

North Somerset Council

Report to the Transport, Climate and Communities Policy and Scrutiny Panel

Date of Meeting: 30/11/23

Subject of Report: Rights of Way Improvement Plan

Town or Parish:

Officer/Member Presenting: Esther Coffin-Smith

Key Decision: No

Reason: This report is for informational purposes

Recommendations

To consider the progress made on the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP) and to review progress annually hereafter.

1. Summary of Report

The Council's second Rights of Way Improvement Plan was approved in December 2022. Since then the Public Rights of Way Team have been working towards the delivery of the action plan, securing funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and prioritising the £100K capital allocation spend.

2. Policy

The Rights of Way Improvement Plan supports the Corporate Plan priority of being a 'thriving and sustainable place,' through the ambition to provide a rights of way network that is accessible, provides a low-carbon alternative for travelling around North Somerset, attracts tourism to our region and contributes to the health and wellbeing of both residents and visitors.

3. Details

The focus for the end of 2022/23 and early 2023/24 has been ongoing maintenance and responding to public concerns, planning the capital-funded improvement works for this financial year and recruitment. We have also been planning for a UKSPF-funded project to deliver accessibility improvements across 15 North Somerset public rights of way routes and to communicate this as widely as possible.

Staff capacity

In order to address some outstanding work areas it has been necessary to temporarily increase staff capacity. We now have a joint post with the Sustainable Transport Team to progress the Strawberry Line extension project (Yatton to Clevedon), a long-term ambition of the council and to address the backlog of Public Path Orders, one element of the RoWIP action plan. This post has been successfully filled and progress is being made on both

work areas. The team has also successfully recruited into a vacant Access Support Officer role with the new appointment joining the team in November.

We have also not been proactive in sharing the good work we carry out, or the wide range of recreational opportunities provided by our rights of way. A 12-month fixed term communications post has been funded through the UKSPF to address this and joined the team in July. This communications expert will enable the PRow team to reach new audiences both for the promotion of the improved routes funded by North Somerset Council but also rights of way more generally. Ahead of the improvement works on the 15 routes being completed, we have been developing a communications and engagement plan, working to improve the range of material on the PRow internet pages and providing dedicated support to promote the ongoing work across the PRow network through methods such as social media posts, articles and attending events.

UKSPF

The government's UK Shared Prosperity fund has provided £36K to improve routes and communicate the improvements. We have selected 15 public rights of ways across North Somerset (including in: Backwell, Bleadon, Churchill, Clevedon, Hutton, Kewstoke, Long Ashton, Nailsea, Weston in Gordano, Winscombe), many of which are also routes to schools. We are proposing a wide range of improvement measures including: vegetation removal/overhanging branch reduction, tarmacking of paths, re-stoning of paths, improving sight lines, bridge refurbishment/replacement, gate removal, pothole repair and creation of ramped access. Approximately half the routes will be addressed this financial year, as funds allow, with the remainder in the 2024-25 period.

2023-24 Capital Allocation

The PRow team have been allocated £100k for both 2023-24 and 2024-25 to deliver the improvements highlighted in the RoWIP, as nominated by the town and parish councils. There are 292 suggested route improvements on our list. 173 of these have been completed, 12 are under investigation or in progress and the remaining 107 are not currently possible to achieve or have been investigated and no work is required at this time.

This will be used to fund the route improvements as well as some pedestrian counters to monitor footfall across the routes ahead of the improvements being made, to enable us to demonstrate an improvement in usage post-works. This will be achieved through better accessibility for users but also through improved awareness of the route through the work of the communications officer.

4. Consultation

N/A

5. Financial Implications

The costs of the post, pedestrian counters and improvements are being met through the capital allocation and UKSPF grant.

Costs

UKSPF Salary costs - £9K

UKSPF Funding for route improvements - £26K

NSC Capital allocation - £100K (£16.5K for pedestrian counters, the remainder for route improvements)

Funding

As above.

6. Legal Powers and Implications

N/A

7. Climate Change and Environmental Implications

The existence and efficiency of a good Public Rights of Way Network supports the Council's aim to encourage active and sustainable (low-carbon) lifestyles. It also contributes towards achieving our Green Infrastructure Strategy by allowing people to connect with nature.

8. Risk Management

N/A

9. Equality Implications

Yes. The route improvements will provide better accessibility for a wider range of people.

10. Corporate Implications

The rights of way network is a valuable resource for being able to enjoy the beauty and tranquillity of large parts of the North Somerset countryside. Improvements to routes increases the likelihood that they will be used and contribute to health and wellbeing together with supporting our Climate Emergency by providing sustainable, low-carbon options for travelling to school or work and for accessing local services such as shops, health facilities or to reach public transport. The also attract visitors so a well-maintained and accessible network also supports North Somerset's economy and reputation.

Author:

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Appendices:

None

Background Papers:

Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2022.