

Objectives and priorities of the group

South Wiltshire Paths Group (SWPG) was established in 2012 to improve access to footpaths and encourage walking among the parishes of South Wiltshire. This improves the health and fitness, both mental and physical, and social cohesion of the residents of Southern Wiltshire.

We particularly would like to see young and old out walking and taking an interest in the countryside. To this end SWPG are actively encouraging parishes to maintain and walk their own local paths. Many paths become overgrown in summer and are only accessible to determined walkers. Casual walkers are often deterred by a lack of signage and physical difficulties of using local paths. Many stiles have fallen into disrepair and are difficult to negotiate for older residents and wherever possible we try to replace with kissing gates. The extensive paths network in Southern Wiltshire cannot be maintained and improved without the help of volunteers.

Project progress

Circular walks

Our network of circular paths are starting to spread across the area. The first circular walk we undertook was at Alderbury. So far we have resurfaced several stretches on the path and from the attention these work parties created a local Alderbury footpath group has been set up. The group has been out on several occasions over the winter installing new waymarker posts. There are just two jobs left to do to get this circular path up and running, however we have come up against issues with landowners preventing us from finishing. We now have circular walks developing in Pitton and Firsdown. Again the implantation of the circular walks has lead to the locals banding together to create their own footpath groups in both parishes. Both groups have been out clearing vegetation on their local paths and Pitton are currently working on future projects. We have plans in place for circular walks in many more parishes such as Downton and Winterslow which need backing from the local community and then we can proceed.

Pitton Group and Winterslow locals out clearing paths



Alderbury group out waymarking their Circular path



Circular walks seem to be the key to creating interest from local communities and local footpath groups. The SWPG gives them support and advice where needed such as how to contact landowners

or providing a set of tools needed to complete practical tasks. For the most part the groups are self-sufficient with the knowledge that support is there if they need it.

Kissing gates and other works

To date well over 60 kissing gates have been installed, over 150 metres of path resurfaced, footbridges replaced and waymarking improved. All this hard work amounts to over 800 volunteer practical hours not including all the other work our volunteers do or the hours the local groups have put in.

Case study - Gills Hole

Gills Hole is a stretch of path on the boundary of Redlynch and Whiteparish. The path goes through woodland which had made its true route difficult to determine for people using it and we wanted to correct this. The path was a prime opportunity to link the New Forest National Park with Wiltshire and our planned works caught the eye of the New Forest National Park Authority. They in turn funded the contractor for the four days of work and materials need such as wooden kissing gates. The volunteer turn out for the four days was tremendous from both local people and people from farther parishes. The first challenge with this path was to determine where it was actually meant to be and then who actually owned it. Once these where obtained and permission from the landowner was gained we were able to complete the works. As you can see from the photos below there was a lot to be done but due to the 80+ hours of hard work our volunteers put in we got it done.



What could make the project better

Media coverage and other communication

The key to any project that involves volunteers is getting the word out there and publicity is a high priority to the group. If people don't know that we exist then they can't help. We already have a regular newsletter, website, actively involve landowners, parish councils and parishioners in our plans, putting up posters on village noticeboards, entering articles in parish newsletters and generally improving communication within the parishes. However we need to up this effort with more newsletter articles, newspaper articles, more posters in more locations and our website needs an overhaul.

Landowners

As already mentioned landowner involvement is very important to projects being completed. If a landowner doesn't want the improvements done or change their mind then we are forced to stop such as our Circular Walk in Alderbury.

Outline of forward work plan of the group

Work parties

We want to keep doing our monthly work parties and where possible up the number we do a month. There are a few parishes across the Area Board which haven't been visited yet by our work parties. The only reason for this is that we aren't away of the things that need doing. We would like all parishes (not just the ones we haven't visited) to inform us of the works that need doing and any Circular walks they would like to start up. We can then assess which ones are viable and can hopefully get them sorted. In turn we ask that the Parish helps us get local volunteers and getting landowner permission.

Publicity

As mentioned previously we would like to increase the communication we have across the Area Board through improving our website, more published articles and any other publicity avenues. As well as having more input from the parishes on what they feel needs doing.

Future funding

The project funding runs out in November this year and we would like to find continuation funding. It would be a real shame to lose the momentum we have and discontinue improving our local footpaths. We are looking into future funding so the project can continue so we can get footpath groups for every parish in the Area Board to create community resilience.

Volunteer toolbox

The volunteer toolbox is a resource that local groups can go to for information and advice on how to start a group through to how to safely run a work party. Elements of this document are already in

existence and are already being used by groups. We would like to complete the document making it a one stop shop for them to run their groups from.