

**West Sussex County Council Public Rights of Way Service
Annual Report 2023**

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report contains the 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 2023.
- 1.2 With over 4,000km 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 1,235 calls answered through the Customer Service Centre in relation to PROW with the majority received during the summer months. This was an increase of nearly 60% on the previous year. Significantly more reports are received directly either through email or via our on-line web form.
- 2.2 Between reports from the public and other stakeholders and inspection findings 3,675 issues were logged onto our database in 2023 (3,570 in 2022), while 3,780 issues were resolved in the same period (3,724 in 2022).

3. Routine Maintenance

- 3.1 We continued to deliver our 15-month inspection and maintenance programme During 2023 our routine maintenance contractor, County Tree Surgeons, amongst other works, delivered:
 - 1215 signs; (2022 - 1,154)
 - 126 bridges; (2022 - 144)
 - 13 boardwalks; (2022 - 8)
 - 39 flights of steps; and (2022 - 41)
 - 52km of surface vegetation clearance (2022 - 48km).
- 3.2 2023 saw 76 other items of work ranging from handrails, small surfacing and culverts works along with some stile and gate works and tree clearance where we haven't been able to get hold of the landowner.
- 3.3 County Tree Surgeons have continued to provide us with a good service and this is a good opportunity to thank them for their flexibility and quick response times to work required to keep the network safe and accessible for lawful users.

3.4 We also undertook our annual summer clearance programme, separately from the routine maintenance programme, where 169km 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 every 15 months, on a parish-by-parish basis. Our Volunteer Rangers also support the service by undertaking a variety of practical works to supplement our maintenance programme across the county. During 56 tasks days during 2023 our Volunteer Rangers delivered:

- 4.8km of vegetation clearance and removed 29 fallen trees;
- Installed 8 new bridges and rebuilt 4;
- Installed 7 plank crossings and 28m of boardwalk;
- Laid 42 tonnes of Type-1 stone for surfacing improvements;
- Installed 44 new steps;

4.2 It is important to note that 55 Volunteer Parish Path Inspectors came to the refresher training day in Billingshurst (split over two sessions) and a further session is being held on 16 April 2024.

4.3 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.

4.4 2023 also saw the Ramblers starting to do works on the network, including some significant clearance to open up paths.

4.5 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 volunteers work from office staff through to the Access Rangers and Volunteer Coordinator.

5. Gates for Stiles

5.1 The PROW team continue to improve access by offering gates to replace existing stiles across the network, due to the restrictive nature of stiles for some users.

5.2 During 2023/24 financial year we have provided 36 gates to landowners, with the agreement that they install the structure and maintain it in the future as they would with other structures on their land. This number is up 56% from last year 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 Works Programme during 2023 we replaced/repaired 5 bridges/boardwalks and any associated works, including bank stabilisation and drainage improvements.

6.2 Further to this a Capital Surface Programme was undertaken totalling over 5.02km of improvements on the network.

6.3 Some works have been carried over to the 2024/25 Capital Programme due to them not being able to be completed for a number of reasons. These include repair works to Old Shoreham Toll Bridge in Shoreham and the replacement of the bridge on BW1730 in Cowfold.

6.4 The Programme for 2023/24 is shown below:

Parish	Path No.	Location of Works	Budget	Funding Stream*
Balcombe	FP8Ba	Surface & Drainage improvements on footpath that runs from Mill Lane, Balcombe westwards to BW8_1Ba.	£14,200	LHMB
Balcombe	FP26Ba	Bridge and boardwalk replacement works on footpath that runs southwards from Boundary Road into Walk Wood.	£27,100	LHMB
Billingshurst/ Wisborough Green	FP780/1	Bridge replacement works on Public Footpath 780/1, west of Lee Place Farm.	£380,000	LHMB
Crawley	Permissive Path	Surface & drainage improvements on footpath that runs from FP1545 Buchan Country Park.	£8,900	LHMB
Crawley	FP1541	Bridge replacement works on Public Footpath 1541, west of Rusper Road, Ifield.	£23,400	LHMB
Henfield	FP2390	Bridge replacement work on FP2390 North of Shiprods, Wheatsheaf Road, Henfield.	£22,200	LHMB
Horsham/ Southwater	FP1639/1	Bridge structural testing works at Horsham/Southwater Parish boundary across railway line.	£31,000	LHMB
Kirdford/ Wisborough Green	BW614 & BW777	Surfacing & drainage improvements to bridleway that runs between A272 and Crimbourne Lane.	£36,000	LHMB
Nuthurst	BW1799	Surface & drainage improvements to bridleway that runs from Copsale Road north-eastwards to Elliotts Farm.	£33,900	LHMB
Patching	BW2264	Surface & drainage improvements to bridleway that runs eastwards from Michelgrove Lane to Myrtle Grove Farm.	£22,000	LHMB
Rudgwick	BW1370/3	Surface & drainage improvements to bridleway that runs between Naldretts Lane and the Downs Link.	£17,000	LHMB
Southwater	BW1642 & BW3568	Surface & drainage improvements to bridleway that runs southwards and south-eastwards to the Bax Castle Pub.	£65,000	LHMB
West Dean	BW455	Bridge replacement works on bridleway that runs eastwards from the A286.	£15,200	LHMB
Wiston	FP2704/1	Surface & drainage improvement works on footpath that runs from Great Barn Farm eastwards to Mouse Lane, Steyning.	£19,600	S106

* LHMB – Local Highways Maintenance Block; ITB – Integrated Transport Block; PC – Parish Council

7. England Coast Path

- 7.1 The England Coast Path, renamed in May 2023 to King Charles III England Coast Path, is progressing well. The section of KCIIECP from East Head to Shoreham opened in October 2023 and as part of the establishment works, there have been improvements to the route such as surfacing, gates for stiles and better signage.
- 7.2 The KCIIECP Project Officer continues to communicate with the Local Planning Authorities, Tourism departments, Landowners and interest groups to ensure the trail is well maintained and to support the benefits to be gained from having a new National Trail.
- 7.3 The remaining section of KCIIECP, from West Wittering to the Hampshire border, still resides with the Secretary of State for approval, however the Project Officer is collaborating with the relevant stakeholders in this area to represent the interests of the KCIIECP and coastal access whilst we await approval of the route. Also, in the meantime, the Project Officer is developing management processes for the KCIIECP and working with neighbouring authorities to ensure the ongoing maintenance of the trail.

8. Planning

- 8.1 During 2022 WSCC's PRow team received 369 requests (19 higher than last year) for PRow comments on planning applications and these include pre-consultation inquiries too. These range from small scale planning applications for items such as extensions or new garages where PRow are nearby to large scale developments involving multiple residential or commercial units immediately impacting the PRow network.

Nick Scott, WSCC Principal Rights of Way Officer