

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL

County Council

7 March 2024

REPORT AUTHOR: County Councillor Jackie Charlton Cabinet Member for a Greener Powys

SUBJECT: Question from Alan Austin

Approximately 5 years ago Powys County Council drafted a Memorandum of Agreement setting out the basis upon which its responsibility for maintaining and improving rights of way could be shared with Town and Community Councils, who would enlist the help of local volunteers. Is it intended to develop this approach and, if so, what actions are planned?

Background Notes

There is a network of 8,000kms of rights of way (footpaths, bridleways and byways) in Powys. Only 30% is assessed as being in satisfactory condition. Many routes are impassable and there are 10,000 reports of problems awaiting attention. Common problems are: absence of signposts and waymarks indicating the existence of a right of way, broken stiles and gates, obstructions caused by locked gates, barbed wire and general overgrowth. For at least 10 years and probably longer, the position has become progressively worse. Any prospect of significant improvement was lost when large budget cuts were made in 2019, resulting in officers becoming overwhelmed and failure of the Council to fulfil its statutory duties.

The benefits to health and wellbeing of walking in the countryside are well understood, as is the importance of walking tourism to the Powys economy. From time-to-time funding is obtained by the Council from central governments for specific projects related to rights of way. While any improvement work has to be welcomed, it should be recognised that these projects do not address the long-term deterioration of the network. Also, officer time is diverted from core responsibilities such as dealing with problems and coordinating volunteers. When funding such as this is available, it's disappointing that the Council is not allowed to decide for itself how it might be used to best effect.

It is understood that there is little prospect of any increase to the rights of way budget and it is necessary to find new ways of working, such as those set out in the Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) that is the subject of this question. In the past 5 years the MoA has not been promoted. Just a handful of town and community councils have signed up and most are unaware of its existence.

Response

The Memorandum of Agreement is a tool through which the Countryside Access and Recreation team can work in partnership with Town and Community Councils and other organisations, to look after the public rights of way network and public greenspace. It is not a transfer of responsibilities, nor does it replace or amend the powers and duties that are already available to the County Council and Town and Community Councils. It is intended that we develop this approach. However, for the reasons below, we do need to take the time now to review how we can effectively support communities who would like to work in this way, before extending the approach further.

The Memorandum of Agreement was prepared in 2019, before the COVID 19 outbreak. At that time, it was envisaged that constraints on revenue budgets would mean that officers of the Countryside Access and Recreation team would spend the majority of their time working with community volunteer groups, to reopen and maintain public paths. However, following the COVID outbreak, the team has found itself working with very different opportunities and constraints. Core revenue budget savings have led to a reduction in the number of area maintenance officers but delivering work using a much higher level of external funding (predominantly capital grants) than expected.

This is both an opportunity and a challenge. The team is able to fund projects on the ground to a much greater extent than anticipated, but these are time bound with tight deadlines and relatively short delivery windows. Officers are managing competing time pressures, balancing project and contractor management and volunteer engagement for the active projects, against supporting community volunteer groups where there is no current project being delivered. We are looking at ways to address that challenge, whilst also seeking to make sure that we maximise the opportunities offered to the public through the external funds available to us.