

Devon Countryside Access Forum
Tuesday, 21 September 2021
Public Rights of Way and Country Parks Service Update
Richard Walton, Public Rights of Way and Country Parks Manager

Introduction

I am pleased to have started in post with Devon County Council (DCC), having joined on 1st July 2021; and would like to thank my predecessor, Ros Mills, for her excellent leadership and support in developing such a skilled, hard-working team.

As DCAF members will be aware, I joined DCC from my previous role as National Trail Officer for the South West Coast Path (SWCP). I am especially pleased to be able to continue to contribute to management of the National Trail as part of a partner organisation.

In addition to work on National Trails, I have been fortunate to contribute to activities led by various organisations delivering wide ranging recreational and access management services. This includes Bracknell Forest Council (heading up the parks and countryside service, including public rights of way), New Forest National Park Authority (as policy advisor), Cornwall County Council (with responsibility for multi-use trails and countryside facilities), and the Forestry Commission (looking after woodland trails and associated infrastructure in Cornwall and North Devon).

My main formal qualification is in Town and Country Planning (specialising in countryside management), this being followed by an in-job training placement as an assistant public rights of way warden at Devon County Council.

Initial Priorities

Priorities for the Public Rights of Way and Country Parks service are determined through a combination of measures including national and local policy, legislation, and stakeholder consultation. My current focus is on

Consistency: providing effective management to enable the Public Rights of Way and Country Parks teams to continue to deliver agreed priorities. This includes ensuring quality standards remain high, with positive working relationships sustained.

Collaboration: supporting, strengthening, and developing working arrangements and partnerships with stakeholders, interest groups and local communities – including through the DCAF.

Policy and Practice: reviewing and updating the Rights of Way Improvement Plan and other relevant documents to recognise and optimise the strategic importance and value of access and recreation. As part of this, maintain and improve access and recreational infrastructure to better connect people and places.

Linked to the above, the aspiration and intention is to continue and improve on work to provide an inclusive and proactive service that

- increases opportunity and outcomes for underrepresented, socially excluded audiences

- optimises health and wellbeing value of enjoying the great outdoors
- positively contributes to biodiversity gain and climate change mitigation and avoidance

Current and Upcoming Activities

Recent recruitment for a new Public Rights of Way Senior Officer (Legal & Development) did not generate a significant number of suitable applicants and so it was not feasible to draw up an appropriate shortlist and appoint. This seems to reflect a wider national picture, possibly in part linked to the pandemic. August can also be a difficult time for recruitment due to the holiday season. A temporary pause has been taken, with the intention of readvertising this Autumn.

There is an additional vacancy in the team due to our PRow Assistant Officer moving across to legal services. Service activities, and the associated staffing resource, are considered to be of importance, and so the funding for this post will remain available to secure a replacement.

The mild, wet summer resulted in significant vegetation growth impacting on the path network. The wardens have been very busy organising contractors to carry out seasonal cuts and responding to related customer reports.

As we move into the Autumn, work plans include

- England Coast Path and South West Coast Path: Working with Natural England, landowners and other groups to implement access improvement projects to finalise the designation process for the new access rights. This includes works at key locations such as Croyde and Torcross. Once the new access rights are in place, DCC will be able to assess and utilise the additional powers available to address longstanding issues where legitimate public access is currently restricted.
- Definitive Map Review: Complete the parish-by-parish review. Alongside this, we will be working closely with stakeholders regarding the 1st January 2026 deadline for registering historic paths.
- Extending the shared use trail network: Supporting work led by the Transport Planning team to extend and improve the shared-use trail network e.g., the Tarka Trail up to Woolacombe.
- Dead Slow: liaising with the Road Safety team and the BHS to help promote the campaign to reduce the number of incidents involving horses and riders on the road network.
- A38 Corridor Access Opportunities Consultation: liaising with Dartmoor National Park Authority on consultation to identify potential recreational and access improvements on the moorland fringe, and beyond the National Park boundary.
- Capital Programme: Works to improve the rights of way and trail network across Devon including surfacing, drainage and bridges.
- Restoring Stover Park: Completing the development phase as funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). Subject to a progress review with the NLHF in January, the delivery phase bid is due to be submitted in Spring / Summer 2022.