West Sussex County Council Public Rights of Way Service Annual Report 2025/26

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 financial year of 2025/26.

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 An important element of our service is handling enquiries from path users and other parties with 867 calls received through the Customer Service Centre in relation to PRoW. This was a decrease of approximately 9% from 2024/25 (952). Call demand was at its highest during the summer months of 2025 peaking in July.

2.2 Between reports from the public, other stakeholders and inspection findings 3,651 were recorded for this period (3,421 in 2024/25) and 3,805 were resolved (4,017 in 2024/25)

3. Routine Maintenance

3.1 We continued to deliver our 15-month inspection and maintenance programme during 2025/26 financial year. Our routine maintenance contractor, County Tree Surgeons, amongst other works, delivered:

- 1,237 signs; (2024/25 – 1,101)
- 206 bridges; (2024/25 – 146)
- 41 flights of steps; and (2024/25 – 32)
- 28km of surface vegetation clearance (2024/25 – 43km).

3.2 2025/26 saw 52 other items of work ranging from handrails, some stile and gate works and tree clearance where we haven't been able to get hold of the landowner (65 in 2024/25).

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 203km of surface vegetation was cleared (185km in 2024/25).

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.

4.2 Our WSCC Volunteer Ranger also support the service by undertaking a variety of practical works to supplement our maintenance programme across the County.

4.3 As part of 51 tasks days during the 2025/26 financial year our Volunteer Rangers delivered:

- 3.2km of vegetation clearance;
- 19 tonnes of MOT laid;
- 7 x 6m bridges and 8 plank crossings built;
- 58m of boardwalk and 36m of revetment installed;
- 54 fallen trees cleared; and
- 11 new or repaired signs

4.4 In addition, we continue to be supported by the active Parish volunteer groups in Horsted Keynes, Easebourne, Midhurst and the newly established Friends of Old Shoreham group as well as the Ramblers' volunteer group all working in partnership with WSCC. They carry out PROW maintenance and improvement work, including sign installation and repair, vegetation clearance and replacing stiles with kissing gates.

4.5 We are again grateful for the continued support of many individuals who give their time free of charge to support the PROW service, supporting both office staff and Access Rangers.

5. Gates for Stiles

5.1 Improving accessibility of the network continues through our gates to stiles programme. The PRoW team continue to promote the replacement of stiles with gates through landowners to improve access across the network.

5.2 During 2025/26 financial year we have provided 40 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 slightly down from 43 in 2024/25.

6. Capital Works Programme

6.1 As part of the annual Capital Works Programme during 2025/26 we replaced/repaired 6 bridges and any associated works, including bank stabilisation and drainage improvements.

6.2 Further to this the Capital Surfacing Programme was undertaken totalling over 7.5km (8.17km in 2024/25) of improvements on the network.

6.3 The Programme delivered for 2025/26 is shown in Appendix A

6.4 Some works have been carried over to the 2026/27 Capital Programme due to them not being able to be completed for a number of reasons. These include Kirdford FP603/1,Loxwood BW2847 and Horsham FP1639/1.

7. Public Path Orders

7.1 As part of the PRoW team function we process landowner applications relating to the diversion or extinguishment of public rights of way under the Highways Act 1980. During 2025/26, 7 applications from landowners were received. This resulted in the investigation, consideration and confirmation of 2 diversion orders. The previous financial year (2024/25) saw receipt of 4 applications, resulting in the making and confirmation of 2 orders.

7.2 Similar to the previous year we have seen a decrease in the number of formal consultations issued by local planning authorities for the diversion of public rights of way under Section 257 Town and Country Planning Act. During 2025/26 no formal consultations were received.

7.3 In addition to the above, 2 formal consultations relating to improvements or enhancements to the network by way of permissive agreements or dedications were issued (2 from 2024/25).

7.4 As well as the changes or improvements to the network through landowner applications under the Highways Act 1980, formal dedications and permissive agreements, we have also seen an increase in additions to the network through Definitive Map Modification Orders (DMMOs). Whilst these applications are considered by our legal colleagues, if confirmed, operational management sits with the PRoW team. During 2025/26, 6 DMMOs were confirmed resulting in the following:

- Additional 2,025 metres of bridleway or restricted byway
- Additional 1,528 metres of footpath

8. King Charles III England Coast Path

8.1 The establishment works for the final stretch of the King Charles III England Coast Path (KCIIIECP) in West Sussex was complete between West Wittering beach and Emsworth. Works included new signage, surface improvements and a new path with associated boardwalks at Chidham. Now that the West Sussex part of the KCIIIECP is complete, this has joined up over 210 continuous miles of coast path between Calshot in Hampshire and Rye Harbour in East Sussex.

8.2 Due to the completion of the establishment works the KCIIIECP Project Officer role has now ended. This is an opportunity to thank them for their hard work and dedication to establishing a great resource for residents and visitors to West Sussex.

8.3 Works continue to develop the partnership that WSCC have committed to join. This covers West Sussex, Hampshire, Portsmouth, Southampton and the New Forest. The inclusion in a trail partnership increases the National Trail Grant award and in the future part of this will be used to fund a Trail Manager proposed to sit within Hampshire County Council.

9. Planning

9.1 During 2025/26 WSCC's PRoW team received 249 consultation requests (254 in 2024/25) 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 is nearby to large scale developments involving multiple residential or commercial units immediately impacting the PRoW network.

9.2 Of these:

- 55.4 % responded to on time (138)
- 4.4% of no response required (11)
- 18.5% responded later than advertised deadline (46)
- 21.7% where no response was recorded (54)

Nick Scott, WSCC Principal Rights of Way Officer