

Notes of the Devon Countryside Access Forum Rights of Way Improvement Plan review working group

24 November 2022 – Stover Country Park

Present: Sarah Slade (Chair); Chris Cole (Vice Chair); Lucinda Francis; Gordon Guest; Sue Pudduck; Tino Savvas; Bryan Smith and Tim Spray.

Richard Walton (Public Rights of Way Manager), Hilary Winter (Forum Officer)

History

- 2005 Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP) – in accordance with guidance and regulations.
- 2012 RoWIP review – sets out main management objectives.
- 2022 – formal ten-year review process.

RoWIP 2022 process

Themes have been informed by P3 workshops and responses from DCAF members. Richard Walton to produce a report for consideration at the next DCAF meeting in January. This will be sent to other organisations too, such as the Ramblers and BHS.

It was noted that the National Parks are included in the RoWIP. The National Parks were experiencing implications of funding cuts and Exmoor National Park is exploring handing back the day-to-day management of public rights of way to highway authorities, a role currently done on an agency agreement. It is important to include National Parks even though they have their own recreation strategies.

Despite budget constraints, the policies, objectives and priorities should stand even if delivery is implicated.

Other authorities were not all on the same timeframe. The review formed part of discussions between rights of way managers at the SW Adept Group meetings.

The format of the 2022 RoWIP had not been determined and would depend on issues raised.

Headline points

There was similarity in headline points between the DCAF and P3 workshops. Some Parish Councils and volunteers were very active.

Use of 2012 document

Richard Walton confirmed this was more useful than the 2005 document and could be used to check or challenge process. In addition, there was a Service Plan and the Highway Infrastructure Asset Management Plan.

Use of statistics

Statistics to back up, support and inform RoWIP policies was raised. Systematic data was essential, together with achievement data. Some Best Value Indicator data was still used.

It was difficult to find meaningful data on permissive paths and any changes in availability.

At a service level, legal agreement information was not fully known.

Enlisting the support of a university to complete some data analysis might be useful. PRoW staff resource was limited.

During CoVID people valued the network and were more aware of health and wellbeing, even if usage had returned to pre-CoVID levels.

RoWIP Impact Assessment

Attention was drawn to the themes in the Impact Assessment:

- the actual or potential effects of DCC decisions and actions on people;
- the impact on the environment, including biodiversity, energy and water; and
- that public authorities must consider economic, social and environmental well-being.

Key themes

Development and urbanisation

Exeter was a growth area and had some funding from developers for connectivity of routes and opportunities for new infrastructure. Some issues arose from requests to tarmac bridleways, for example. How were such networks to be maintained in the future? Recreational and commuter routes often had different requirements.

It was important for people to be able to access rights of way and green space close to where they live to reduce the impact on the environment.

There should be more emphasis at the planning stage on recreational access through better design guidance to protect the character of areas. Health improvements had a monetary value. Planning was a district council function and authorities often had a policy approach of so much greenspace per 1000 population.

Trees in urban streets provided shade and reduced pollution yet some authorities did not like the ongoing maintenance.

Many developments did not provide sufficient green space in the right areas. e.g. near Pinhoe. Budgets should be frontloaded for this purpose. Some initiatives such as Haldon Forest Park and Dawlish Country Park provide good green space but, in the case of Haldon in particular, public transport links from the areas it serves are extremely poor with no direct service.

Technology

This should include communications.

The Plan should identify people who have the responsibility to deliver, get the message across and monitor. The RoWIP should be responsive to changes in technology.

The Creature Comforts campaign (Aardman) was very memorable.

Education

This is an overarching issue but could be included under technology. Consideration needs to be given to how education (as opposed to information) could align with RoWIP policies; should DCC work with other partners/organisations, influencers, campaigns; Apps etc. To what extent does or can DCC get involved?

Partners/organisations could include the Kennel Club; Dogs Trust; Sustrans; Countryside Mobility; Disabled Ramblers; Caravan and Camping clubs, vets etc. The University of the West of England had done a research project with information posters on buses which were found to impact on behaviour.

The Plan could include suggested actions if ways could be found to deliver them, or higher-level aspirations.

The technology topic could include communications and education.

Education could be at a site-specific level e.g. Stover Country Park.

Agriculture/land management

The RoWIP should consider the impact on landowners e.g. dogs, trespass, how people use the countryside and how to use it responsibly. The current RoWIP policies do not emphasise issues from the landowner perspective.

Signposting and waymarking can assist.

The Report a Problem on the DCC website was useful but not so helpful for landowners where the response was not a DCC responsibility, for example livestock worrying or trespass.

Use of cycles on footpaths could put landowners at risk of future path claims.

Education was key in this area too.

Population

Irresponsible dog ownership continued to be an issue.

Again, from an education perspective, targeted campaigns could be instigated to see what the impact is. This required funding and links to other teams in DCC, for example Communications.

Accessibility

Attention was drawn to the rising number of people of over 65s – nearly 12 million and by 2030 this is estimated to rise to 21.8% of people in the UK. The Department of Work and Pensions, (March 2020), gave a figure of 14.1 million disabled persons in the UK. February 2022 figures suggest there are about 3.12 million Blue Badge holders.

Demand for mobility scooters will increase and restrictions on size do not apply to class 2 scooters which have to do 4 miles per hour or less.

The RoWIP should recognise these increasing demands plus the inclusion of blind/sight impaired people and other groups, perhaps with a view to keeping up to date with good practice.

Accessibility should include 'inclusivity' and widening participation, for example ethnic minority groups.

A question was asked about where 2 in 1 gates fitted in the hierarchy. The aim was to improve to the least restrictive but this was not always possible, so it was sometimes a case of making path furniture better than it was. A preference for 1.2m gates rather than 1m gates was raised.

Public/animal health

Public rights of way sometimes had to be closed due to avian flu and culling of birds. With CoVID and animal health issues, it was possible for DCC to do an alternative route with the landowner so long as the legal route was not closed. However, this was the responsibility of the landowner to maintain and there were insurance implications.

Climate change

This had implications for management of the path network. There was a balance between the cost of doing things such as maintenance more frequently and carbon/energy use and biodiversity. Carbon impacts could depend on the surface type and maintenance regime.

Travel to greenspace should be reduced.

There should be routes to public transport hubs.

Biodiversity

There was a duty to incorporate nature recovery.

The DCAF had previously raised instances where invasive species had ended up on verges and lanes following highway maintenance works.

Health and wellbeing

Path surfaces could put people off using them. Quality was important – balance – but not tarmac.

The RoWIP could consider partnership working, for example social prescribing.

Local economy

Thinking to the future, the possibility of a tourist tax was raised or using finely tuned Apps to trigger payment for use of certain areas of activities.

Funding

The role of volunteers was recognised as very important. Could the principle be taken further and perhaps overlap with education? There were insurance implications to consider. The ageing population offered opportunities.

Apprenticeship schemes and career paths were mentioned.

New funding sources needed to be explored with much less reliance on national government or local government funding. Support will be required to make public rights of way successful over the next ten years.

Legislation

Agri-environment policy potentially had an impact.

It was likely the Deregulation Act outcomes for public rights of way produce fewer changes than anticipated. Work was currently very slow.

The 2026 cut-off date had not been implemented but lost paths remained a matter to investigate.

Other themes raised

- **Unclassified, unsurfaced county roads**

These need to be considered more fully in the RoWIP. They made an important contribution to health and well-being. The number of category 12s had increased as roads had fallen into that category through deterioration. These should also be shown on the interactive map.

Chris Cole confirmed the Trail Riders Fellowship is working on a green road map at national level and was seeking local authorities to take part in a pilot. Richard Walton suggested Chris speak to the PRoW Technical team. Tim Spray asked to be kept informed.

A DCC internal project had been set up to look at maintenance categories.

- **Multi-use**

Multi-use was generally supported. Concerns were raised about the increase in type of user, especially on footpaths.

- **Electric bikes, e-scooters etc.**

Increased use posed challenges. There were issues around safety and enforcement and shared space on multi-use trails. It was not entirely clear where they were permitted and legislation might change.

- **Role of the Public Rights of Way team**

This should be clearly acknowledged in the RoWIP and the contribution made by rangers/wardens etc.

Members of the working group agreed the 2012 format was useful and already comprehensive. Priority themes were education/information provision and getting better outcomes from developments.

Views differed as to whether a new RoWIP was required or whether an addendum or list of priorities should be added. The Chair said that Richard Walton should come back with suggestions for the review format as part of the report to the DCAF in January.