping to recruit new volunteers to inspect and carry out minor tasks on the route.

The South Somerset Ramblers working party group may also help out on projects that need a few more hands to complete works. They generally meet once months but aspire to meet twice a month to carry out path maintenance and improvement works.

Local Councils are being encouraged to develop a Local Cycling and Walking Investment Plan. If completed this plan may well generate funding for projects on routes such as the Langport Cycleway. We are investigating if SCC intends to complete one.

Langport Cycleway Survey 2017

In order to gauge local views of the Langport to Muchelney Cycleway and to understand how it is used, we ran a public survey between April and the end of June. It was sent to all parish councils in area north, key businesses, community groups, the Local Information Centres, libraries and was posted on site in various locations. Respondents were invited to complete the survey online and on hard copies that were collected and transposed.

In all we received 300 responses. The results show that, of the respondents, over 97% know and use the cycle route with about 90% saying that they use it on a monthly basis or more frequently, 20% use it every day and a further 41% use it weekly.

The majority use the route for walking and cycling, while running, horse-riding and walking, including with children in buggies are also popular activities; only a small percentage use it to get to work, the majority seeing it as a recreational route either for fitness or just for enjoying the countryside. It is used throughout the year and valued by local businesses as an important asset in attracting customers to the area; of the 61 businesses that responded, 57% said that they consider it important to their customers.

Observations such as: “We have a holiday cottage and we encourage our guests to use it as it provides an off road circular route to Langport”, and “This route is a much safer way for my two children to enjoy the benefits of cycling; I find roads around Langport unsafe due to HGVs travelling along the narrow roads”, are representative of the many comments received in praise of the cycleway.

It is highly valued by local people, by visitors from neighbouring villages and from further afield; its contribution to the vitality of the local economy is recognised and prized. *Summary of the Langport Cycleway Survey 2017 is attached as an appendix.*

Meetings with Parish Representatives

SSDC officers from Leisure and Recreation and Area Development convened a meeting with representatives from Langport Town Council, Huish Episcopi Parish Council, Drayton Parish Council and Muchelney Parish Meeting to discuss the management of the cycleway from 2019 onwards.

They have all indicated their commitment to retaining the cycleway for community use. We are aware that a degree of capital investment will be required in the near future. We are in the process of working with the group to establish capital and revenue costs. Langport Town Council has offered to act as the named authority for the coordination of the cycleway and will oversee maintenance and insurance, as an in kind contribution. Levels of contribution from the remaining parishes are yet to be confirmed.

Landowner consultation

The landowners and their agents of both sections of the cycleway have indicated that they are sympathetic to local ownership and its continued use as a cycleway and leisure facility for the community.

The owner of Section 1 (see map) wishes to sell his holding; he has agreed to separate it from a larger parcel of land which will go to auction in June 2018. This is an opportunity for the community to own this stretch and will ensure access and use in perpetuity.

The agent for the owners of section 2 has indicated that they are open to some negotiation on the current levy.

Conclusion

Capital and revenue costs for the Langport Cycleway have been estimated and we are working with the community to agree funding targets for capital and ongoing revenue commitments. We are supporting bids to external funding sources and, with Ward Member support, will contact surrounding parishes to request their support.

There is significant community support for this initiative and the parishes now need time to confirm their annual contribution. SSDC officers are supporting the consortium to develop a Memorandum of Understanding and to finalise the funding package and anticipate that a request for a capital contribution will be forthcoming.

Financial Implications

None at this time.

Corporate Priority Implications

Council Plan – Economy

- Capitalise on our high quality culture, leisure and tourism opportunities to bring people to South Somerset.

Council Plan –Health and Communities

- Help people to live well by enabling quality cultural, leisure, play, sport & healthy lifestyle facilities & activities.

Carbon Emissions & Climate Change Implications

As an off road walking and cycling route the Langport Cycleway offers a safe route for green leisure and commuters to Langport and Huish Episcopi, helping to reduce carbon emissions.

Equality and Diversity Implications

The access to the Langport Cycleway includes gateways that can be opened enabling all-mobility vehicles to make use of the route. Gateways were tested at installation with a range of specialist bicycles and mobility vehicles to ensure the route was accessible for everyone.
