

Denbighshire County Council Rights of Way Improvement Plan Assessment:

Executive summary

The assessment has been carried out as part of the County Council's new statutory duty to prepare a Rights of Way Improvement Plan and in accordance with guidance issued by Welsh Assembly Government. It looks at all aspects of the Council's work on rights of way (ROW) and the context in which this work is carried out and will form the basis on which a Rights of Way Improvement Plan, setting out how the County proposes to manage and improve the local ROW network over the next 10 years, will be drawn up.

Strategic context

The ROWIP must both draw on, and contribute toward other local, regional and national plans and strategies, with the County Council's *Vision for Denbighshire*, *Rural Strategy*, the *Tourism Strategy for North Wales* and *Regional Transport Plan* being particularly important. It is also important that the ROWIP is seen as being 'owned by' and the responsibility of the whole authority, not just that part responsible for the management of the Rights of Way network.

The County's Public Rights of Way Network

The County has a recorded network of 1,296 kms (809 miles) of public rights of way of which 84% (1,088 kms) are footpaths and available, as of right, only to walkers. Bridleways, which can also be used by horse riders and cyclists, make up 14% of the network (182 kms) and byways open to all traffic, which can also be used by vehicles, make up 2% (26 kms). Other rights of way are known to exist but are not currently recorded. The County also has a further 91 kms of unsurfaced public roads.

Organisation and staffing

It is the Rights of Way Unit that is responsible for discharging the County Council's duties towards public rights of way. As well as preparing a Rights of Way Improvement Plan these duties include keeping an up to date legal record of all rights of way, maintaining signposting and waymark paths and dealing with paths that are obstructed. The Unit is part of the Environment Directorate and has a staff of 5; the Rights of Way Officer, two Access Assistants and two Footpaths Inspectors.

Whenever possible, problems are dealt with on a direct one-to-one basis with the Footpath Inspector normally approaching the landowner concerned. While generally successful, the present level of staffing means that the Council can only act on a 'fire fighting' basis, responding to issues brought to its attention by path users. The appointment of a third Footpaths Inspector would allow it to change over time to a more proactive way of working.

To advise the Council on its rights of way function, a statutory Local Access Forum was set up in 2002 and currently has 17 members. The Forum is serviced by the authority (as required by the legislation) but it is finding it difficult to provide a adequate Secretarial support, with that role being undertaken by the Rights of Way Officer.

The ROW Unit also works closely with the Countryside Services, which is part of the Lifelong Learning Directorate and has a full time staff of 26. The Service has no statutory functions towards rights of way but is responsible for promoting selected routes. It also maintains these paths to a higher standard than would otherwise be possible to enhance visitors' enjoyment of the area.

Promoted paths

More than 160 km (100 miles) of rights of way are currently promoted by the County Council; around 12% of the path network. In addition to 70 kms (44 miles) of the Offa's Dyke National Trail, this includes three Regional Routes - The North Wales Path, Hiraethog Way and Dee Valley Way / North Berwyn Way - and several local 'honey pot' routes in popular tourist areas.

A long term aim, should the money become available, is for a fourth Regional Route running down the western side of the County. This would be based on existing rights of way and would link the three current Regional Routes to provide a wide choice of walking opportunities on high quality routes through attractive scenery.

Budget

As part of its highways maintenance budget, the Council has provided £107,710 for revenue spending and £50,000 for capital spending on public rights of way in 2007/08. This is a 50% increase on previous financial years and reflects a reappraisal of the amount spent on highway maintenance in general as a result of pressure on the authority, including pressure from the Local Access Forum. The bulk of this revenue spending is allocated to footpaths. However, in relative terms, far more is allocated to byways (£296 per km) and bridleways (£108 per km) than footpaths (£58 per km).

The Countryside Service does not have a dedicated budget but is largely dependent on grant aid, especially from the Countryside Council for Wales. This includes around £10,000 a year paid by CCW as reimbursement for three-quarters of the cost of maintaining the Offa's Dyke Path.

The Definitive Map and Statement

The Definitive Map and Statement - the formal, legal record of the line and status of all rights of way – is a highly technical and time consuming area of work but one which underpins the whole of the path network.

The Council does not have the large backlog of rights of way 'claims' waiting to be dealt with and unlike many other authorities across England and Wales. There are nonetheless more than 800 identified problems with the existing Definitive Map and Statement that need to be resolved of which around a third are likely to require formal Definitive Map Modification Orders to be made. Dealing with an issue of this scale and complexity is beyond the current capacity of the Rights of Way Unit.

Condition of the path network and the maintenance backlog

Over the last ten years the Council has consistently out-performed other highway authorities in Wales in the proportion of rights of way that are correctly signposted where they leave a metalled highway or which are easy to use. But a comprehensive survey carried out in 2002 found that, out of nearly 10,000 stiles, signposts and other items of path furniture on the ROW network, many were dilapidated or missing while other were nearing the end of their useful lives.

Dealing with this backlog of path maintenance will require one-off expenditure of around £590,000, together with a further £100 -150,000 a year to ensure the network remains in good condition and stop another backlog developing. These figures do not take into account the cost of clearing vegetation, on which £12,000 a year is currently spent, or any work that may be needed to path surfaces or drainage.

Community Councils and other players

As well as the County Council, many other bodies and individuals have a direct interest in the rights of way network. The Council already works closely with many of these, including the farming community, and bodies representing the many different type of path users, but would welcome comments on the way these existing partnerships can be developed and new ones created.

It is particularly keen to work more closely with Denbighshire's 38 Community and Town Councils. One possibility which the County wishes to explore in more detail would be to set up a rolling programme in which groups of communities identify the most important paths in their areas, which can then be developed and promoted as easy-to-use village walks and rides. The council will be investigating if it can access EU and other external funding for this work to improve local path networks, given that the scheme could bring significant community and economic benefits. It might also be a quick way of making sure that a range of routes are available to people with restricted mobility or who have other special needs.

The public's use of rights of way, and views on the ROW Improvement Plan

A special survey was carried out, including through a questionnaire distributed with *County Voice*, to find out how much people in Denbighshire use their rights of way and their views on the Improvement Plan.

It found that over 70% of respondents use rights of way at least once a week for walking or running, with the most popular activity being a walk of 2 miles or more. Running or jogging to keep fit was also an important activity, rivalling the traditional use of 'walking the dog'. Almost 90% of those who responded agree or strongly agreed with the statement that "spending money on footpaths and bridleways is good value compared to spending by the Council on other leisure activities".

Asked about priorities for the Improvement Plan, the survey shows a clear consensus of support for three main areas of work – putting up more signs to make paths easier to find, making paths easier to use for the elderly or disabled people, and ensuring all paths are clear of overgrowth or obstructions. There is also strong support for completing the legal record and changing the line of paths to overcome conflict.