

Planning and Rights of Way Committee

6 June 2023

Public Rights of Way Annual Progress Report 2022

Report by Nicholas Scott (Principal Rights of Way Officer)

Electoral divisions: Countywide

Summary

This report contains an annual progress report for the Public Rights of Way team within Countryside Services setting out our achievements on the network and customer service data during the 2022 calendar year.

1. Introduction

1.1 With over 4000km of Public Rights of Way (PROW) to maintain across West Sussex the PROW team provide an important service to the residents and visitors of West Sussex. Our responsibilities include maintaining the path surface, negotiating improvements with landowners and working closely with key stakeholders to help support key corporate objectives. The service is supported by considerable input from volunteers who both assist with path inspections and practical tasks across the network.

2. Customer Service

2.1 A major element of our service is handling a high volume of enquiries from path users and other parties with 805 calls answered through the contact centre in relation to PROW.

2.2 Between reports from the public and other stakeholders this has generated 3,570 issues that were logged onto our database in 2022 (4,002 in 2021) with 3,724 issues resolved in the same period (3,824 in 2021).

3. Routine Maintenance

3.1 We continued to deliver our 15-month inspection and maintenance programme as much as possible, but inspections were paused for a month in February to allow our routine maintenance contractor to catch up following COVID related delays. During 2022 our routine maintenance contractor, County Tree Surgeons, amongst other works, delivered:

- 1,154 signs
 - 144 bridges
 - 8 boardwalks
 - 41 flights of steps
 - 48km of surface vegetation clearance
- 3.2 2022 saw 105 other items of work ranging from handrails, small surfacing and culverts works along with some stile, gate and tree clearance where we have been unable to get hold of the landowner.
- 3.3 This is a good opportunity to thank our routine maintenance contractor, County Tree Surgeons, for the flexibility and quick response times to ad hoc work required to keep the network safe and accessible.
- 3.4 For information the new routine maintenance contract begins on 1 May 2023 and I can confirm that County Tree Surgeons were successful in regaining this and will continue to deliver this work.
- 3.5 We also undertook our annual summer clearance programme, separately from the routine maintenance programme, where 339km of surface vegetation was cleared.

4. Volunteers

- 4.1 Our inspections continue to be greatly assisted by Parish Path Inspector Volunteers working with our local Access Rangers to inspect every path at least every 15 months, on a parish-by-parish basis. Our Volunteer Rangers also get their hands dirty with a variety of practical works to supplement our maintenance programme and add extra value across the county. During 2022 our Volunteer Rangers delivered:
- 8200m of vegetation clearance.
 - 28 tonnes of Type 1 used.
 - 6 new plank crossings, four repaired.
 - 10 bridges new 5m and over and 2 refurbished.
 - 51m of boardwalk installed.
 - 70 steps installed.
 - 36 fallen trees cleared.
 - 24 fingerposts installed or repaired.

This totalled 3546 hours given by the volunteers over 60 days.

- 4.2 In addition, we continue to rely on the active volunteer group in Horsted Keynes working in partnership with WSCC. They carry out much PRow maintenance and improvement work within the parish, including sign

installation and repair, vegetation clearance and replacing stiles with kissing gates.

- 4.3 We are again grateful for the continued support of many individuals who give their time free of charge to the PROW surface and the team who support the work of the volunteers from office staff through to the Access Rangers and Volunteer Coordinator.

5. Gates for Stiles

- 5.1 The PROW team continue to improve access across the rights of way network by offering gates to replace existing stiles across the network, due to the restrictive nature of stiles for some users.
- 5.2 During 2022 we provided 23 gates to landowners with the agreement that they install the structure and maintain it in the future as they would with other structures that exists on their land. This number is down 47% from 2021 but we are reliant on landowner agreement to this change and we will continue to try to bring about access improvements by this means throughout 2023.

6. Capital Works Programme

- 6.1 As part of the annual Capital programme during 2022 we replaced/repared 8 bridges and any associated works including bank stabilisation and drainage improvements. This programme also included design of 5 further bridges scheduled for replacement during the 2023/24 Capital Programme.
- 6.2 Further to this, a capital surface programme was undertaken totalling over 3.41km of improvements on the network including drainage and surface improvement works on the Downs Link in Itchingfield surface improvements in Ashington, Bolney, Hassocks, Slinfold and Southwater.
- 6.3 Some works have been carried over to the 2023/24 Capital Programme due to it not being possible to be completed for a number of reasons and these include bridge replacement works in Billingshurst and completion of repair works to Old Shoreham Toll Bridge in Shoreham.
- 6.4 We also undertook improvements to FP13c in Hassocks this year in partnership with the local Parish Council who assisted by contributing funds toward the project.

7. England Coast Path

- 7.1 Progress on the England Coast Path (ECP) is on-going. There is a small section of the ECP from the County's eastern border to the River Adur which has been open since 19 May 2022. Works are largely complete on the next stretch of the ECP from Shoreham to West Wittering. All the signage and minor improvement works are done with one large surfacing project remaining to be complete in Sidlesham. Once this is complete, this stretch of the ECP can be opened by Defra (forecast for end of summer 2023). The remaining ECP from West Wittering to the Hampshire border still resides with the Secretary of State for approval, however the WSCC ECP Project Officer is collaborating with the relevant stakeholders in this area to represent the interests of the ECP and coastal access whilst we await approval of the route.

The Project Officer is also undertaking planning and research work to prepare WSCC for the management of the ECP once it is all opened.

8. Planning

- 8.1 During 2022 WSCC's PRow team received 350 requests for PRow comments (including any re-consultations). These applications range from small scale planning applications for extensions or new garages where PRow are nearby to large scale developments involving multiple residential or commercial units immediately impacting the PRow network.

9. Complaints and Compliments

- 9.1 The County Council's Customer Relations team did record 3 formal customer complaints (4 in 2021) in 2022 and 2 compliments (down from 6 in 2021). Of the complaints, 1 was upheld and related to a complaint about the nature of a response from a member of the team regarding an issue reported.
- 9.2 The team also received a further 8 compliments that weren't logged with the Customer Relations team during 2022.

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