

**Report to:** Scrutiny Committee for Economy, Transport and Environment

**Date of meeting:** 18 March 2015

**By:** Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

**Title:** Progressing as a strategic commissioning authority: rights of way and countryside site management functions

**Purpose:** To update Scrutiny on the development of the commissioning strategy for our RoW and countryside management functions and to seek Scrutiny's views on its involvement with this project.

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**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Scrutiny is recommended to:

- 1) **Note the progress on the development of a commissioning strategy for rights of way and countryside management; and**
  - 2) **Approve the creation of a Scrutiny Committee Reference Group and nominate attendees, or agree other suitable arrangements for Scrutiny involvement.**
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## **1. Background**

1.1. The County Council, as Highway Authority, has a statutory duty to ensure that the rights of way (RoW) network of 2,000 miles is accessible and maintained. The County Council also has a duty to conserve the wildlife value of 10 countryside sites. This includes Country Parks and Local Nature Reserves and ensuring safe access for the public.

1.2. The Authority's RoW and Countryside Management functions are delivered by two teams; the RoW and Countryside Maintenance team (RoWCM), and the RoW Access (RoWA) team. The RoWCM team undertake maintenance on the RoW network and countryside sites. They oversee the management of the capital bridge/surfacing programme and 10 countryside sites and consist of 16.8 full time equivalent (FTE) posts (four of which are funded from the capital budget). The RoWA team consists of 9.6 FTE and leads on a range of functions including prioritising maintenance work, managing volunteers and handling enquiries from the public. The team is also responsible for the Common Land, Town and Village Green and Definitive Map caseload as well as public inquiries.

1.3. Strategic commissioning is an operating principle of the County Council that will be applied to all business planning activity. In autumn 2014 a project manager was appointed to develop the commissioning strategy for how rights of way and countryside sites are managed. This will look at how the County Council will secure the best outcomes for residents through understanding long term need, matching supply with need and making the most effective use of all available resources.

1.4. The County Council is consulting a range of stakeholders including residents, volunteer groups, Parish and Town Councils, landowners, local businesses and partner organisations to understand the need for rights of way and countryside sites in East Sussex. The importance of rights of way and countryside sites in contributing to health benefits and economic growth via tourism will also be explored.

1.5. This report summarises the initial findings of the consultation, sets out the timetable for the development of the strategy and proposes the creation of a Scrutiny Committee Reference Group. If this is not approved it is proposed other suitable arrangements for the involvement of the Scrutiny Committee in the development of the commissioning strategy are agreed.

## 2. Supporting information

2.1. The service operates well, in an effective and efficient manner with a low unit cost. Both teams benefit from strong leadership and committed staff. This is demonstrated by the changes applied since the Scrutiny Review of countryside management in 2007 as well as the service and peer reviews in subsequent years.

2.2. The application of the strategic commissioning framework will bring together lessons learned from the reviews with a clear understanding of long term need to secure the best outcomes for residents. Strategic commissioning delivers two key outputs:

- A strategy. This clearly sets out the vision and prioritised outcomes which are based on the long term need of residents in the county.
- A delivery model. This identifies the most effective use of resources to meet the need detailed in the strategy.

2.3. A timetable for the development of the strategy has been agreed with the Project Board.

Action	Deadline
Data gathering and analysis	April 2015
Draft strategy	August 2015
Submit draft strategy to Cabinet	October 2015
Public consultation on strategy	February 2016
Strategy finalised and submitted to Cabinet	April 2016

2.4. To understand the long term need for our rights of way and countryside sites in East Sussex four areas will be investigated, these are:

- Usage. Explored via data on the Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment (MENE) and our own consultations with residents.
- Health benefits. Investigated with Public Health specialists.
- Involvement. Understanding the plans of the broad range of stakeholders who are involved through our survey and engagement events.
- Tourism. Investigating the financial relevance of RoW and our countryside sites to the economic growth of the county.

2.5. The consultation on usage ended on 20 February and with over 800 responses. It is too early to have a full report on the findings, however an initial review of the data shows that:

- 98% of respondents have used a rights of way (RoW) in the last two years
- Key reasons for using RoW and countryside sites regularly are to get fresh air, relax, exercise and enjoy scenery and walking. In addition 6% of those asked used RoW as it is the shortest route to their destination.
- A main reason to use RoW and countryside sites over other outdoor facilities are the scenery and wildlife. Easier access would encourage some to use them more.
- The regularity of visits to RoW is varied, from daily to yearly, whereas it is more common for visits to countryside sites to be a few times a year.
- 83% of those asked said that they felt countryside sites were important for wildlife conservation as well as human use.

A full report will be issued in April.

2.6. The consultation on stakeholder involvement also ended on 20 February and received over 110 responses. A full report will be issued in April but an initial assessment of the data shows that:

- A range of stakeholders have responded from across the public, private and voluntary sectors. A high proportion of respondents are from parish and town councils and voluntary associations.
- The area that demonstrated the highest involvement from stakeholders was RoW (by foot), with 68%.

- A significant number (85%) had regular involvement to enjoy the countryside while only 26% had regular involvement that was business related.
- Education, health/exercise and conservation were rated as more important reasons to have access to the countryside than tourism and local business.
- The key issues that encourage rights of way and countryside site use are condition (60%) and time available (54%).
- A large proportion of respondents felt named and regular contact with County Council Officers and clear procedures would help them meet their objectives.

2.7. As the information from the analysis stage is gathered it is proposed that a Members Advisory Group is created to inform the development of the strategy in the planning stage.

### **3. Conclusions and reasons for recommendations**

3.1. Over the last five years the rights of way and countryside management functions have streamlined and improved in response to the changing budgets and requirements. In applying the strategic commissioning approach a strategy will be developed that puts long term need at the heart of future plans. This will secure the best outcomes through matching supply with need and making the most effective use of all available resources.

3.2. It is recommended that a Scrutiny Committee Reference Group is created, or other suitable arrangements agreed, to inform the development of the strategy at the next stage.

#### **RUPERT CLUBB**

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#### LOCAL MEMBERS

All

#### BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None