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Cabinet Member for Communities

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Stakeholders – via email

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Dear Colleague

As a passionate user of rights of way in in the county, I wanted to invite you to take part in our 10 week consultation to shape how we maintain the network in the future.

As you know, our stunning rural county boasts a huge network of over 4,500km of public footpaths and bridleways; are enjoyed by thousands of people every year. Staffordshire County Council is responsible for working with landowners and others to keep these public rights of way open, safe and appealing for people to use and enjoy.

As the County Council's income reduces whilst demand for services such as adult social care continues to increase, we need to find savings and new ways of working in everything we do.

The amount that the County Council can spend on the network from April 2018 is reduced so we need to revise our current working practices and ensure that we are making the most difference with the budget available.

As a result, we have undertaken a 'root and branch' review that looks at seven areas, including the roles and responsibilities of the staff involved, a more formal enforcement protocol and ways to maximise income from fees and charges.

Whilst these areas of work are still developing, we have now launched our stakeholder and partner consultation around our proposals for new maintenance standards. These standards centre on the principle that we will focus our money and activity on the most 'valuable' footpaths and bridleways, which are important to our communities and for promoting tourism.

As you may know, there is currently no formal system for how our small in-house team maintains and inspects rights of way, and how they respond to the thousands of reports

presented to us every year. So, whilst every right of way is important, we do need a system whereby we can ensure that our limited County Council resources are focused on those routes that are most valuable and offer most benefit to Staffordshire people.

As a result we have developed a hierarchy system which sets the standard for the activities and our responses to reports on all rights of way. Following a desktop research exercise, each right of way has been provisionally categorised as an A, B or C route, depending on the likely demand on that route (based on the size and location of the population, and its scenic amenity) and its wider benefits (based on whether it is a promoted route and/or is valuable to the visitor economy, used by multiple-users, whether it has links to country parks, shops, schools, etc).

This means that proactive maintenance will be primarily focused on A routes, and issues will be addressed on these ahead of those categorised as B or C. The categorisation of the path will also affect how quickly issues are resolved, with an issue on an A priority route being addressed faster than the same issue on a C route. To be clear, this does not mean that routes classed as C will not receive any County Council support, every right of way is important.

The approach will see us focus resources onto the most used and valued paths, although issues concerning safety will be prioritised regardless of the category. Those proposed to be in the C category are those that are most likely to be infrequently used and are deemed not to offer as much benefit to the public as those in the A and B categories. We would carry out our statutory responsibilities to maintain access and the surface of all rights of way, but would only be able to respond to non-emergency issues when limited resources allow.

Whilst we will continue to bid for improvement funds whenever they are available and will meet our statutory responsibilities, it is clear that we need more help from the community. Whilst many individuals and organisations are already taking the opportunity to get involved and make a difference, we need more people to get involved and volunteer so that we continue to have a rights of way network we can all be proud of.

As an organisation that is passionate about our rights of way, we would welcome your views on a number of proposals to help us maintain these important community assets. Whilst the amount that can be spent by the County Council on the network is not the subject of the review, stakeholders, partners and user groups can steer:

- how each right of way is categorised indicating where the County Council should focus the majority of its resources compared to where local people could get more involved. We are welcoming any local insight or intelligence that could help;
- whether a new online system to help people report and monitor issues would be useful;
- an enhanced volunteer programme indicating what the priorities for council supported volunteer programmes should be ie what would make the most difference in your organisation to get more people involved.

We are also asking local parish councils to consider taking on some of the liaison with landowners about their statutory responsibilities about rights of way on their land. As



the majority of reports being made to the County Council are about broken stiles and gates on privately-owned land, which are the responsibility of landowners, we need parish councils to be our eyes and ears on the ground, and encourage landowners to replace them where necessary.

The consultation will also gauge the enthusiasm of organisations to get more involved with helping to maintain rights of way.

I do feel that your organisation's input into this consultation is absolutely essential to ensuring that we can find the best way of managing the network in the future.

The consultation runs until 25 December, and you can submit an individual or organisational response online at www.staffordshire.gov.uk/rightsofwayreview until then, where you will also find more specific information and frequently asked questions.

In the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact me or Nicola Swinnerton, Rural Access and Development Manager on rightsofwayreview@staffordshire.gov.uk with any questions you may have.

Yours faithfully



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