

**AREA NORTH COMMITTEE
24 March 2010**

ITEMS FOR INFORMATION

The items for information do not form part of the agenda. Should members have questions regarding any of the items please contact the officer shown underneath the relevant report. If, after discussing the item with the officer and it is felt appropriate, a member may request an item to be considered at a future Committee meeting.

- 1. Annual Report Outlining The Work Of The SSDC Countryside & Rights Of Way Service 2009-2010**

1. Annual Report Outlining The Work Of The SSDC Countryside & Rights of Way Service 2009-2010

Strategic Director: Vega Sturgess, Operations and Customer Focus
Assistant Director: Steve Joel, Health and Well-Being
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**Previously acting Countryside Manager*

Purpose of the Report

To update the Area North Committee on the past year's work of the Countryside Rights of Way Service and to provide information on the forthcoming return of the responsibility for the maintenance of rights of way to Somerset County Council (SCC).

Public Interest

For some years SSDC has undertaken the maintenance of the rights of way network on behalf of Somerset County Council under a special agreement. The district council has decided to end this agreement and return responsibility for the service to Somerset County Council from 1 April 2010.

Recommendation

- 1) Note and comment on the report.
- 2) Request a future presentation to the Area Committee from the relevant service manager for the rights of way service from Somerset County Council, suggesting specific items for information and clarification.

Background

The Service's Work Includes:

- The management and maintenance of the delegated Countryside Rights of Way network in South Somerset.
- Community engagement through volunteering opportunities, work placements, work parties and the Parish Path Stewardship scheme.
- Creating learning and training opportunities with school and college groups, voluntary organisations, parish councils, festivals and events.
- The provision of information (particularly our long-distance and local walking trails) through tourism publications, email bulletins and websites.

The Service Approach is:

- To be responsive.
- To be efficient - sharing resources through collaborative working, both across this service, with other services and with external individuals and organisations.
- Building capacity through apprenticeship collaborations, the use of seasonal staff, volunteers and the use of external funding.

- Delivery focussed.

Service Delivery 2009-10

- 2009 was the fourth year of the Parish Paths Stewardship Scheme with 58 volunteer training sessions held and newsletters distributed to members of the scheme and parish councils. We now have Rights of Way Parish Paths Liaison Officers (PPLOs) representing over 85% of Parishes and Towns across the District. The success of the scheme is reflected in the fact that across the District over the last 12 months there were almost 300 volunteer days devoted to public right of way maintenance and improvement ranging from surveying and light vegetation clearance to building stiles, gates and surface improvements.
- In 2009 in our Key Performance Indicator (former target BVPI 178) for rights of way being 'open, available and signed' stood at 66%, slightly lower than the 67.5% peak of 2008. This indicator is established through 4 independent surveys that are carried out across South Somerset each calendar year. Each survey visits a random range of sites and checks their condition and accessibility. The Key Performance Indicator is an average figure of the four surveys.
- Two major consultation exercises were undertaken with parishes in Area North in 2008/09. The consultation enabled us to prioritise paths in parishes for frequency of vegetation clearance. Three major vegetation cuts were undertaken during the year with several of our best used paths cut on four occasions. Our consultations also enabled us to draw up a list of projects to improve access to the network in Area North.
- The Area North Committee allocated £15,000 from the 2008-09-service enhancement budget to deliver a wide range of projects, identified as local priorities to improve access. A list of these projects (previously circulated) with an update on progress is attached in Appendix A.
- The team have continued to work closely with Somerset County Council to bring in additional funding and to work collaboratively on trails, bridgework and community projects. Total funding secured from SCC exceeded £150k in 2009/10. Additional grants of some £12k were secured through SCC from the Local Transport Plan for rights of way improvements in the South Somerset District. This additional money was used to improve signage across the area as recommended in the full network survey carried out by Somerset County Council.

Changes to the management of the rights of way service from April 2010

At SSDC District Executive in June 2009 the decision was taken to end the delegated agreement between SCC and SSDC for the maintenance of the Rights of Way network. With effect from April 1st 2010, the responsibility for the maintaining the network passes back to SCC. This means that for the first time since the 1980's SCC are once again responsible for the maintenance of the whole of the Rights of Way network in Somerset.

The future of the service had been the subject of several reviews in recent years. The service proved increasingly expensive to run over the years with unforeseen costs frequently creating overspends on budget. In 2008/9 the increased costs of fuel and high levels of rainfall particularly increased the financial pressure.

SCC views the return of the function as an opportunity to seek economies of scale from running a county-wide maintenance programme. An audit requested by SSDC Scrutiny Committee in 2008 revealed that when Sedgemoor DC and Taunton Deane BC had surrendered their delegated agreements, there had been no discernable reduction in the level of service.

The handover becomes effective on the 1st April and all maintenance queries and emergencies will be dealt with by SCC. They will be contactable at County Hall Taunton, or faults may be reported directly at www.somerset.gov.uk following links via Services, Environment, report a problem with Public Right of Way and use of the interactive mapping system.

SCC will maintain the close links that have been fostered through the Parish Path Stewardship scheme.

Legal matters such as the diversion or closures of Rights of Way will continue to be dealt with by the District Rights of Way Officer in the Legal team based at Brympton Way, Yeovil.

Countryside Sites Team

The countryside sites team remains with SSDC managing Ham Hill Country Park, Yeovil Country Park, Chard Reservoir Local Nature Reserve and smaller sites at High Ham, Penselwood and at Sampsons Wood in Yeovil. The team will also take responsibility for Langport Visitor Centre and the cycleway from April 10.

Financial Implications

From 2010 onwards SCC will become responsible for maintaining the Public Rights of Way network and all financial responsibilities for the network will rest with SCC.

There are no financial implications for SSDC arising from this report.

Implications for Corporate Priorities

2.9 Increase resident satisfaction on country parks, open spaces, street cleaning, car parks and public toilets.

3.29 Increase access to services and facilities by public transport, walking and cycling.

Carbon Emissions and Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI188)

None from this report

Equality and Diversity Implications

None from this report

Background Papers: *Countryside Service Plan 2009/10*
SSDC District Executive Report July 2009

Appendix A – Area North Service Enhancement Programme - Improving Local Access Using Rights of Way

Background: In February 2009 the Area North Committee allocated £15,000 towards improving local access in and around communities in Area North. Town and Parish Councils and local Parish Paths Liaison Officers were invited to submit local priorities for improvement, based on surveys of their local network. Final decisions were based on the following criteria: -

1. Work should not lead to increased future maintenance for SSDC (and if possible reduce maintenance liabilities)
2. Must enable/improve access for local people
3. Must fit with SSDC priorities for:
 - (a) Promoting active lifestyles
 - (b) Promoting alternatives to the car
 - (c) Tourism and educational benefits

Project Location	Project Description	Assessment Criteria (see above)	How does this work make a difference?	Cost	Status
Aller	3 replacement gates behind church near to recreation ground	Meets 1,2,3a and 3c	Existing stiles reaching end of useful life, replace with self-closing gates. Better connection with the advertised Parrett Trail	£800	Completed
Barrington	Replace flight of wooden steps destroyed by ancient badger sets and run-off water	Meets 1,2 and 3a	Existing route has had to be closed. Compliments work to improve drainage to fields above. Solves long-standing problem	£1200	Water run-off not yet alleviated. Work to be undertaken in the Spring
Curry Mallett	Improving access to network of local paths. New gates as required	Meets 1,2 and 3a	Better access to network Greater access for less mobile people Reduce future maintenance liabilities	£1700	Completed
Drayton	Three stiles replaced	Meets 1,2,3a and 3c	Existing stiles reaching end of useful life. New self closing gates to be fitted	£800	Completed
Fivehead	Culvert water course on footpath leading to bridleway	Meets 1,2,3a and 3c	Reduces future maintenance costs.	£1000	Ground conditions saturated. Work scheduled for Spring
Kingsbury Episcopi	Fence line to be moved from proximity of ditch. New gate to be installed	Meets 1,2,3a, 3b and 3c	Move fence line to increase width of path for walkers. On Parrett Trail, well used but very slippery when wet.	£1000	Completed

Project Location	Project Description	Assessment Criteria (see above)	How does this work make a difference?	Cost	Status
Lopen	Surface improvements at Kitchen's Lane/ School Lane Approx 80m	Meets 1,2 and 3b	Well used by locals but very poor surface esp. in wet weather Will reduce future maintenance costs	£1000	Nearing completion
South Petherton	Improvements to local path network and improvements to Bridleway at Long Lane Over-Stratton	Meets 1,2 and 3a	Creates easier access. Replacing stiles with 2 gates and gaps. Bridleway clearance.	£1500	Completed
District-wide Wigborough	Parrett Trail Diversion. Formal diversion onto longstanding permissive/ advertised route.	Meets 1,3a, 3b and 3c	To meet requirements and commitments of legal diversion of the route at Wigborough. The advertised trail, since inception follows this route.	£1500	Completed
District-wide Fivehead	Improvements to drainage on bridleway. Stoning, pipe-work and re-contouring. Long term –infrastructure project	Meets 1,2,3a and 3c	Bridleways are scarce in South Somerset Part of newly promoted route (Horse Riding in South Somerset Aug 09) Also improves access for cyclists and walkers.	£3500	Awaiting dry conditions, rescheduled for spring
Area North	Training of volunteers. Various Courses	Meets 1,2 and 3 a	Improves capacity and skills of local community and volunteers	£1000	Fully subscribed 2 days of courses to be run in March. Volunteers will be Lantra certified in the safe use & basic maintenance of brushcutters and trimmers.