



KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

# Countryside Access Service

**ANNUAL REPORT 2011/12**

# Overview

I am delighted to see that 2011-12 was another highly successful year for Kent County Council's Countryside Access Service. Despite the uncertainties and changes, officers have continued to deliver a wide and complex breadth of services, achieving all of the targets set out in the Business Plan.

In Kent the popularity and demand for well maintained access to the countryside continues to grow and demand for Services is as high as ever. Coastal access is especially prominent in people's minds and much work has been done to deliver the first stretch of the England Coastal Trail in Kent between Folkestone and Ramsgate.

Nearly £800,000 worth of capital infrastructure projects were delivered on target and a further £418,659 of external income generated to deliver projects over and above the day to day statutory management of the network. The Service also attracted almost £700,000 of funding from partner organisations, individuals and charities to support targeted projects identified by local communities and set out in the Countryside Access Improvement Plan.

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We received 344 compliments which reflect the public perception of the Countryside Access Service (and ultimately KCC) and the quality and professionalism of the Service with the 'Explore Kent' website reaching another high with 2,198,294 page views, an increase of 20% on the previous year. However, the number of fault reports increased with a significant rise in fly tipping and vegetation clearance issues; this was expected following the reduction in maintenance budgets.

The pragmatic and innovative approach to the use of volunteers has enabled the Countryside Access Warden volunteer scheme to continue to provide a valuable role in assisting with the management of Kent's large and valued network of Public Rights of Way, with 300 volunteers now registered wardens.

The Countryside Access Service Business Plans for 2011-12 and 2012-13 continue to support KCC's medium term plan, 'Bold Steps for Kent', with tangible contributions to helping the economy grow, putting the citizen in control and tackling disadvantage. The review of KCC's Countryside Access Improvement Plan in 2012-13 will strengthen further these links to reflect the Vision for Kent.

Please find a moment to read this report; it reflects the dedication and hard work of a small, effective, high profile and popular frontline Service.

**Mike Overbeke**

Head of Countryside Access Service

# Annual Report 2011-12

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## Financial and operational highlights for the financial year 2011/12

### Income generated

**£418,659**

Income received through successful bids to support delivery of projects. The Service also attracted £686,320 from partner organisations.

### Number of letters, phone calls and emails received from the public

**79,700** (+38,200 for Countryside Management Partnerships)

These comprise fault reports, general correspondence, requests for information, and requests for advice on specific issues.

### Fly tipping

**166 reports resolved**

An increase of 51% on last year.

### Number of Fault Reports processed

**6,115**

A 16% increase on last year.

### Public compliments

**344**

Received from people praising the Service's work.

### Number of volunteers

**300**

Countryside Access Wardens now working to help keep the PRow network open.

### Number of stiles removed

**876**

A 15% increase on last year.

### Approved capital programme delivered

**£750,000**

All schemes delivered on time and to budget.

### Explore Kent website page views

**2,198,294**

The Explore Kent pages are one of the most used sections of Kent County Council's website.

### Countryside access website page Views

**64,279**

Items searched include content on village greens, design standards, and the Definitive Map.

### Countryside Management Partnerships

Every £1 invested by Kent County Council brought in £20 from contributions and grants by partners and other funding organisations.

### Planning applications

**235**

Large and small scale applications have been commented on where PRow are affected or where improvements to the network and green space have been sought.



# KEY facts

## The Countryside Access Service is responsible for:-

- Kent's Public Rights of Way network which is 42% of the highways network (4,400 miles / 7,100km)**  
 Managing and promoting the PRow network, with support of Kent based contractors and volunteers, making sure it is open and available for use.
- 815 miles / 1,300km of high profile promoted walks and rides**  
 Managing and promoting the North Downs Way National Trail and other high profile routes to support Kent's tourism industry.
- 7 Countryside Management Partnerships**  
 Supporting the public/private sector partnerships to deliver a wide range of access and conservation projects in local communities to improve the natural environment and wellbeing of residents.
- Explore Kent Partnership**  
 Leading a public/private and voluntary sector partnership to provide a one stop shop for information on walking, horse riding, cycling, parks and green space.
- The legal Definitive Map and Statement of Public Rights of Way**  
 Keeping the Definitive Map up to date, dealing with applications from residents and businesses to add new routes or change their alignment, resolving any errors and working towards producing a new electronic Definitive Map.
- 192 Open Access Sites**  
 Managing and ensuring access to over 2,000 hectares of public open green space, shown as Access Land on Ordnance Survey maps.
- 301 Commons and Village Greens**  
 Managing the Common Land and Village Greens service by dealing with land searches, leading on a national project to ensure Common Land in Kent is correctly recorded and resolving applications from people across Kent to apply to register land important to local communities, as village greens.

"...you have built up a fantastic Service - unparalleled in my experience, anywhere in the country, in terms of expertise and efficiency..."

**Barrister, Lincoln's Inn**



# Bold steps for Kent

The medium term plan for Kent County Council was published in December 2010. It sets out three clear aims:

1. To help the Kent economy to grow
2. To put the citizen in control
3. To tackle disadvantage

The Countryside Access Service helps to deliver these aims in the following ways:

## Helping the Kent economy grow

- Supporting Kent's £2.5billion tourism industry by keeping the PRoW network open and promoted - £1.5b of this income is directly attributed to visitors exploring the countryside and coast.
- Managing and developing the PRoW network to meet modern demands for sustainable transport and for creating a healthy workforce.
- Achieving a 20:1 economic return on new 'multi-user' route schemes - compared with typical 3:1 for road and rail projects.
- Supporting Kent's thriving £100million equine industry by managing 700 miles of safe off-road horse riding routes and developing new routes where appropriate.
- Supporting developers and facilitating the planning process by resolving PRoW and Village Green issues to help accelerate economic development.
- Improving the accuracy and accessibility of our electronic mapping to help the land based sector manage their businesses more effectively.

## Putting the citizen in control

- Bringing together under the Explore Kent Partnership brand all information about walking, riding and cycling and all of Kent's parks to inspire residents to explore and enjoy the countryside and coast.

- Empowering, training and equipping 519 volunteers to carry out low-level maintenance and improvements on PRoW, local nature reserves, Sites of Special Scientific Interest and historic sites.
- Supporting capacity building activity in voluntary groups - for example for health/guided walks and 'Friends of' groups.
- Administering the Kent Countryside Access Forum, a statutory but independent forum whose purpose is to advise KCC and other access providers on PRoW and access management.

## Tackling disadvantage

- Providing opportunities across the county for disadvantaged communities and groups to improve their mental, physical and social wellbeing using their local countryside and green space.
- Negotiating with landowners to remove a minimum 200 stiles from PRoW every year and carry out other improvements to help the elderly and less mobile access the countryside and coast.
- Working with head teachers to identify and improve walking and cycling routes to schools.

## Countryside Access Improvement Plan

The Countryside Access Improvement Plan was developed with extensive public consultation. It is the Service's business plan and was adopted by Kent County Council in 2008.

The Plan contains seven different themes all with objectives and actions against them which help to deliver against Bold Steps for Kent. The objectives are coded, for example M1, K1, and are referenced throughout the report.

The Improvement Plan can be viewed online at [www.kent.gov.uk/countrysideaccess](http://www.kent.gov.uk/countrysideaccess).



## Theme 1: Well maintained countryside access (Objectives M1 to M10)

**Aim:** To significantly improve the maintenance level, quality and accessibility of the Public Rights of Way (PRoW) network.

### Destination Signs

These are now widely installed on the network to indicate how far in distance places or visitor attractions are. They have been especially useful on well used local routes as well as those connecting to schools, rail stations and other community facilities. **M2**

### National Trails

The section of North Downs Way between Thurnham and Charing has had work done to improve sections of surface on byways that were starting to deteriorate.

Assessment on Phase 1 of the new England Coastal Trail between Folkestone and Ramsgate is complete and work will commence on the ground once a report is approved by the Secretary of State. **M2**

### Byways Working Group

The Group has reviewed the management of byways at Holly Hill to consider seasonal closures and restrictions to help protect surface conditions and the local environment. **M4**

### Bridge Maintenance

14 new bridges have been installed on the network this year. **M5**

### Stile removal

876 stiles have gone this year from key promoted or local routes where they have been replaced with a gap or gate to make the network more accessible. Almost 3,000 stiles have now been removed since the Improvement Plan was published. **M6**

### Fly tipping

This has increased this year by 51% with 166 reports actioned relating to rubbish, often building material or tyres, deposited on the PRoW network. **M9**

### Fault reports

6115 fault reports have been logged by the public representing a 16% increase on last year. Reports of overgrown vegetation significantly increased by over 40%. Of the faults reported this year 60% have been resolved. Wardens have greatly assisted with waymarking and minor vegetation clearance on routes.

### Capital Schemes

The Service has successfully delivered a £750,000 capital works programme to enhance the PRoW network. Projects have focused on improving path surfaces on key local community and promoted routes and those in desperate need of repair.

### Highlighted Project M5

#### Improving bridges and gates

There are over 3000 bridges and more than 7500 gates on the PRoW network.

Each structure varies in condition and how long it may have been in place. All major bridges (of a certain length or construction) are inspected every 2 years. Any defects are reported and put into forward work programmes. Anything that is dangerous to the public is dealt with quickly.

Many of the bridges and gates are on well used promoted routes or those that link communities. A targeted campaign this last year focused on improving the condition of the structures on these routes. This resulted in some bridges being replenished or where necessary being completely replaced. A second targeted campaign focussed on repairing or replacing gate latches to make passage safer and easier, particularly for horse riders, the elderly and disabled.



## Theme 2: Growth and development (Objectives D1 to D5)

**Aim:** To ensure that PRoW and open green space is protected and enhanced when industrial, residential and area development takes place, especially in the Thames Gateway, Ashford, and the wider east Kent.

### Planning Policy

Technical input has continued to be given on many of the documents being prepared by the district councils as part of their local development frameworks, including Cycling Strategies and Green Infrastructure Strategies. The Service has also responded to national consultations to influence changes to the planning process as new legislation is implemented. **D4**

### Planning Applications

The Service has responded to 235 planning applications this year ranging from large scale sites to smaller applications that affect individual routes. **D4**

### Development Proposals

The Service continues to negotiate improvements through the planning process. This includes enhancements to existing routes as well as the creation of new PRoW and green space to make a better network. Sites across Thameside and at Chilmington Green, Sholden and Repton Park have been a particular focus this past year. Advice has also been given to ensure changes to the network are legally implemented when routes are affected by development. **D2**

### Growth Areas

Technical advice has been provided for numerous large scale development proposals across Ashford, Thames Gateway, and other parts of East Kent. This is to ensure that the proposals include a good provision of routes and green space that both encourages sustainable transport and also links well into wider networks. As a result of this work significant links and improvements have been agreed at sites including Northern Gateway (the former Glaxo site at Dartford), Northfleet Works, Sittingbourne Town Centre and sites on the Isle of Sheppey. **D3**

### Highlighted Project D3 Vale Road, Tonbridge

The redevelopment of the Vale Road area of Tonbridge continues with new housing provision alongside the River Medway. There is also an area of light industrial units which sit immediately east of the town centre. There are 2 PRoW connecting Vale Road with the town centre which were rather narrow and not well used. The Service has worked with developers, and also secured a grant from the Department for Transport Local Sustainable Transport Fund, to improve the surface and widen the routes.

What was once a closed-in pathway has been transformed making the route much more pleasant and suitable to use. Residents and workers can now access the town centre in a much easier and safer way without the need to use the car. The route also provides a link to the wider network to access the countryside to the east of Tonbridge.



*"The continued professional advice you give as the plans move forward is gratefully received by all of us working on the redevelopment of Northfleet Works."*  
**David Lock Associates**



### Theme 3: A more sensible network (Objectives N1 to N3)

**Aim:** To create a PRoW network which satisfies modern needs and demands, in particular for sustainable transport and off-road leisure cycling.

#### Pilgrims Trail

The new Pilgrims Cycle Trail, which runs from Rochester to Canterbury, was formerly opened in 2011. Surfacing on some of the byways along this route has been completed to improve their condition. It provides a challenging long distance cycle route following the North Downs and Stour into Canterbury. **N3**

#### Tudor Trail

Work has been carried out in partnership with Penshurst and Hever Castle Estates to extend the popular Tonbridge to Penshurst cycle route over to Hever Castle. This extended route has been rebranded as the Tudor Trail. A further extension to Edenbridge is in development. **N3**

#### Leysdown Tourism Initiative

The Isle of Sheppey cycle routes were formerly opened in the summer of 2011. They include a new 9.5km route linking Leysdown on Sea with the Isle of Harty. **N3**

#### City 2 Sea

Work on the regionally important cycle route along the Thames from Dartford to Swale continues to evolve. Options for a route across Swanscombe Pennisular have been assessed. A link to connect with the Bridge Development at Dartford has also been secured and is due to open at the end of 2012. **N3**

#### Highlighted Project N2/N3 Cyclopark



Cyclopark is a new activity and extreme sports centre set within 43 hectares of rolling landscaped parkland to the south of Gravesend.

The service has worked closely with Cyclopark to promote the site as a gateway to the wider countryside. It has the Wealdway and two National Cycle routes in close proximity. Circular walks and rides have been developed and will be promoted as part of the Cyclocountry. They will link the Park to local communities and other nearby parks at Cobham and Shorne. The routes are due to be open in 2012.



"The new links will allow the school to more easily access Cyclopark and all the wonderful facilities it will offer now and in the future".  
**Headteacher, Gravesend**

## Theme 4: Knowing what's out there (Objectives K1 to K8)

**Aim:** To maintain the legal record of Public Rights of Way, Village Greens and Common Land, and to increase public awareness and use of Kent's countryside and coast.



### Excluded Areas

A Definitive Map has been produced for the former Excluded Area of Ramsgate. This now means the whole of Kent is covered by a Definitive Map and Statement - the legal record for Public Rights of Way. **K1**

### Village Greens

There are now 191 recorded Village Greens across Kent, 16 of which have been registered in the past four years. Each application often results in consideration of complex legal issues at a Public Inquiry. **K1**

### Explore Kent

The Explore Kent website remains as popular as ever with a staggering 2,198,294 page views. Users seek information on walking, riding, cycling, parks and green space. Campaigns have been targeted to promote Kent's unique coast and countryside to residents and visitors alike. Circular walks and rides have been published in local media to raise the profile of Explore Kent and encourage residents to lead a more active life and support the local rural economy. An advert ran in the Bluewater cinema for six months and was viewed by over 400,000 people. Content is regularly added to and refreshed to maintain a vibrant and attractive site for all to use. It has become a one stop shop with the support of partners and those who use it. **K2**

### Circular Walks and Long Distance Routes

The Walks in Kent series remains very popular and each of the walks is regularly maintained to ensure they are in good order. This year focussed on production of Literary Walks with a Dickens inspired route at Higham and a Jane Austen inspired walk at Tonbridge.

Cycle rides are also popular and there is a marked increase in demand for information given the popularity of cycling. **K5**

### Kent Walking Festival

The festival was a huge success in 2011. Almost 1500 people took part booking places on 106 walks organised by 36 different walk leaders. This has led to further Guided Walks being booked via the Explore Kent Website. **K3**







## Theme 5: Improving safety (Objectives ST1 to ST4)

**Aim:** To address known safety issues and concerns on the PRoW network and create new safer routes where necessary.

### Gating Orders

The Service worked closely with Crime Reduction Partnerships in Ashford, Gravesham and Swale to assess if any particular measures may be necessary on routes to help prevent and reduce antisocial behaviour and crime. Routes at Ashford have been considered this year. **ST1**

### Safe Routes to Schools

Six routes to schools have been improved this year. The Service works closely with schools and partners to put in place quality routes to promote more sustainable travel and active lifestyles as part of the Healthy Schools Initiative. **ST3**

One of the improved routes is at Capel le Ferne. Pupils who walked to the local primary school had to use a narrow muddy path. The route between the Village Hall and School has been widened and surfaced to make it much easier and safer to use. The project was delivered in partnership with Sustrans as part of the Routes to Schools programme.

### Highlighted Projects ST4 Road Crossings

The Service has been working in partnership with Network Rail to review safety at 21 rail crossings. This forms part of their national Level Crossings Programme. This is particularly relevant in Kent given greater frequency and higher speeds of trains as a result of the High Speed 1 Service.

Options identified may result in:-

- 1) improved signage
- 2) minor works for example cutting back vegetation
- 3) major works that may include diverting routes



We are delighted. The new path goes directly to the school gates. Walking and cycling to school is not only healthy but also means there is less traffic congestion on the roads.  
**Headteacher, Capel le Ferne Primary School**



## Theme 6: Education and respect for the countryside (Objectives E1 to E4)

**Aim:** To improve understanding and appreciation of the Kent countryside as both a working environment, and a fantastic leisure resource.

### Working with landowners

Staff have continued to work positively with the landowning community to offer an advisory service and to disseminate information such as the Countryside Access Design Standards. These help to ensure that all paths and public green spaces are accessible and offer visitors a safe and enjoyable environment whilst also respecting landowners needs.

**E1**

### Public awareness

The Service attended high profile events including the County Show and the Outdoors Show in London. These provide opportunities to engage with the wider public and promote walking, riding and cycling, parks and green space for the Explore Kent partnership.

Staff from the Service regularly give talks to community and user groups and organisations to promote the work we do.

**E2**

### Schools

As well as supporting schools with improved routes to increase walking and cycling, the Service also works with education providers to promote Kent's countryside, coast and wildlife and encourage the younger generation to explore the county. This has taken the form of providing information to fit the national curriculum as well as occasionally leading groups of children on walks.

**E3**



*'The Design Standards are a most welcome addition as they will lead to higher quality routes being accessible to more people...'*  
**Walker and resident,  
Shepway Area**

## Theme 7: Working smarter and improving customer service (Objectives S1 to S8)

**Aim:** To ensure the most effective use of all available resources, and working smarter to deliver an excellent front line service.

### Explore Kent iPhone and Android app

This year we have increased the number of routes available on the iPhone and Android app to 50, and introduced cycling routes for the first time. The app continues to prove very popular with our customers who can browse and save routes straight to their phone and track and share routes with other users. The app download page is one of the most visited areas of the Explore Kent website. **S2**

### Social media

The Service has continued to make full use of web-based social media including Facebook, Flickr and Twitter to provide 2-way interaction with customers. These sites have been successfully used this year to promote events, guided walks and projects delivered by the Service. **S2**

### Volunteers

There are now 300 Countryside Access Wardens who regularly work on improving the ProW network and their local countryside. They are fully trained and equipped for a range of work from minor vegetation clearance to waymarking routes. Work done is logged directly into a Management System where matters of a more serious nature they may come across can also be reported. **S4**

### Staff training

Investment in training this year has included updates on PProW legislation, the new planning guidance from Government, and better understanding of our customers to help deliver the Customer Services Strategy. **S6**



### External funding

The Service successfully secured an additional £418,659 of funding to deliver projects. Successful bids were made to County Council Members for the Highway Fund and Community Fund, Interreg, Natural England and others. Core activities, for example charges for property searches, have also contributed to income. **S7**

In addition to this the Service also secured £686,320 of support from partner organisations, individuals and charities to help deliver projects. **S7**





**Highlighted Project S4****Explore Kent Partnership**

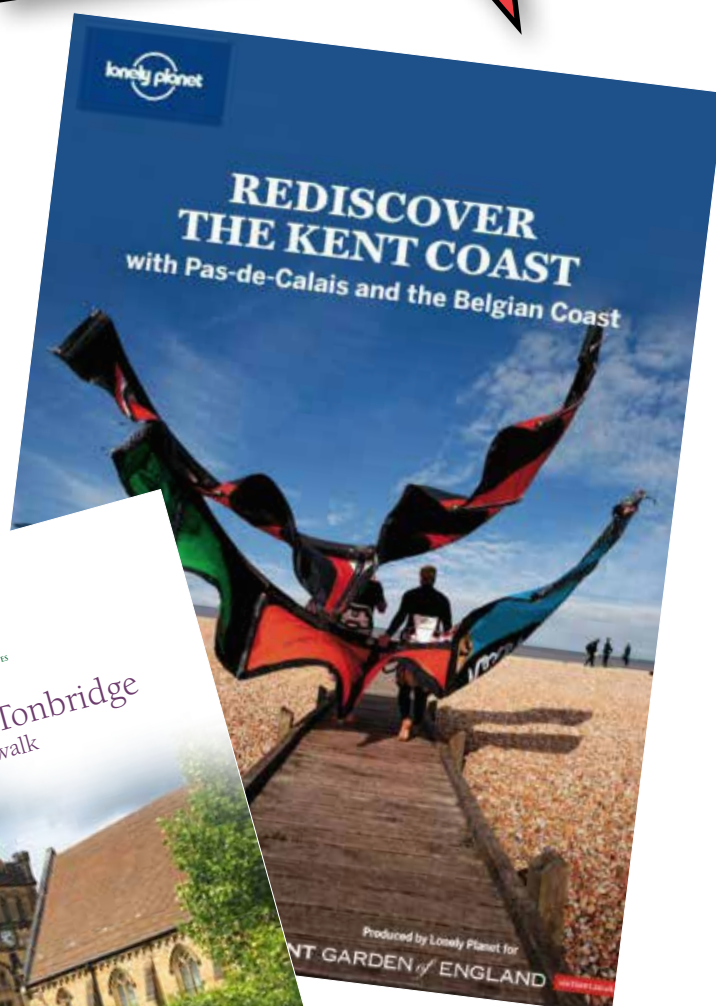
Over 50 partners attended the Explore Kent Conference in November. The purpose of the day was to share best practice and discuss further ideas for the development of the website and brand. An online forum has also been established to continue to share information as improvements are made. It also helps to better integrate partners' needs to provide customers with the information they seek.

The Service has worked closely with Visit Kent on various projects including an Interreg funded project focussing on coastal areas in Kent. One aspect of this resulted in work with Lake Market Research Agency who undertook 1600 face to face surveys with customers to improve walking and cycling on the Kent coast.

As well as continually seeking to improve customer service and provide information that people ask for the Partnership seeks out new partners and new ways of doing things. This resulted in a collaboration with Lonely Planet to produce a guide to rediscover the Kent Coast. It involved working with European partners and also covers the Belgian Coast and Pas de Calais 50,000 guides have been distributed as well as it being made available online.

"The conference was a great event to understand how my organisation can be part of Explore Kent. I now know how we can more readily share best practice and new ideas which will help all our customers."

**Conference Attendee, Maidstone Borough Council**



# A highly valued Service

Spending just 0.09% of KCC's annual budget the Countryside Access Service provides unquestionable value to the residents of Kent, delivering services that people praise and continue to ask for. The Service received 344 compliments this year. there were only 9 complaints received.

"Thank you for the Guided Ride. It has shown me some beautiful parts of Kent and given me more confidence to get out on my bike more and explore other parts of the County".  
**Bike Week Participant, London**

"Thank you for the work you arranged to the tarmac slipway path. It is superb. They (Neighbours) were full of praise...one of them has had a knee replacement and was so pleased to be able to get up and down the path easily. Keep up the good work!"  
**Resident, Dymchurch Area**

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"As a result of the enjoyment I have had though the warden scheme, and unsure what to do next, I have been accepted on a Countryside Management Foundation Degree at Hadlow College... I just wanted to thank you for the enjoyment I have had so far."

**Ronald McDonald,  
Countryside Access Warden,  
Ashford**

"The repaired and new bridges are great. They look professional and add significantly to the improved access on our local network."  
**Resident, Staplehurst Area**

"Thank you for producing leaflets on circular walks in Kent. We have enjoyed so many of them and they have taken us to places we haven't even heard of. Your service is very appreciated"

**Resident, Sevenoaks**

"We were very impressed with the work you have done to develop your website and also the mobile app. The quality and richness of the site is terrific".

**Recreation Group, Countryside  
Council for Wales**

"To be able to cycle traffic free into Dartford Town Centre will be a real benefit and I applaud the work being done to achieve this."

**Resident at The Bridge,  
Dartford**

# Projects for 2012-13

## Funding

With an 11% cut in budget for 2012-13 the statutory services required from a PRow, Access Authority and Commons Registration Authority will continue to be delivered but at a reduced level. External funding opportunities will be pursued.

Seek a minimum of £30,000 external funding to address a shortfall in the 2011/12 core budget.

Seek additional income to support the delivery of the Countryside Access Improvement Plan, including an Interreg IVa bid with Visit Kent Ltd.

We will support Bold Steps for Kent in the following ways:

## Helping the Kent economy grow

Deliver £750,000 of capital schemes and other targeted work, with Kent based contractors, to keep the PRow network open and promoted to support sustainable transport and tourism.

Continue to develop and promote more multi user routes to better connect local communities, and encourage sustainable transport.

Work in partnership with Natural England to deliver the Folkestone to Ramsgate section and negotiate and support in delivery of the second section of the England Coastal Trail from Folkestone to the East Sussex border.

Support Developers by resolving PRow and Village Green issues as quickly as possible. Publish a Design Guide and further Technical Standards to assist with best practice for the creation and implementation of new routes and green space.

Complete work on producing an up to date Definitive Map for publication in 2012 and increase the accuracy of our electronic mapping to support businesses and the land based sector in Kent.

## Tackling Disadvantage

Remove a further 300 stiles from the PRow network to help the elderly and less mobile.

Continue to work with schools to improve local walking and cycling routes and promote healthier lifestyle and sustainable transport.

Support the Countryside Management Partnerships to deliver on a diverse range of projects to help improve the environment and health and wellbeing of residents.

## Putting the citizen in control

Continue to recruit and train Countryside Access Wardens to carry out low level maintenance and improvements to local Public Rights of Way and green space.

Design and publish a new Explore Kent Interactive Map making it easier for customers to access information and report problems to the Service.

Review, update and consult the public on the Countryside Access Improvement Plan.

Work in partnership with local authorities, local communities and individuals to deliver improvements to Public Rights of Way and green space.

To continue to administer and support the Kent Countryside Access Forum - a statutory body that advises the Service on the improvement of public access to the coast, countryside and green space.

To investigate schemes to engage more volunteer and community involvement in low level maintenance of Public Rights of Way.

# Contacts

For further information about the Countryside Access Service visit [www.kent.gov.uk/countrysideaccess](http://www.kent.gov.uk/countrysideaccess) or telephone 0845 3450210

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The Explore Kent Partnership is a Countryside Access Service initiative.



For the best information on walking, horse riding, cycling and parks contact Explore Kent.

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tel: 08458 247600  
email: [explorekent@kent.gov.uk](mailto:explorekent@kent.gov.uk)



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