

### Best Value Review of Countryside Services

#### Measures proposed to improve performance on maintaining the PROW network

A major effort is required to improve performance on maintaining the PROW network to achieve the LPSA stretched target of 75% ease of use by 2006 (effectively November 2005)

#### Action already taken since April 2004

- **Countryside Volunteer Service** - the appointment of the Volunteer Co-ordinator in October 2004 came too late to have any impact on the 2004/2005 LPSA target. Work is now well advanced on establishing new procedures for recruiting, training and managing the new countryside volunteer work force. 30-40 existing volunteers can be incorporated into the service and an additional 15 have been recruited since October. Their time over the next year will be prioritised to deal with PROW maintenance issues.
- **NYCC Apprentice Team** - the original proposal to outpost one apprentice to each area team proved to be impractical. The apprentice work programme has therefore been fundamentally re-organised. A team of 3 apprentices is now being managed by an Assistant PROW Officer and has been provided with a vehicle and trailer. They are dedicated full-time to resolving problems in Areas 1, 2 and 4. They started work in November and are already making significant inroads into the maintenance backlog. In the first 4 weeks up to 24 December, the team completed the following work: 19 gates installed, 6 signposts erected, 3 sets of steps built, 4 bridges repaired, 3 stiles replaced, 3 routes (1000m) cleared of overgrowth and numerous waymarks installed. Undertaking this work by contractor would have cost in the region of £10k.
- **City of York Council Apprentice Team** - in addition to the team 'seconded' to NYCC (see above), a central team of up to 7 apprentices managed by York CC staff is available for NYCC projects. It has been agreed that their work will be prioritised to deal with Area 3 PROW issues. Although some work has been undertaken, less success has been achieved due to problems with setting up and managing projects. These problems are being urgently addressed (see below).
- **Bridge maintenance** - over the past few months an assessment has been made of the scale of work needed to repair or replace existing bridges on the PROW network. Each defective bridge on the network, no matter how small, would result in failure of that PROW in the LPSA surveys. This assessment had never been attempted before, as there is no comprehensive inventory available of the number and condition of bridges. In the absence of such an inventory, the number of reports in the CAMS system was assessed and this demonstrated that there were over 200 known bridges that needed to be repaired or replaced at an estimated cost of £1m to £1.5m. This database was updated with assistance from user groups who, in conjunction with staff, also helped to identify a number of priorities for early action. These are currently being inspected and surveyed. It is hope that existing resources can then be re-prioritised, additional resources

sought and improved management systems put in place to address the problem comprehensively.

- **Howardian Hills AONB** - for a number of years, AONB and PROW staff have been working jointly on a comprehensive programme to survey and improve all PROW in the AONB. The structured approach taken to planning and implementing this survey meant that the service has been able to attract 50% grant assistance from the Countryside Agency, doubling the level of resources available. This programme is now in its final year, so that by March 2005, all PROW in the AONB should be up to a high standard.
- **Management Issues** - During August 2004, an existing member of the HQ PROW staff was seconded to Area 3 to help resolve a number of management issues that were preventing progress on achieving targets. As Area 3 contains the largest length of PROW and therefore many of the outstanding problems, it was crucial that this situation was resolved quickly.

#### **Additional action being considered**

- **PROW Area Staff** - the workload and responsibilities of existing area staff are being examined to see if more dedicated time can be given to supporting the countryside volunteers and apprentices to ensure a steady workflow. At present there is a 'bottle-neck' which is preventing the resources available being put to work to address known problems. More time needs to be devoted, for example, to identifying appropriate projects, arranging landowner access and setting up and managing work on the ground.
- **New Deal Taskforce** - the potential is being examined for making more use of the New Deal Taskforce based in Malton. The team has already been used on PROW projects but a number of problems were encountered. It is vital that any work is undertaken efficiently and to an appropriate standard. The Malton team is being used again on a trial basis in Area 2 to determine whether a more acceptable standard of work can be achieved. Should this prove to be the case, there could be significant potential for using this team for a concentrated period targeted at PROW maintenance problems.
- **Area Rangers** - at present, two Rangers are employed in Area 3 specifically to identify and resolve maintenance problems on the network. Although one post is currently vacant, these staff have proved to be an invaluable mechanism for targeting and resolving problems quickly and efficiently. Ideally this resource should be replicated in the other area teams to provide much needed additional manpower. The possibility is therefore being examined of re-prioritising existing PROW resources to take on an additional Ranger in each Area Office. If this could be achieved, it would provide a substantial and much needed boost to staff morale, as well as significantly increasing the volume of work that could be undertaken on the ground.
- **Obstructions** - obstructions to the network, which can range from seasonal ploughing and cropping over paths to physical blockages, can be a significant cause of failure for the LPSA target. Enforcement action at present has to be dovetailed with all the other duties of the PROW staff. It is clear from existing performance (see target 6.10 in the Best Value Improvement Plan) that the service is well below its target on implementing the adopted ploughing and

cropping policy. Other obstructions are a significant cause of public complaints, which can be difficult and time-consuming to resolve. Consideration is therefore being given to re-prioritising existing staff resources to provide a dedicated 'enforcement officer' based at County Hall to assist with resolving obstructions to the network.

- **Community Paths Initiative** - this work is currently being undertaken temporarily by one of the Area PROW Officers, following the secondment of the lead officer to Area 3 (see above). A review is being undertaken of the future of this project, as it may well be that similar benefits can be achieved through an expansion of the Countryside Volunteer programme (see above). This could release valuable resources, which could then be re-prioritised to improve performance against the LPSA target.
- **Nidderdale Access Issues** - now that the majority of the work needed to meet the new CROW Act open access provisions has been completed, it is envisaged that there could be some spare capacity to devote to meeting the LPSA target in the Nidderdale AONB area. There will be a continuing and ongoing requirement to manage the work of the Open Access volunteers and to deal with related issues but any spare capacity will be devoted to helping identify and manage PROW works for the countryside volunteers and apprentices in the AONB area.
- **LPSA Survey** - to measure performance against the LPSA target, the County Council is required to undertake sample surveys in May and June of at least 2.5% of the network. This sample is very small and means that no matter how much effort is put into improving the network, the sample could still miss any improvements that have been made, resulting in failure to meet the target. This is potentially one of the most serious obstacles to meeting the target. To address the issue, consideration is being given to undertaking a much larger sample for the final surveys to be completed in 2005. Although this risks diverting valuable staff and volunteer effort from work on the ground, it is possible that time could be spent to better effect in this way if a more accurate assessment of performance was achieved.
- **PROW Materials** - Discussions are taking place within the Business Unit to identify whether there might be any scope for re-prioritising existing budget resources this financial year to enable a supply of PROW materials to be bought in to support the PROW work programme. With the additional staff resource now being dedicated to maintenance and improvement, it would be unfortunate if this were not matched by the necessary materials to undertake works on the ground.
- **Landowner Assistance** - it is proposed to write to both the National Farmers Union and the Country Land and Business Association to seek their support in encouraging their members to help resolve any maintenance problems over the coming months. The prime responsibility for maintaining PROW furniture lies with land owners and occupiers, although in practice the County Council undertake much of this work. Any additional work undertaken by landowners over this period would clearly be of great help in achieving the LPSA target.