

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

14 July 2020

Statement and Questions from Tim Lewis (Wiltshire Ramblers Area Committee) about the Countryside Rights of Way Team and the Local Transport Plan 4

Agenda Item 5 – Public Participation

To Councillor Bridget Wayman Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Waste

Statement

According to the paper entitled Maintaining the Rights of Way Network in Wiltshire: the Need for a Post-Recovery Austerity Plan, prepared by Nigel Linge, the former Chair of Wiltshire’s Countryside Access Forum, and approved by that Forum at its meeting on 4 July 2019:

“This paper identifies that Rights of Way (RoW) in Wiltshire are woefully underfunded. [Wiltshire has] the third longest RoW network of all English counties.....In 2018 the Rights of Way and Countryside Service addressed less than 40% of problems reported. Central Wiltshire [one of three areas into which the county is divided for RoW matters] received 1146 reports, which identified 1201 tasks, or an unattainable 8 per day per inspector, if that was their only work.[There is a] 45 year backlog on Definitive Map Modification Orders”

The paper contains 32 recommendations, some of which are subdivided into several parts.

According to the reply to the question posed by Mr Jarvis at its previous meeting on 9 June 2020, the Council is currently developing its fourth Local Transport Plan (LTP4) (which largely shadows the Local Plan Review). LTP4 will comprise a core strategy document supported by a number of daughter documents, including a review of walking and cycling strategies.

In view of the increased health and climate change priorities of recent years, such a review will need to include the upgrading, improvement and better maintenance of our RoWs. These needs should become an integral part of implementing LTP4 since, as is evident from Mr Linge’s paper referred to above, the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) team is manifestly unable to carry out its statutory duties effectively due to inadequate levels of staffing and funds.

The Council has a responsibility to make the countryside accessible on foot by the general population with the intention of encouraging healthy exercise, reducing obesity and improving its quality of life.

Question 1

What plans does Council have to increase the budget and staffing levels of the CRoW department to enable the early, full implementation of the recommendations contained in Mr Linge's paper?

Response

Due to the severe adverse impact on the council's budget of supporting Wiltshire's businesses and vulnerable residents during the Covid-19 pandemic, we are developing recovery plans which require the levels of funding available for all our statutory and non-statutory services to be reviewed. The council's priorities will be focussed on supporting the recovery of the local economy, supporting local communities and individuals who remain vulnerable, and continuing to meet our statutory requirements. Environmental concerns including climate change and carbon reduction will form an integral part of the council's plans but we are not yet in a position to be able to say how resources might be made specifically to the rights of way and countryside services.

Question 2

Will Council incorporate into LTP4 longer-term steps to augment the CRoW team and to source funds with the aim of ensuring that all of Wiltshire's towns and villages are connected to their neighbours by good, weather-proof RoWs which are free of motorised vehicles (in the case of footpaths, bridleways and restricted byways) and accessible by less able people and, as far as is practicable by those with disabilities and families with pushchairs etc?

Response

The important role of rights of way is recognised in the current Wiltshire LTP 2011-2026 (LTP3):

6.98 Access to Wiltshire's countryside is provided through a network of more than 6,000 kilometres of public rights of way, the management of areas of access land and through permissive access agreements. In doing so, important links are provided between communities and the countryside for recreational (e.g. leisure, exercise, tourism, etc.) and utility (e.g. to get to work, school or local services) purposes.

This role is likely to be reiterated in LTP4. However, as with the LTP3, the limited available funding will need to be prioritised in the context of agreed goals / objectives across the whole of the transport-related context in Wiltshire. These matters will be considered as the LTP4 is developed and subject to stakeholder and public consultation.