

North Yorkshire Local Access Forum**6 July 2016****Increasing the Use of Volunteers and Strategic Partners to Assist With the Delivery of the Countryside Access Service****Report of the Assistant Director – Waste and Countryside Services****1.0 Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 To advise NYLAF of how the County Council is using volunteers and strategic partners to assist with the delivery of the Countryside Access Service. To ask the NYLAF to comment and advise on our approach.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 The report from the NY Local Access Forum subgroup in February 2015 offered several helpful recommendations for increasing volunteer involvement related to the achievement of minimum statutory standards. The purpose of this report is to inform NYLAF of the work that we do with volunteers to help deliver the Countryside Access Service. Included is a review of the sub group recommendations together with a summary of future plans to expand the role of volunteers and strategic delivery partners.

3.0 Current Position

- 3.1 The Countryside Access team currently works with volunteers in two ways:
- an in-house group called the Countryside Volunteers
 - occasional practical work with other local groups such as Rotary Clubs, Ramblers, bridleway groups and parishes.
- 3.2 The Countryside Volunteers are managed by a full-time Volunteer Co-ordinator based in the Development and Outreach Team working closely with the Countryside Access Team. The Countryside Volunteers were established 13 years ago with 115 volunteers presently registered across the county. Last year 62 volunteers gave over 2200 hours on rights of way tasks (see breakdown below). 20 new volunteers were recruited in 2015-16 and enquiries continue to come in on a regular basis. Several of the volunteers are also members of the Ramblers, Bridleway groups or Parish path groups with a broad range of interests, skills and experience.

3.3 Volunteer activity in 2015/16 is summarised in the following table:

Activity	Number	Hours
Practical maintenance tasks - <i>furniture items repaired/installed</i> - <i>signposts and waymarks repaired/installed</i> - <i>clearance tasks</i>	125 36 48	
Total	209	1652
Path surveys completed	29	137
Site visits & inspections completed	14	36
Notices put up (then removed)	30	83
Days research on bridge ownership	36	297
Activity days with Howardian Hills AONB (conservation, monument management, surveys, junior rangers etc.)	79	1056

It should be noted that volunteer activity was impacted upon during this period due to the transition to the new Countryside Access Service, however, the expectation is that activities will increase substantially in 2016-17 through the adoption of revised working practices.

4.0 NYLAF recommendations on the use of volunteers

4.1 NYLAF noted that volunteers can be used effectively to help with a number of tasks and made a number of recommendations which have been summarised below with relevant progress and/or commentary shown below each point.

4.2 **waymarking ROWs**

Volunteers currently do a small amount of waymarking, as well as erecting finger posts and waymark posts. Training volunteers to carry out waymarking on a systematic basis is planned as part of the CAS review. We have several other projects to complete first, but would hope to start this later this financial year or the beginning of the next.

4.3 **liaising with landowners and tenants**

This is not yet a role in which we have involved volunteers. Some work with landowners is contentious with potential legal ramifications and this work would always stay with an officer. There are also potential issues around data protection, but we hope to be able to resolve that. However, where issues are not contentious, there is a role for volunteers here which would probably be included in the work with third party groups (see below for details).

- 4.4 ***surveying ROWs, taking photographs, inspecting reported issues***
With fewer staff available to supervise practical work, the focus of the countryside volunteers is gradually changing from maintenance work parties to volunteers acting as the 'eyes and ears' of the service, carrying out exactly the roles described in the LAF report. Volunteers carry out surveys; inspect reported issues to take photos and write a brief description; put up, check or remove diversion, closure and S31 notices; and carry out low level maintenance using hand tools. We began these activities in 2015-16 and expect this to grow significantly with over 100 inspections likely this year.
- 4.5 ***general path clearance***
Small groups of volunteers occasionally do path clearances and over 2.5 km of ROW were cleared last year. This is an activity we hope to do more of, once we have arrangements in place for more tools etc.
- 4.6 ***admin – before a maintenance/improvement and tracking work and actions required***
We do see a small role for admin volunteers and two people have offered to help input the data from a planned volunteer survey of bridges later this year. However, all maintenance work needs to be prioritised by CAS staff first and once the issue is logged on the Council's Countryside Access Management System (CAMS) database tracking and allocation are all done by CAMS. The necessary training and supervision of volunteers using complex database management systems is likely to outweigh the benefits.
- 4.7 ***Maintenance/improvement jobs such as repairing or installing stiles, gates, bridges etc.***
We no longer have the resources to sustain regular work parties led by CAS officers on the scale we did previously. However, some of this work has continued, as shown in the table above, and is still ongoing this year. There are safety and liability issues with volunteers working unsupervised and we are working on ways of covering those. We need to find a different way of tackling this work and so are developing plans for working with external groups and with other strategic partners such as the National Parks and the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) in Nidderdale, Howardian Hills and Forest of Bowland (see 5 and 6 below respectively).
- 4.8 ***NYCC have accepted the use of volunteers with regard to libraries where NYCC staff have been cut and many libraries rely on voluntary staff to stay open. A similar attitude should be applied to ROWs.*** Waste & Countryside Services are totally committed to working with volunteers and to expanding work with volunteers. They continue to fund a full time volunteer co-ordinator specifically for the countryside volunteers. It is difficult to make comparisons with libraries though, as the challenges and the legal and safety ramifications of activities on ROWs are quite different. The worst case scenario is that they could endanger life (of volunteers and/or path users) and could also pose a danger to a landowner's stock.

- 4.9 ***Training in first aid, health & safety, strimming etc. should continue to be undertaken where necessary but if volunteers are organised into effective groups, not everyone in every group would require training in everything.*** All volunteers will continue to have a basic health and safety induction as this is part of NYCC's liability for any work done on ROWs on our behalf. We currently have 6 volunteers who have undergone bespoke strimmer training and attained a strimmer certificate to enable them to carry out the activity safely. For first aid we only train enough volunteers to provide adequate cover so we currently have 17 of our most regular volunteers trained in emergency first aid, with another 10 places planned this year.

5.0 Work with third party groups

- 5.1 In addition to the above recommended volunteer tasks, NYLAF suggested working with third party groups as follows:

NYLAF suggest that NYCC consider appointing recognised bodies (such as Ramblers, British Horse Society, Bridleways etc.) as contractors as these groups frequently have their own groups of trained, organised and expert volunteers together with appropriate insurance and administration.

NYLAF consider many parishes have a great deal of local knowledge of ROWs combined with great enthusiasm to see their local ROWS maintained and improved. NYLAF therefore suggest that NYCC re-explore their relationship with parishes, perhaps by resurrecting the Parish Paths Partnership, and see which parishes would be happy to take a role in ROW maintenance/improvement.

- 5.2 In the past work with third party groups such Rotary Clubs, Ramblers, bridleway groups and parishes has been quite small in scale and done in an ad hoc way. Following the reductions in the Countryside Access budget the service has been approached by a number of groups and parishes offering to help maintain rights of way and as the resources for internal practical tasks have decreased.
- 5.3 We are keen to explore ways to expand this area of activity and work is underway to develop a model which will support third party groups to work without direct supervision whilst also ensuring work is carried out safely and to the required standard. In order to keep within the budget available, any maintenance or improvement work will also need to align with CAS priorities if resourced by NYCC.

5.4 There are a number of issues under consideration that need to be addressed for this to work successfully and sustainably, including the following:

- Staff time for initial set-up and ongoing liaison with groups
- Lines of communication, liability and responsibility
- Prioritising work – who decides if and when the work should be done?
- Liaison with landowners
- Health and safety – regardless of who insures volunteers, NYCC are liable for the safety of volunteers and for path users, and potentially for any damage to landowners property or stock, where work is carried out on our behalf or at our request.
- Skills and training – funding for training, staff time for training.
- Quality of work – is it on the definitive line, is the work of a good standard, how will this be monitored?
- Materials and tools – purchase, maintenance and transportation of tools and materials. The removal of arisings and any other debris.

5.5 As identified by NYLAF, one possible model is the Parish Paths Partnership (P3). We contacted seven other local authorities who have (or recently had) a P3 project to discuss their experiences. Of those:

- one has closed due to insufficient funding.
- one described their P3 as 'limping along towards closure' and that work completed does not meet the authority's priorities and is therefore considered poor value for money.
- one has P3 managed by Groundwork with a delegated budget

In the remaining four authorities:

- many P3 groups (up to two thirds) are limited to surveys, waymarking, strimming and clearance.
- Where furniture maintenance is undertaken, funding and/or staff are available to:
 - help each group get established
 - provide initial practical training
 - provide tools and materials
 - work alongside volunteers initially and then for more complex tasks e.g. bridges.

5.6 Whilst we do not have the level of funding or staffing required for a full P3 project, there are elements we could take from P3 which we could use in working with local groups. To this end we hope to start some pilot projects this year, starting with a Ramblers group first, then a parish group.

5.7 Some ideas considered so far are:

- To put together a written agreement for each group spelling out the geographical area to be covered, funding arrangements, lines of communication and responsibility.
- To set up a training package for group leaders and a few members of the group. The knowledge and skills gained could then be cascaded through the group whilst working on tasks under the guidance of those already trained.
- To ask groups to plan a programme of works for the year ahead which CAS officers could then match with CAS priorities and agree with them any changes or additions.
- Local groups developing relationships with landowners and tenants in their area, to liaise on practical works on their land, but also to help change the culture of assuming NYCC will do everything for them.

5.8 With the information gained from the pilots we would hope to have a well developed model that we could gradually extend across the county. It is unlikely that we would have the capacity to work with every parish and community group, but we could work with those who show interest, perhaps grouping some parishes together to share resources and training.

6.0 Work with strategic partners

6.1 In addition to working with volunteers and 3rd party groups, CAS is currently expanding upon existing strategic partner relationships with its National Parks and AONBs to explore opportunities to work better together to help achieve common goals and pool limited resources.

6.2 A number of pilot projects have been initiated since the creation of the Countryside Access Service which are in the process of being implemented this financial year. These include the following:

- **Upper Nidderdale Landscape Partnership** – working alongside Nidderdale AONB and the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority – undertaking a programme of access enhancement projects in Upper Nidderdale during 2016-18 fully funded via the Heritage Lottery Fund (£25K).
- **Howardian Hills AONB Enhancement Project** – utilising HHAONB funding (£7.5K) working with North York Moors National Park Authority (NYMNP) Young Apprentices to undertake a number of enhancement projects identified within the AONB.

- **Unsurfaced Unclassified Roads (UUR) Pilot** – working with NYMNPA Rangers utilising their expertise and local knowledge to help manage the UURs in the Scarborough area on behalf of the Highways and Transportation Division (project budget £30K).
- **Forest of Bowland AONB Enhancement Project** – utilising FoBAONB staff to undertake maintenance projects within the AONB.

6.3 Depending on the success of these pilots, it is hoped that they will provide models for expansion and provide longer term sustainable solutions to help the CAS maintain and enhance the public right of way network across North Yorkshire.

7.0 Conclusion

7.1 Given current financial and staff resource constraints, the CAS recognises the value and is committed to the use of volunteers. Indeed, it is a key Service Plan objective to seek opportunities to further develop the use of volunteers, third party groups and strategic partners to assist with the delivery of the Countryside Access Service which is reflected in the initiatives noted in this report.

8.0 Legal Implications

8.1 There are no legal implications as this is an advisory report only

9.0 Financial Implications

9.1 There are no financial implications upon the County Council.

10.0 Equalities Implications

10.1 There are no equality implications as this is an advisory report only.

11.0 Recommendation

11.1 It is recommended that:

- i) LAF members comment on the content of the report.

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Background Documents: None