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The Countryside Access Warden Scheme The use of Volunteers in helping with Public Rights of Way Maintenance

Introduction

KCC as highway authority and surveying authority has a statutory responsibility to manage and maintain the Public Rights of Way (PRoW) network. Maintenance responsibilities are split between KCC and the landowner with KCC carrying over-all responsibility to ensure the network is available for use. The network consists of nearly 7000 Km (4300 miles) making up 42% of Kent's highway network.

The management of PRoW is complex and emotive. The recent forestry debate highlighted how highly the public value access to the countryside. As well as a deeply ingrained passion within the British psyche for accessing and enjoying the countryside, the wider benefits are now increasingly recognised, notably the significant impact to tourism and the rural economy and the major benefits walking, riding and cycling brings to the health and well being of the population.

The Countryside Access Service (CAS) has a long history of harnessing the goodwill of communities and volunteers to assist in the delivery of PRoW maintenance and the promotion of walking and riding opportunities. In that time an enormous wealth of experience has been gained in establishing an effective model for using volunteers *that does not cost more than it actually delivers*.

The use of volunteers has evolved over two decades from initiatives such as:

- the Parish Paths Partnership; a Countryside Commission backed programme of rights of way improvement and promotion,
- the kit bridge installation programme,
- programmed tasks undertaken with volunteer input from user groups
- repair and replacement work undertaken by active volunteer groups.

What all of the above had in common is the high level of officer involvement required to plan and deliver tasks including:

- negotiation with land owners for access,
- clarification of the ongoing responsibility for work completed¹,
- purchase and delivery of materials,
- provision of risk assessments,
- repair replacement and servicing of tools,
- supervision of works was also required in many cases.

Where work was not completed on the day officers would have to arrange completion at a later date or arrange for contractors to complete the work. The numbers involved in volunteer work dwindled significantly from the mid 1990s as payments made for volunteer expenses on the basis of work completed were withdrawn. The Parish Paths Partnership came to a close following the withdrawal of Countryside Agency funding. Many volunteers retired, often finding tasks too physical and many regular volunteers found that requirements to carry out risk assessments and report activities in advance, to meet health and safety and insurance requirements, were too onerous and detracted from their enjoyment.

The reality is that, while contributing benefits in the form of community involvement and community ownership, in strict financial terms significant investment by the County Council in respect of officer time was required. When compared with the delivery of core work programmes by other means

¹ Many items of furniture on the rights of way network have a shared liability with the greater proportion of that liability in the case of gates and stiles resting with the landowner in the event of an accident.

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(primarily small contractors competitively tendered) the value of work delivered by volunteers at £1 for every £1 in officer time² is disproportionately high.

A cost effective way of working with volunteers was required to help keep this valuable resource safe and fit for the increasing public demand for this service.

Careful analysis of the reports/complaints received from the public indicated that much of the high impact but low priority work was low risk and could be completed by volunteers, following training, and importantly without officer supervision. The work could be covered by simple generic risk assessments and completed with simple hand tools. There was clearly a niche that volunteers could occupy that would deliver improvements to the PROW network as well as the added benefits of community involvement and ownership

The Countryside Access Warden Scheme

In 2008 the CAS revolutionised the opportunities they offered to volunteers. After a careful assessment of where volunteers' strengths and limitations lay the Service trained the first 30 Countryside Access Wardens.

This role is radically different to the traditional way in which volunteers had been used in the past. Rather than officers gathering a work party together to do a job, the new wardens are spread all over the county and work autonomously to tidy up the path network as they go. They help by improving path signage, cutting back vegetation growing over stiles and 'choke points' and are the valuable 'eyes on the ground' for their communities, reporting back on bigger problems.

Since then the scheme has grown to over 200 volunteers and is not only gaining interest with people keen to become new wardens but also with other county councils who have seen the success of the scheme and want to replicate it in their own areas.

The success of the scheme is based on innovative use of technology establishing an on-line community on the IDEA Communities website. The online community not only allows volunteers to communicate directly with each other through forums but also allows KCC CAS officers to post tasks on a "wiki" enabling what is otherwise small ad-hoc activity to be directed. This results in a direct flow of work straight to the volunteers in a fast and efficient manner.

Volunteers report that they love the freedom and the opportunity to explore and discover more about their local area whilst performing this valuable role for KCC. The 200th Countryside Access Warden, Cheryl Mvula and her husband Manni started in December and said *"Even through the winter months we've loved the motivation of knowing that we are helping to make a difference. We've already managed to do a few jobs whilst walking near Faversham, although we are looking forward to the summer!"*

Additional benefit has been added through development of the Countryside Access Management System to enable the on-line reporting of faults on the network by the volunteers and the work that they have undertaken.

Other opportunities offered by the Service include project opportunities for career development: currently two mature students are working with area PROW officers on a series of small improvement projects.

The CAS continues to build on the opportunities for volunteers, seeking to achieve the greatest benefits at a time of severe budget pressures and to contribute to the Governments Big Society and localism agendas.

² Worcester CC comparative costs exercise. KCC costs are likely to be higher*. Surrey CC figures in a presentation to the County Surveyors Society in 1997 indicated that officer costs exceeded the value of volunteer work if that same work had been completed by contractors.

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Future development of volunteer opportunities is likely to include:

- Volunteer Surveyors, establishing a programmed approach to the survey of the PRow network for asset management, public safety and insurance purposes.
- Further extension of the volunteer warden scheme.
- Potentially extension of the role of wardens to include other activity such as the limited repair of path furniture and leading guided walks.

The CAS is justifiably proud of the work completed by volunteers and the benefit this brings in helping to ensure the PRow network is available and welcoming for visitors to the countryside. Volunteers add value to the work carried out by the CAS and this is as it should be, however it is imperative that due to the significant liabilities around managing the network the use of volunteers requires the direction of a professional service.

Similarly it is clear when considering the volumes of work³ required simply to maintain the current condition of the network that volunteers are only part of the delivery mix and there will continue to be a heavy dependence on skilled and highly mechanised contractors directed by professional qualified staff.

Conclusion:

Kent's CAW scheme is ground-breaking and innovative; it is borne out of significant experience over many years of working with volunteers through a variety of delivery models. It delivers low risk yet high profile improvements whilst not becoming a burden to the authority and careful management and monitoring of the scheme will be essential to maintain its cost effectiveness and mitigate risk to KCC.

Mike Overbeke
Head – Countryside Access Service

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³ Indicative stand still position figures.