

North Yorkshire County Council**North Yorkshire Local Access Forum****23 November 2016****Countryside Access Service Review Update****Report of the Assistant Director – Transport, Waste and Countryside Services****1.0 Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 To provide NYLAF with an update on progress on a comprehensive review of the Public Rights of Way Service following a restructure carried out in 2015.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Under the auspices of the North Yorkshire 2020 programme, Waste and Countryside Services undertook a restructuring exercise in December 2014 – March 2015 to move the service to a ‘minimum standards’ position. The restructure removed 3FTE front line Public Rights of Way (PRoW) staff. The new staffing structure for the PRoW team became operational in October 2015. The team now has a Principal Officer, four Public Rights of Way Officers, two Field Officers and a Technical Officer shared with the Definitive Map Team. The saving also removed £105k from PRoW maintenance and operational budgets.
- 2.2 In Autumn 2015 the team started a fundamental review of its purpose and operational work models and practices, with the aim of ensuring that the savings made are sustainable in the long run and that the service meets its statutory responsibilities while providing the best level of service for the available funding.
- 2.3 The review being carried out is a ‘root and branch’ review of the PRoW Service and how the Council delivers its responsibilities for management of public rights of way. The intention is that this review will lead to more transparency over why we do what we do, and therefore why we don’t do other things. An important part of this approach is the development of service standards which will be published towards the end of the programme.
- 2.4 The NY Local Access Forum received a detailed report on initial route prioritisation proposals in February 2016. North Yorkshire County Council BES Executive Members received an update report in April 2016. Executive Members were happy that the review should continue along the lines set out. North Yorkshire Transport, Economy and Environment Scrutiny Committee received a report in October 2016 and were supportive of the approach being taken.

3.0 Update on Review Progress at October 2016

3.1 Paragraph 3.2 sets out the scope of the review programme, and provides an update on what has been achieved to date. Sections 5, 6 and 7 provide more detail on three key elements of the review.

3.2 The workstreams within the review of the Public Rights of Way service are:

3.2.1 To refresh the service's policy framework.

Update: A proposed updated policy statement has been prepared. In practice the proposed new statement is little changed from the old.

3.2.2 To deliver a revised, comprehensive and transparent route categorisation of all the paths on the network, resulting in publishing a category map of the entire network on the Council website for the first time.

Update: The NY Local Access Forum provided comments on an initial route categorisation proposal at their February meeting. Those proposals have since been mapped in detail. The mapping exercise suggested that the initial proposals were too complex and included too many path characteristics. The proposals have been simplified and remodelled. Section 5 provides more detail. The proposals are ready for public consultation to begin once support resources are available. An 8-week consultation is envisaged to allow all interested parties enough time to provide their comments.

3.2.3 To refresh the model used by the team to prioritise the resolution of defects reported to it.

Update: The existing issue prioritisation model has been examined and alternatives discussed. The conclusion is that the existing model has the benefit of being simple and familiar, and therefore only very minimal change is proposed to the model the team uses to prioritise its response to customer reports of defects. This will therefore not be the subject of public consultation.

The three factors that contribute to prioritising our response to a report of a defect will remain:

- *The category of the route (ultimately including an element of community value),*
- *The effect that the reported defect has on the ability of people to use the network,*
- *The health and safety risk posed by the reported defect i.e. potential severity of injury x likelihood of injury.*

The introduction of a new route categorisation model will change the specific scores assigned to individual reported defects. The model ensures that while in general defects on higher category paths will be prioritised, defects that cause a risk to the public and defects that stop people using paths will tend to come to the top of the pile for attention even when they are on lower category paths.

- 3.2.4 To revise all existing detailed work processes to ensure consistently efficient approaches are taken to reported network defects. New procedures will be developed for all of the 'volume' issue types reported by customers.**

Update: Work has been undertaken on almost all of the service's work processes. A more detailed update on this element of the review is provided in section 6 and the Forum is invited to comment on the direction of travel.

- 3.2.5 To ensure that the service maximises the benefit from the continuing support of its existing group of countryside volunteers, by ensuring that the volunteer role is set out clearly within the new working procedures, and by ensuring that we manage our offer to the volunteers and other groups more efficiently.**

Update: All of the work undertaken to this point to develop revised working processes have included an important role for the countryside volunteers, and have brought the countryside volunteers into the flow of work processes. The task of working through the existing procedures has reinforced the desire within the service for countryside volunteers to play a key role in supporting the service to work more efficiently.

- 3.2.6 To decide on the future of the team's core IT system.**

Update: A systems appraisal has been undertaken and considered, but was not conclusive. NYCC Technology and Change has been asked to undertake a further comprehensive analysis of the current and future benefits of either maintaining and investing in the current system, or transferring to an alternative system that would need to be developed but that could offer significant potential synergies with the system currently used by NY Highways. In the meantime the team is continuing to use the current system.

- 3.2.7 To explore the potential to make use of new IT functionality around managing volunteers, enforcement activity, mobile working and statutory reporting.**

To develop integrated on-line defect reporting for customers, to reduce administrative work and to provide better real time feedback for customers.

Update: No progress has been made on these items as they are dependent on a decision regarding the team's core IT system. Both system options will be able to support these objectives.

- 3.2.8 To examine how we can work with existing community and user groups who want to work on maintaining or improving the network.**

To set out our approach to requests from communities to improve the network to ensure consistency in response and that expectations are realistic.

Update: Progress has been made to develop a pilot with the Lower Wharfedale Ramblers Group who are keen to support the service by undertaking practical maintenance and improvement tasks on the network within an area comprising 17 parishes. We hope that this pilot will inform our approach to improving the network. Further detail is provided in section 7.

3.2.9 To set out a published statement of service standards.

Update: A statement of service standards will be developed and published once the prioritisation and new working processes have been implemented.

4.0 Review Timetable.

4.1 While progress has been made, the review programme has fallen behind its initial timetable. The route categorisation work in particular has taken longer than expected due to technical difficulties in mapping the network and conflicting pressures within and outside the service area. Table 1 sets out a revised outline timetable for key expected activity relating to the route categorisation and process review elements of the review programme.

Table 1: Review programme – revised outline timetable

| | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Autumn 2016 | Develop detailed proposals around the proactive seasonal vegetation programme. |
| Autumn 2016 to Winter 2016/17 | Public consultations on: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• approach to route categorisation;• principles applying to the proactive seasonal vegetation programme. |
| Winter 2016/17 to Spring 2017 | Implementation of route categorisation, with knock on effect on issue prioritisation. |
| Through to Summer 2017 | Ongoing programme of process reviews relating to the majority of reported defects. |
| Through to Summer 2017 | Implementation of process reviews, following agreement of a categorisation model following public consultation. |
| 2017/18 | Develop workable proposals on the detailed measurement of community value. |

5.0 Approach to Route Prioritisation.

5.1 Overview of the Proposed Approach to Route Categorisation

The aim is to assign and then publish a route category for every section of path across the network. We have considered a range of options, and propose the following model with the following key elements:

- We will continue to manage the network based on 'Links' – sections of paths.
- Each link will have a category assigned.
- Eventually, a category banding will be assigned to each link based on a total points score which will be the sum of (a) a points score assigned for the characteristic of the route, and (b) a points score assigned for the value placed in the route by the community.
- We will assign a category banding to each link. This will be mapped and published on the website.
- The category will be assigned based on the distribution of scores once all links have been scored, and on the capacity level within the service.

- The category rating will then form part of the issue prioritisation model.

5.2 This approach has been proposed because we think:

- that it is a transparent approach to assessing the entire network;
- that the inclusion of community value in the model will focus attention and resource onto parts of the network that will provide greatest benefit and value per pound spent.
- that it provides a means to alter obviously perverse and incorrect categorisations over time.

5.3 While we believe that the aim to measure and include community value remains valid, measuring the value that different communities place on different types of footpath is complex. We will need to define what we mean by community value and how to measure it objectively.

5.4 Therefore, the intention is to initially implement the new route categorisation based on the characteristic score alone. Then over time we would seek to add a measure of community value into the model in a way that provides real differentiation between routes which are genuinely valued above others.

5.5 Detailed Route Prioritisation Proposals: Characteristics

Table 2 contains the proposed characteristic scores to be applied. It shows the type of characteristic that we consider important, how that characteristic is to be defined, and the score linked to each defining characteristic. Many paths and sections of route are multi-faceted in nature and could fall into more than one of the defining characteristics set out below. It would be possible to give a multi-faceted section or path points for each of its characteristics. However this would make the model much more complex. Therefore we have opted for a 'key characteristic' model that will assign one score to each path based on its highest scoring characteristic. The characteristics chosen have the advantage of being factually objective. They can all be mapped using currently available datasets.

Table 2: Path characteristic scores

| Path characteristic | Defined by / as | Score |
|---------------------------|--|-------|
| National Trail | Defined by Natural England | 10 |
| National Cycle Network | Defined by Sustrans | |
| Safe routes to schools | Rights of Way that coincide with the SRTS network. Only included within 3km of secondary school and 2km of primary schools. Usually surfaced routes providing alternative direct pedestrian / cycle route from population centres to schools avoiding busy roads or roads without a footway. Just that section of the route defined as a SRTS scores 10. | |
| Routes within urban areas | Routes mostly within a development limit of service centres/large villages. The whole length of the route is classed as a 10. | |
| NYCC promoted routes | A number of routes promoted by NYCC. This list will be subject to review over time | 8 |

| | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| Routes within 1km of urban fringe | Routes that lie within 1km of the development limit of service centres/large villages. The whole length of the route scores 8. | |
| Multi-user trails | Largely barrier free, surfaced strategic routes that can be used by walkers but which are also good for cyclists and horse riders either linking communities or over 5km in length. For example Nidderdale Greenway. | |
| Routes within 1km of village centres. | Paths that lie within a radius of 1km from a village centre. The whole length of the route scores 6. | 6 |
| Routes within AONBs | As defined by Natural England | |
| Routes along main rivers and canals | As defined by the Environment Agency | |
| Routes avoiding A and B class roads | Routes within 50m of an A or B class road that run parallel and offer an alternative route. | |
| Routes onto access land | As defined by Natural England | |
| Other routes | Routes that don't have any of the other characteristics | 4 |

5.6 The modelling undertaken has not pointed to any obviously unreasonable or perverse results overall. The Local Access Forum, while understanding the benefits of operating within a 'strong' model, felt it desirable for officers to have a degree of flexibility at the local level. We therefore intend to develop and operate a mechanism by which officers can amend path category scores within the model in order to recognise specific local characteristics and amend any obvious local anomalies.

5.7 Table 3 illustrates the proposed breakdown of the network into four category bandings:

Table 3: Path Characteristic Categorisation.

| Path characteristic | Length (km) | Characteristic Score | Path Categorisation |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| National Trail | 87.5 | 10 | Category A (15.1%) |
| National Cycle Network | 260.2 | 10 | |
| Safe routes to schools | 411.7 | 10 | |
| Routes within urban areas | 161.7 | 10 | |
| NYCC promoted routes | 609.7 | 8 | Category B (21.4%) |
| Multi-user trails | 65.3 | 8 | |
| Routes within 1km of urban fringe | 633.5 | 8 | |
| Routes within 1km of village centres. | 2211.6 | 6 | Category C (45.9%) |
| Routes within AONBs | 411.8 | 6 | |
| Routes along main rivers and canals | 74.1 | 6 | |
| Routes avoiding A and B class roads | 4.5 | 6 | |
| Routes onto access land | 102.8 | 6 | |

| | | | |
|--------------|--------|---|--------------------|
| Other routes | 1077.5 | 4 | Category D (17.6%) |
| Total | 6112 | | 100% |

6.0 Review of Working Procedures.

6.1 One objective of the review is to ensure that the newly structured team has clear and consistent procedures in place to prioritise cases, resolve cases on the ground, and review, close or resolve the backlog of cases.

6.2 To this end, work is being undertaken on a rolling programme of procedure reviews. Some procedures exist but are outdated and have fallen into disuse. Work has been undertaken to review the service's approach to the following issue types:

- a) Ploughing and cropping
- b) Obstruction / approach to enforcement
- c) Furniture - gates and stiles
- d) Signposting
- e) Waymarking
- f) Seasonal vegetation
- g) Bridge inspection

Defect reports falling broadly within these categories make up about 85% of the reports received by the PRoW team.

6.3 A number of proposals have emerged on how to deal with defects better in future:

- a) We will triage reports initially in order to prioritise them more consistently and close out cases that are invalid.
- b) We will seek to ensure that work is undertaken at the appropriate level within the team – for example by making more use of Technical Administrative resource, and by passing cases on to PRoW team officers only when full information is available.
- c) Volunteers will be asked to undertake activities that help the service react to defects reported to us – in particular undertaking site inspections to act as the service's 'eyes and ears' on the ground.
- d) Volunteers will become an integral part of the thinking of team staff when faced with an issue to resolve, and staff will use volunteers more consistently.
- e) We will ask landowners to take more responsibility.
- f) We will move to enforcement action more quickly within the procedures. We cannot afford to go back and forth numerous times before taking action or requiring landowners to undertake necessary works.

6.4 To provide an example of the sort of issues we are considering, Table 4 sets out the approach envisaged to deal with reports of routes obstructed due to ploughing and cropping activities. This includes desired outcomes together with potential risks and issues to consider at each step. The table shows that we will seek to have the appropriate officers undertake appropriate work, seek to reduce the need for officers to undertake site inspections and visits, and place more emphasis on landowners to do what they should be doing.

Table 4: Ploughing and Cropping draft processes.

| Step | Outcome, issues and risks |
|--|--|
| Customer sends a report of a P&C issue on the network, logged accurately within the system. | There is scope to encourage customers to send us a photo of the issue? This would reduce need for inspection. Potential to improve the advice offered on the NYCC website. |
| Initial screening undertaken by Technical Administrative staff instead of PRow team officers. Is there a photo, is the report valid, do we know the landowner details? | Desire to ensure that as much information is available as possible before PRow team officers gets involved in a case |
| If landowner not known PRow team officer tries to find the information. | Potential to put less effort into this activity for low priority paths. |
| A standard letter is sent to the Landowner where known asking them to reinstate within 14 days. Ask them to send us a dated photo once they have undertaken any reinstatement work, and inform them of intention to take enforcement action to reinstate the route and seek to recover costs and to inform Rural Payments Agency of the situation. | We are going to take reports that appear valid at face value and contact known landowners without prior inspection. Risk that the report is incorrect. A proportion of cases will be resolved through this action alone. Potential to stop after this point and close the case for low priority paths. Is it appropriate to enforce P&C issues on low priority paths? |
| Depending on response (if any), volunteers carry out a site inspection within an appropriate time period, take a photo and report on site condition. | Reduces the need for multiple visits. Confirms issue either exists or has been resolved. |
| If path has been reinstated send thank you letter and record for proactive work in future seasons. | We may wish to undertake proactive work with landowners in future seasons where there have been issues reported. |
| If path has not been reinstated and remains blocked then pass case to PRow team officers for review and decision on whether enforcement is in public interest. | There are occasions when it may not be in public interest. |
| If so undertake enforcement action and seek to recover costs. Inform RPA and record on P&C spreadsheet for proactive work in future seasons | |

7.0 Working with third party volunteer groups

7.1 The service is keen to find a way to tap into the enthusiasm and energy of existing groups of volunteers who have expressed an interest in supporting the maintenance and improvement of the network in their local areas. The objectives of the developing pilot project described briefly below is to ensure that groups of volunteers can work on the network safely and legally, that the service can maintain a degree of direction and quality control over work being undertaken, and that the engagement

doesn't require a significant amount of officer time to be directed away from issues that would be deemed a higher priority by the service.

- 7.2 Staff have been working to develop a pilot project with Lower Wharfedale Ramblers. Work on the pilot has included:
- a) Data protection – a protocol is now in place to enable us to share landowner contact details;
 - b) Health & Safety – we have discussed risk assessments and training requirements and have identified which types of work can proceed without certificated training so that the pilot can get underway. Work will continue on future training arrangements so that additional types of work can be added as the pilot develops.
 - c) A list of potential maintenance tasks has been identified together with provision of specifications for construction of furniture to relevant British Standards.
 - d) Members of the Lower Wharfedale group have undertaken some practical work with the PRow team officers to further develop the relationship and to assess confidence and competence in a range of tasks.
- 7.3 A formal agreement is now in place and the operational phase of the pilot has begun. The next step is to engage with other groups around the county that have also expressed an interest in proactively supporting the service to maintain the network. This will allow us to review and refine the model as appropriate.

8.0 Recommendations

- 8.1 The North Yorkshire Local Access Forum is invited to comment on the content of the report.
- 8.2 In particular Forum members are asked to comment on the approach to work processes as detailed in section 6.

IAN FIELDING

Assistant Director – Transport, Waste and Countryside Services.

Author of Report: Ian Kelly, Countryside Access Manager.

Background Documents:

Report to NY Local Access Forum 4th February 2016

Report to BES Executive Members 22nd April 2016