

<b>COMMITTEE</b>	<b>COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</b>
<b>DATE</b>	<b>4 November 2021</b>
<b>TITLE</b>	<b>SUBMISSION OF THE DRAFT RIGHTS OF WAY IMPROVEMENT PLAN</b>
<b>CABINET MEMBER</b>	<b>Councillor Gareth W Griffith</b>
<b>AUTHOR</b>	<b>Dafydd Wyn Williams, Head of Environment Department</b>
<b>PURPOSE</b>	<b>To receive feedback and observations from the Scrutiny Committee on the final draft of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan and approve its use for a public consultation.</b>

## **1. BACKGROUND**

1.1 A draft version of the Right of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP) was submitted to the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 25 February 2021. The Committee's decision was:

- To accept the draft plan and note the observations received during the meeting and incorporate them into the document for public consultation.
- That the final version is submitted before the committee following the consultation period.

1.2 Following the Committee, the representatives of the Access Forums were contacted to obtain their views on the draft plan. After these meetings and upon hearing the comments of the Scrutiny Committee, the document was amended, with the intention that it would be released for public consultation before this Scrutiny Committee meeting.

1.3 It should be noted that a Local Authority is expected to provide a minimum of 12 weeks for the consultation on the draft RoWIP. Unfortunately, due to pressure and a reduced capacity in the Countryside Service over the summer months, it was not possible to prepare a final draft to be released for public consultation, as well as analyse the response, before the date of this meeting.  
I apologise for having to report that the timetable has slipped once again.

## **2. UPDATE**

2.1 The version being submitted before the Committee includes amendments and additions and apart for a few changes in emphasis, the direction of the Actions remains unchanged.

The main changes are noted in the body of the document.

2.2 Despite the delay, the RoWIP is being prepared at a time of change in the countryside access field and I believe that having an overview of the changes will be useful to the Committee.

2.3 **Access Reform Programme:** Natural Resources Wales and the Government have established the Programme to consider changes to access legislation, and attention is given to the following fields:

- Increasing the range of activities permitted under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act and creating new access land in coastal areas.
  - Increasing the range of activities that the public can undertake, with permission, on public footpaths (cycling and horse-riding permissible on footpaths), improving processes and reducing the systemic pressures associated with managing the temporary diversion of rights of way, closing them for a short period, and undertaking stock management work on them.
  - Improving the process of creating, storing and communicating statutory access maps.
  - The role and administration of Local Access Forums
  - Control of dogs in the countryside.
- 2.4 The recommendations deriving from the work have yet to be publicised and no clear guidance has been received from Welsh Government on the way forward. Nevertheless, the far-reaching impacts that may arise as a result of the Access Reform Programme should not be disregarded.
- 2.5 **The visitor economy:** Rights of way that allow access to highlands and coastal areas have been key to the growth of the tourism sector in Gwynedd and they will certainly have an important role to play in the future as the Council considers the sustainable visitor economy principles.
- 2.6 The designation of the Slate Landscape World Heritage Site is likely to bring opportunities to develop access in these areas, but challenges are also anticipated, e.g. striking a balance between access and safeguarding heritage features.
- 2.7 **Resources:** Part 2.6 of the draft plan discusses resources and the increasing pressures on the Countryside Service to maintain the rights of way infrastructure and process orders. Although the situation in terms of core budgets remains difficult, an increase was seen over the past two years in the availability of grants, mainly from Welsh Government.
- 2.8 For the 20/21 and 21/22 years, nearly £400k was received to improve the rights of way network as well as a similar amount to upgrade the Lonydd Glas.
- 2.9 The presumption is that the grants will continue for the coming years, which raises a question about the Service's current capacity to take advantage of and make the best use of the grants, considering that rights of way officers are also responding to day-to-day matters.

### 3. RECOMMENDATION

- 3.1 The Communities Scrutiny Committee is asked to offer observations on the final draft Rights of Way Improvement Plan and subject to incorporating the observations, to authorise the Environment Department to use it for the purpose of public consultation. The Department will report back to the Scrutiny Committee after the consultation period.

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## APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Gwynedd Rights of Way Improvement Plan (final draft)