



**To/
Councillor Andrew Stevens
Cabinet Member for Environment &
Infrastructure**

BY EMAIL

cc: Cabinet Members

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SPC/2024-25/4

06 November 2024

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Committee on 15 October 2024. It is about our follow up on the Public Rights of Way Scrutiny Working Group. A formal written response is not required.

Dear Councillor Stevens,

Follow up – Public Rights of Way Scrutiny Working Group

The Committee takes responsibility for following up on previous Scrutiny Working Groups, to check on progress with the topic / issue(s) and response to any specific suggestions or recommendations made and agreed action coming out of the Scrutiny session.

At our Committee meeting in September, we followed up on the Public Rights of Way Scrutiny Working Group, which originally met in November 2023 for an overview of Public Rights of Way (PROW) across Swansea (mapping / numbers) and had discussed a range of issues, including impacts on PROW from developments and the effect on communities. The Committee wanted to understand how things have moved on from discussion / issues back in Nov 2023 and consider progress on action following suggestions coming out of the Scrutiny session and find out how things have progressed and developments in this area of work.

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We noted that overall, the Working Group had praised the work of the Countryside Access Team and felt that the PROW in Swansea were an asset with huge value for money, however resources were a concern.

Key issues for our follow up session were:

- Information about PROW footfall / usage and whether this has increased
- Progress in developing the 10-year Countryside Action Plan that Councillors were told was due to be adopted in Spring 2024
- Developments regarding resources – the Working Group was told that a team restructure was imminent to improve support for this area of work. Councillors were particularly concerned about resources for pathway maintenance
- Marketing activity regarding PROW
- Progress in lobbying WLGA / Welsh Government on legislation to avoid the duplication of diversion orders which currently takes place
- Any joint / collaborative working between those involved in PROW work and Active Travel work
- The effectiveness of partnership working

We thank you and lead officers for attending the meeting to answer questions. We appreciated the written report provided which updated us on the issues raised by the Working Group and actions taken. It enabled a very helpful and comprehensive discussion. Committee members praised those involved in this work.

Committee Views, including any outstanding issues / actions:

PROW Footfall

We asked about the Council's ability to record / monitor PROW usage, and heard that this was problematic. Efforts to count usage was very labour intensive and time consuming, despite the use of automated counter systems, and previous attempts had proved inconclusive with unreliable data, but indications were that usage figures were stable year on year. It was explained that the preferred option for the Service was to liaise with Tourism colleagues to include PROW usage in their visitor surveys, though it was acknowledged that this would be an underestimate of the number of people using the path network, given use by local residents. You told us that the use of automated counters had been discontinued and there were no plans to put any further resources into recording footfall. We understood that there was no obvious benefit to recording / monitoring usage and no practical reason to have this information, as any related granted funding for PROW was based on population data. We noted that the service was aware of which PROW routes were most popular.

Countryside Action Plan

We asked about progress in developing the 10-year Countryside Action Plan – noting that it has been delayed. You reported that a draft version of the Countryside Access Plan (CAP) was published in December 2023 and public consultation ran until April 2024.

[New plan to help improve access to Swansea's countryside - Swansea](#)

We heard that the process included liaison with Natural Resources Wales, who have a guiding role in the preparation of the plan. You reported that Natural Resources Wales had now confirmed that no further detailed environmental assessment was required. The next version of the plan was currently being prepared taking into account consultation responses received. There were a number of issues requiring resolution, but it was anticipated that the Action Plan would be finalised around Spring 2025.

Resources

We discussed developments and the current state of resources. We noted the outcome of team restructure, with the creation of the Countryside Team in August 2024, merging the previous Countryside Access Team and the Gower National Landscape Team. The team also now included the Council's Commons Registration Officer. You reported that this was part of a wider restructure of the Natural Environment Section, and will increase mutual support within (and between) the teams, and ensure better line management arrangements, and should result in more efficient ways of working. We were pleased to hear there has been no reduction in staff resources, and that there is greater resilience.

There was discussion regarding both staffing and financial resources. In terms of finance we recognised that the budget is stretched, as it is across the Council. We heard that grant funding was fairly constant each year, however costs on materials were increasing resulting in a net budget reduction. With a budget fully committed you spoke about the challenges when having deal with emergency / urgent repair works, e.g. recent flooding affecting paths in Gower. You talked about the different ways of working and alternative streams of funding. We heard that some Councillors have contributed monies from their community budgets for specific path improvements.

Appreciating that the budget for path maintenance is very constrained – there is insufficient budget to clear all paths annually - we asked whether options have been explored to increase resources other than directly employed staff and external sources of help and support, e.g. whether there has been any contact with Probation Service for community service to assist with PROW maintenance via the Community Payback scheme; using volunteers; apprenticeships, etc. We heard that the Service does work with volunteer organisations / the probation service which can be helpful, but organising suitable work for volunteers can be very time consuming and complex so it is

not an easy or cost effective solution, and has limited direct benefit. You told us that the Service was working with landowners and the Ramblers, to ensure there is sufficient funding to deal with unexpected issues such as trees across paths and other obstructions, as well as being able to respond to complaints received. In addition, the team are encouraging the Ramblers to 'adopt' certain paths that they then take responsibility for regular clearance, potentially carrying out simple maintenance tasks to keep routes open. This would free up officer time to focus on other tasks. The team has also been discussing how volunteers could be used to contribute to a full network baseline survey, which could then inform future workplans.

Marketing of PROW

Recognising that PROW are a big asset to Swansea, and complements our tourism offer, the Working Group had been keen to see marketing activities to raise awareness. We were told that leaflets are produced and distributed to promote PROW and the network of paths, with close working with the Tourism Section to ensure that countryside access opportunities are raised through promotional campaigns, and through social media. We recognised the need to avoid duplication of the work of the Tourism Section. It was emphasised that there were limited resources within the Countryside Team to do the marketing and promotion given the necessary focus on maintenance to ensure paths are useable.

You reported that the Countryside Team have recently assisted the Tourism Section with details of five Gower walks which are to be included in a forthcoming Coast Magazine feature for their Winter edition. It will go live online in Autumn and into print for their Winter edition. The Countryside Team are also building wider links, for example with the Gower Walking Festival and the Gower Show, to promote countryside access. The team are currently updating their range of walking leaflets, to ensure that information is accurate, shares a common visual brand, as well as identifying whether there are information gaps to make it easier for visitors and residents to find promoted walks.

We noted that there will be a reduction in hard copy leaflets in the future with smaller annual print runs to reduce the need for storage space and greater encouragement of use of on line resources.

PROW Access

There was a discussion about access issues that users may encounter and how these can be reported. We noted that the Countryside Team has its own PROW web pages including a range of information including maps, and where issues can be reported. PROW users are asked to send a photo which makes it easier to resolve issues more swiftly (fallen trees etc), helping us to keep the network open.

We also asked about engagement with those organising walking events to ensure planned routes were viable. You confirmed that discussions are held with any such organisers should they contact the Council, and appropriate advice given, in case of any access issues, to ensure such events are successful as anything that encouraged the use of PROW in Swansea would be supported.

You emphasised that many PROW ran across private land and whilst landowners, whether farmers or otherwise, should not hinder access, users needed to be mindful of the surrounding environment and act responsibly, following the Countryside Code, etc.

PROW Legislation

The Committee queried the current position / timetable for proposed changes to PROW legislation. The Working Group had asked you to lobby the WLGA / Welsh Government on legislation to avoid the duplication of diversion orders which currently takes place.

You reported that lobbying has been successful with the Welsh Government recognising that the current legislative framework is very restrictive and changes to the Highways and Planning Acts will simplify procedural process. We heard about a meeting back in February 2024 to discuss this, and current progress regarding proposed legislative amendments to the various Acts dating back to 1949. We were concerned about the time this is taking, though the legislative process is of course entirely in the hands of the Welsh Government. **You assured the Committee that you would chase up on progress at every opportunity.**

Joint Working between Countryside and Active Travel Teams

We asked about the extent to which there is joint / collaborative working between those involved in PROW work and Active Travel work.

It was confirmed that there is a lot of engagement between the teams and the relationship has developed well. You told us that the Countryside Access Team is routinely consulted by the Active Travel Team on all the Active Travel schemes that could potentially be carried out to identify any issues, opportunities for joined up working on projects, appropriate apparatus to be installed, as well as any ecological constraints. You reported that a previous consultation with the Active Travel Team led to several practical changes to plans, so that, for example, equestrian users would be catered for, with better links between the Active Travel route and the PROW network.

The Countryside Team have also discussed with the Active Travel Team the future potential for routes in “less urban environments”, although there may be issues with “urban-style” specifications. We understood that using funding intended for Active Travel for PROW was not an option as the Welsh Government had defined parameters for the use of that specific money, which affected their suitability for the countryside. Committee members felt it was unfortunate that Active Travel funding could not be spent on rural areas, to improve walking routes, given the conditions attached to the funding.

Partnership Working

We note that the vast majority of PROW are across privately owned land which requires the establishment of good working relationships with the landowners many of whom are farmers.

We discussed the effectiveness of partnership working. We noted there is close working with groups including not only landowners, but The Ramblers, Gower Society, National Trust, Natural Resources Wales, Voluntary Groups, and Community Councils, in order to maintain, facilitate and promote countryside access. The key forum for partnership working is through the Swansea Local Access Forum.

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter helpful and would welcome comments on any of the issues raised within, however, we do not expect you to provide a formal response. This letter concludes our formal follow up on the Working Group.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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