

# Stop Line Way Progress Report

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## Purpose of the Report

To update members on the progress of Stop Line Way.

## Recommendation

Councillors are asked to note the report.

## Background

The Stop Line Way (SLW) is the Sustrans Route 33 long Distance coast-to-coast walking and cycling route, which in parts is suitable for wheelchairs and pushchairs. The cycle route is 75 miles long and partly follows the 'Taunton Stop Line' built by the Army in 1940 to contain any enemy invasion of the South West. These defences ran for 50 miles, from Burnham, Somerset on the Bristol Channel to Seaton on the South Coast of Devon. Canals, railways and rivers were made into continuous anti-tank obstacles with roadblocks and over 380 concrete pillboxes. We are most familiar with the section of the SLW that runs through South Somerset from Ilminster to Chard that largely follows the track of the old Great Western Railway. It runs through the flood plain of The River Isle alongside remains of the Chard Canal and past Chard Reservoir with views of the eastern flanks of the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). This part of the SLW route is well defined and enables residents, including elderly and disabled members of the community to confidently access the countryside for leisure. It also acts as a safe, green commuter route for residents to be able to walk, cycle and use mobility vehicles to get to their schools, work, local shops and services.

As the SLW continues southwards towards Axminster in Devon it follows a rather complicated and vague route on paths and roads through industrial estates and residential areas, which is not very easy to follow due to poor signage.

It is the ambition of this project to improve the SLW route while working with developers by enabling the SLW to continue along the old Great Western Railway route and other designated routes where possible towards Devon.

## Strategic Context

In considering the SLW in relation to Chard, it is important to highlight that the implementation of the Chard Regeneration Plan is underway. Positive links have been made with the Chard Regeneration Programme and there are strong links between this and other SSDC initiatives in Chard.

In addition, the District Council has been successful in securing an allocation of grant aid from the national Heritage Action Zone initiative which will provide funding for building improvements and public realm works within Chard town centre, as part of the government's move to improve High Streets across the country.

The proposed improvement to the SLW within the more countryside parts of the local area, therefore very much supports and is complementary to these other important regeneration and environmental improvement initiatives within Chard town centre, being led by the District Council.

It is also important to consider how the project fits within the overall development framework for Chard as set out in the adopted South Somerset Local Plan, with relevant extracts included below:

### **South Somerset Local Plan - Chard - Strategic Growth Extract - Page 70 -73**

*7.21 The Chard Regeneration Plan<sup>96</sup> presented 4 options for the future growth of Chard. Option 3 (Chard Eastern Development Area - CEDA) has been chosen as the most appropriate location for the strategic growth. This option presents the benefits of large scale growth, associated community and highway infrastructure and regeneration without the emerging dis-benefits of undue traffic congestion and pollution. The strategic growth area provides a scale of growth that will enable Chard to achieve and maximise its need for employment, housing, retail and associated amenities as well as improved highway infrastructure. The strategic growth for Chard will be delivered within and beyond the plan period as part of a cohesive plan to regenerate the town and achieve build out. The number of homes expected to come forward within the plan period reflects market deliverability.*

*7.22 In summary the growth proposals include:*

- Approximately 2,716 dwellings (within and beyond the plan period)<sup>97</sup>*
- 17.14 hectares of employment land of which 13 ha is included in existing commitments within the strategic growth area;*
- 2 new primary schools (within and beyond the plan period);*
- 4 neighbourhood centres (Avishayes, Stop Line Slopes, Millfield and Holbear - within and beyond the plan period);*
- Highway infrastructure and improvements; and Sports and open space provision*

These aspirations are then reflected in Local Plan Policy PMT1, as follows and are illustrated on the plan illustrating the allocation of sites on the eastern fringes on Chard included in the Local Plan, also set out below:

#### **POLICY PMT1: CHARD STRATEGIC GROWTH AREA**

Land at Chard is allocated for strategic growth to provide the following within the plan period and beyond:

- At least 2,716 dwellings;
- Approximately 13 hectares of employment land;
- 2 new primary schools;
- 4 neighbourhood centres (Avishayes, Stop Line Slopes, Millfields and Holbear);
- Highway infrastructure and improvements;
- Sports and open space provision.

**Figure 5: Chard Strategic Growth Area<sup>98</sup>**



The Local Plan also addresses Walking and Cycling in the Chard area and includes the following sections:

### ***Walking and Cycling***

*7.34 Chard is a compact settlement with an existing centre offering access to local services, facilities, education and jobs within walking and cycle distance thresholds of the main residential areas. However, the impermeable layout of residential areas currently serves to discourage walking and cycling.*

*7.35 The CEDA will require strong sustainable transport connections with the centre if it is to be fully integrated as an extension to the existing settlement form. It is important therefore to ensure that journeys on foot or by bike are attractive in comparison to car journeys, and contribute to, and form part of a coherent network of attractive-to-use pedestrian and cycle routes. With linkages, further increases in levels of cycling should be achievable.*

*7.36 In residential areas new homes should be designed to make cycle storage secure and convenient and there should be adequate levels of cycle parking at retail and employment areas. Cycle parking at the main public transport nodes should also be provided.*

It is very clear from the above Local Plan statements therefore that the Plan envisages that new development on the eastern edge of Chard will be used to help develop, enhance and expand cycleway and walking routes. The Stop Line Way, as an existing route therefore has the potential to act as a catalyst to initiate the development of further and improved links, associated with new development sites and proposals, which will help existing and new residents access both the town centre and wider countryside, in a much easier and more sustainable manner than at present.

## **Progress**

As part of the South Somerset Environment Strategy SSDC are developing an Access Plan for Chard to encourage walking and cycling as part of the Chard Regeneration Programme.

In partnership with colleagues in the planning team, new discussions are underway with developers who own land allocated for housing and associated uses within the Chard Eastern Development Area. This will help ensure that joint working within SSDC will enable the SLW project to progress and develop through the provision of land for improved cycleway/walkways within development areas and/or financial contributions, as appropriate in each case. These talks therefore include aspirations to integrate the SLW within the delivery of new housing developments, together with new planned amenity and leisure spaces and highway infrastructure.

Development of the SLW project is supported by the Royal Agricultural University at Cirencester through the BSc (Hons) Countryside Management dissertation research undertaken by the Lead Officer. This is mutually beneficial as it enables support to be externally obtained, which draws upon other examples of similar projects elsewhere, as well as ensures that there is valuable 'critical friend' review of the approach being adopted towards achieving the planned improvements.

In Knowle St Giles a working group has been formed to develop a new 'All Ability Access Route' from a point further along Knowle Lane to gain easier access to the SLW, either on foot or bicycle or by mobility vehicle. This project is being undertaken by Knowle St Giles Parish Council with support from SSDC as access to the SLW from Knowle Lane is currently very prohibitive due to the presence of a very steep flight of inaccessible wooden steps. Local residents with bicycles undertake the difficult task of having to carry their bikes up and down these steps, which is virtually impossible with the more popular and heavier electric bikes. The same problem faces families with pushchairs and anyone with limited mobility or wheelchair users who cannot access the SLW at all. Planning permission has been granted for the construction of a 60metre tarmacked ramp which will require several hundred tonnes of material to be imported to create the correct slope for wheeled access.

Funding is being sought for this project which will include a request for SSDC Community Grant support from the Area West Committee, later in the year.

## **Conclusion**

This is a positive time for the Stop Line Way in South Somerset. Following very recent discussions with developers it is evident that they are keen to move ahead with plans to fund and resource the delivery of the SLW route east of Chard through their new developments. Costings and plans are being drawn up by SSDC to assist the developers with this work.

Wider investigations are underway to try to access new Government funding to make further improvements to the SLW in South Somerset.

With the new popularity of families walking, running and cycling together following the recent government restrictions on our ability to travel and access open space, the need to improve the SLW has never been more prevalent. The SLW is a wonderful recreational resource to residents of South Somerset. It provides clean, green, sustainable leisure space with direct access to the rich biodiversity of the old railway line that links the landscape and gives access to the wider countryside.

## **Financial implications**

None.

## **Council Plan Implications**

Health and Communities - To build healthy, self-reliant, active communities we will:

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

## **Equality and Diversity Implications**

The project aims to provide for people across all age and interest groups in the local community

**Background papers:** None

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