

Countryside Access Strategy for Shropshire 2008-2018

Executive summary

The Countryside Access Strategy for Shropshire considers existing countryside access opportunities within the county and, by responding to local needs, seeks to modernise the access network and to make the countryside a more welcoming place for everyone. The strategy considers all access opportunities, not just those provided through the Council's statutory obligations. When referring to the 'countryside' the strategy also includes the more urban routes and networks that provide essential access to services.

A modern and fit for purpose access network will provide many advantages for local residents and visitors alike. In addition to providing people with the opportunity to enjoy Shropshire's distinctive and renowned landscape the implementation of the strategy will achieve wider social, economic and environmental goals. For example, the benefits of exercise in the countryside to people's health are well understood as is the contribution made by walking, horse riding and cycling to Shropshire's tourism economy. Rights of way can also provide routes for people to travel to work, to school or to shops, so helping ease road congestion and green-house gas emissions.

What access is currently available

In addition to over 3,400 miles (5,500km) of rights of way, there are many other ways that people can enjoy the countryside in Shropshire. For example, the public have access to over 10,000 hectares of open access land, Shropshire County Council manages 16 Countryside Heritage Sites, Shropshire Wildlife Trust manages 34 nature reserves and the District Authorities, Natural England, the Forestry Commission and the National Trust also provide public access to land within their management. Landowners may also offer permissive or informal paths.

However, even with this wealth of paths and places available, there are areas of the county where access opportunities are less abundant. Paradoxically, this is often in the places where people live.

Dividing the county up into landscape character areas - Shropshire Hills, Clun Hills, Shropshire Plains, Mid Severn and Oswestry Uplands - reveals the differences that the landscape and settlement patterns have on access provision. In summary:

- Access for walkers throughout Shropshire is generally good.
- The Shropshire Hills and Clun Hills areas have the best access for all users.
- Demand for access is high for all users in the Shropshire Plains area; this large area only contains a quarter of the rights of way network.
- The Shropshire Plains and Oswestry Uplands areas provide the least opportunities for horse riders and cyclists who want to get off-road.
- Carriage drivers and motorised users have limited access opportunities.

What people have told us

Establishing what people want when accessing the countryside is integral to the success of the Countryside Access Strategy. Over 2,500 questionnaires were analysed and user groups also told us what local people wanted. Information provided by Parish Councils, the Parish Paths Partnership, local user forums and the actions included within Parish Plans also proved invaluable as did input from the Local Access Forum. The **main issues** raised through the consultation were:

- Access to the countryside is important and valued by everyone.
- People usually visit the countryside with family and friends to exercise, relax, for a sense of wellbeing, to improve their health or to walk their dog. People also like to just sit and admire the view, look at wildlife or to picnic.
- People want improvements to rights of way such as better signage and fewer physical barriers.
- Walking is by far the most popular activity, followed by cycling and then horse riding.
- Local circular routes are preferred.
- People want more information on what access opportunities are available.
- Most people use rights of way for pleasure rather than for local journeys.
- Horse riders and cyclists want to link up and extend bridleways to create more circular off-road routes.
- Safety improvements to important road crossings and the minor roads that are used extensively by recreational users are needed.

What are we going to do?

After setting out what access is presently available and what people want, the remaining chapters of the strategy describe how the County Council intends to deliver improvements for access to different groups of people. These chapters cover:

- Working with communities
- Making local journeys
- Health and wellbeing
- Access to the Shropshire countryside for everyone
- Visiting Shropshire's countryside

Each chapter describes the subject, what is presently available, what people have told us during the preparation of the strategy, future priorities for Shropshire, and concludes with detailed action plans.

The **main actions** within the strategy include:

- Increasing and improving opportunities for everyone to access the Shropshire countryside.
- Making improvements to the rights of way network.
- Improving information on access opportunities for users.

- Increasing the number of local promoted circular routes.
- Developing more off-road routes particularly for horse riders and cyclists.
- Improving safety especially at road crossings.
- Encouraging more community participation in countryside access issues.
- Promoting the benefits that access to the countryside brings to both mental and physical health.
- Encouraging people to walk and cycle for local journeys.
- Fully understanding what would encourage hard-to-reach groups to better access the countryside.
- Promoting Shropshire as a walking, horse riding and cycling destination.

Resources are inevitably limited and developing new partnerships and finding new sources of funding will be important to the delivery of this strategy. Planned actions will need to be prioritised.

Policies have been developed to support the delivery of the strategy. These outline the County Council's approach to a number of situations, for example how maintenance and enforcement actions are prioritised and how the countryside is made more accessible to those with mobility and other difficulties.

What next

The County Council is required to make a new assessment and to review this strategy within 10 years. Thereafter, the Council is required to review the strategy at not more than ten year intervals.

The Countryside Access Strategy is a statutory document and will form an important part of Shropshire's Local Transport Plan (LTP). The LTP sets out a vision and objectives for transport in Shropshire looking forward to the year 2020. It is anticipated that the Countryside Access Strategy will become an integral part of the LTP at its next review in 2011.