



Committee and Date

Protecting and Enhancing
our Environment Scrutiny

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Item

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Public

The Shropshire Way Long Distance Footpath

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1. Summary

Since 2007 there has been an ambitious project in place to upgrade and extend the Shropshire Way long distance footpath aimed at providing a viable walking offer for residents and visitors to enjoy, and promoting Shropshire nationally and regionally as a great walking destination. Four successful funding bids have resulted in an incremental project to carry out major re-routing, extending and upgrading of the Shropshire Way footpath, accompanied by website upgrades, considerable promotion and the establishment of a Shropshire Way Association. The project has engaged with local communities, businesses and volunteer groups along the way and the consequent feeling of ownership of the route by local walking groups and businesses has reduced on-going monitoring and maintenance requirements. It has provided a product that local accommodation businesses have been able to successfully use to increase turnover and visitor numbers. Substantial national publicity has resulted in Shropshire being increasingly recognised as a place to visit especially for walkers. Several Parish Path Partnership Groups (P3) have been actively involved in the Shropshire Way project. There are currently 53 P3 groups across Shropshire, covering 71 parishes, with many more groups in the process of setting up. So far during 2012/13 Parish Path Volunteers have contributed 5043 hours to working on and supporting the Rights of Way network in Shropshire, (a £ equivalent of £36,300).

2. Recommendations

2.1 It is recommended that:

- The Council recognise the way these projects have helped support the local tourism economy and that the Council continues to support expansion of the Shropshire Way around Shrewsbury and Market Drayton
- The Council continue to support locality working via the local Parish Paths Partnership group volunteers and congratulate the specific groups involved in

these projects for carrying out much of the on-going monitoring and routine works on these promoted routes.

REPORT

3. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

The main risk to continuing with this project based approach to developing routes is lack of capital to match against external funding. Without external funding further work could be jeopardised and the advantages to visitor economy built up since 2007 will be slowly eroded away. With suitable match funding being found we can appreciably increase the visitor and resident offer and economic benefits in the north east of the County around Market Drayton and in the Shrewsbury area.

The opportunities that present themselves with this project are:

Economic –adding value to the tourism offer for Shropshire with improved walking access, interpretation, information and publicity and working with local businesses to ensure that they capitalise on the benefits.

Communities – improving health and wellbeing through improved walking routes and recreational opportunities, offering opportunities for local people to develop small projects to improve their local recreational offer especially around the market towns

Environment – Offering easy access improvements to local green spaces and Countryside sites, connecting up important sites and improving volunteering to help maintain them.

4. Financial Implications

To extend and develop the Shropshire Way product in Shrewsbury and Market Drayton in a similar approach to the existing project would cost around £200,000. External funding bids would be made to support this.

5. Background

The Shropshire Way was originally designed by the Rambler's Association as a long distance footpath in the early 1980's. The route bypassed many of the outstanding locations that Shropshire had to showcase to visitors and resulted in many complaints from visitors as to its condition. Something needed to be done to improve the walking offer within Shropshire for local residents and visitors to ensure that the tourism potential for walking was fully realised.

Improving the walking offer has subsequently been identified within the Destination Management Strategies for the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow, and North Shropshire and Oswestry both of which recognise the importance of walking to support the visitor economy and it is in these areas that we have focussed our projects. In addition the Countryside Access Strategy 2008-2018 aims to provide a high quality access network that supports a thriving sustainable tourism economy.

6. Value of walking to the local economy of Shropshire

The latest Shropshire visitor survey (2007) reports that 12% of visitors had come to the County specifically to walk. This was the joint third most popular reason for visiting (with shopping) behind general sightseeing and visiting an attraction. 12% of both overnights and day trippers said that the primary reason for being in Shropshire was to walk.

A third of all visitors said that they had gone/would go for a walk at some point during their trip – this suggests while walking might not be their primary motivation for visiting Shropshire, a fifth of those prompted to visit Shropshire for other reasons do go on a walk at some point.

Estimating the value of walking to the visitor economy based on the proportion of visitors for whom walking is the primary activity (from the Shropshire Visitor Survey), their levels of expenditure (also from the Visitor Survey) and the overall volume of tourism (from the Economic Impact Assessment for Shropshire, 2011) gives a value of £64.9 million. This equates with 13% of the overall tourism market.

Volume and Value of Walking Tourism (where walking is the primary reason for visit)

	Overnight Visitor	Day Visitor	Total
Estimated Number of Visits	149,760	1,243,200	1,392,960
Estimated Value of Visits	£31.6 million	£33.3 million	£64.9 million
Estimated Value per Visit	£210.98	£26.8	£46.59
Estimated Direct FTE Jobs	-	-	1,014
Estimated Actual Jobs	-	-	1,451
Estimated Direct, Indirect and Induced FTE Jobs	-	-	1,425

Source: *Economic Impact of Tourism, 2011/Shropshire Visitor Survey, 2007*

Using the same employee GVA proxy as for tourism generally, this would suggest that walking tourism contributes £42.7 million to Shropshire GVA, which is the equivalent of 1% of the total (13% of tourism GVA).

The above does not include the value the Shropshire walking product generates through visitors for whom walking is a secondary activity. There will be an associated value, since a lack of walking product could deter potential visitors who want to spend part of their holiday walking. Similarly, an attractive walking product can encourage visitors to stay in a destination for longer and to spend more.

7. The Shropshire Way Projects

Over the last 6 years by using a total of £80,000 capital funding as match, successful funding bids have been made to develop The Shropshire Way to provide

a successful focus to Shropshire's walking offer. A total of £267,750 has been secured from the following sources:

- £240,000 from Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Market Towns Revitalisation Programme (MTRP) and Rural Development Programme for England (LEADER)
- £1,250 from The Ramblers
- £10,500 from local company Pugh's undertakers

This has been supplemented by the equivalent of £16,000 of volunteer time from 12 Parish Paths Partnerships groups who have been actively involved in the projects

A map showing the route is attached and the Projects over time have:

- Upgraded and enhanced the route in the Shropshire Hills AONB area with a guide book, 6 additional new circular walks, considerable website improvements and 12 downloadable podcasts about the area. The podcasts are downloadable recordings of local people talking about the local heritage.
- Upgraded the route along Wenlock Edge and around Much Wenlock creating 6 new circular walks, a guide book and 6 new podcasts. The old railway line was upgraded to easy access for wheelchair and pushchair users.
- Created a new section of the Shropshire Way along the Stiperstones and on through Snailbeach and Pontesbury to Lyth Hill, linking these two key sites
- Created a new loop of the Shropshire Way around Oswestry bringing the walk to the north west of the County for the first time. 4 new circular walks and podcasts were added.
- The Oswestry loop has been linked to the rest of the Shropshire Way network and new routes created through the Meres and Mosses to Whitchurch. 6 New circular walks have been created.
- 6 new circular walks and a guide book are in the process of being produced for the Shropshire Way around Pontesbury and Minsterley.
- A new circular history trail on Whixall is being developed that takes visitors to a recreated "Strategic Starfish Site"
- A new circular Bettisfield Moss Trail is being completed
- Disabled access from the canal is being finalised, complete with new landing stage that allows wheelchair and Lyneal Trust service users access to the peat cuttings and interpretation for the first time.

In all:

250 miles of route have been upgraded of which 117 miles were newly promoted

32 new circular walks have been created

5 community groups have participated

12 Parish Path Partnership groups have actively supported the projects

10 pieces of national press coverage

23 local businesses have been engaged

These projects along the way have helped in the development of 3 new, "Walkers are Welcome towns," in Much Wenlock, Oswestry and Whitchurch but have also supported the other existing "Walkers are Welcome towns," of Bishop's Castle, Church Stretton and Cleobury Mortimer in providing a product that they can use to pull visitors into the area. Our eventual aim is to achieve Walkers are Welcome

status for every market town and the County to be the first nationally recognised as achieving this. New walking festivals have been developed in some areas

The aims of Walkers are Welcome are to:

- be attractive destinations for walkers with top quality information on local walks
- offer local people and visitors excellent walking opportunities within their areas
- ensure that footpaths and facilities for walkers are maintained, improved and well signposted
- contribute to local tourism plans and regeneration strategies
- promote the health benefits of walking and increase participation
- encourage the use of public transport

It has to be stressed that at all stages of these projects the scope of works was designed with steering groups of local people, businesses and walking groups and emphasis was placed on what they needed as well as on what a visitor would need. This has led to a high degree pride in the trail and a feeling of local ownership. One particular campsite has adopted a section of the walk and its maintenance.

The work has been carried out in partnership not only with local communities, Parish Paths Partnerships and walking groups and also with other national organisations such as Natural England, The Shropshire Wildlife Trust, the Canals and Waterways Trust, The Lyneal Trust, Shropshire MIND, the National Trust and the Meres and Mosses Landscape Partnership Project. This has added considerable value to all projects and further increased the support to the visitor economy.

The press and TV coverage has been considerable, increased visibility of Shropshire as a visitor attraction has increased, and we are no longer “Britain’s best kept secret” and there have been many more follow on articles in the walking and national press. A film has also been made about walking in Shropshire and what a wonderful destination it is. This can be found on the Shropshire Walking site at: www.shropshirewalking.co.uk

The difference the projects have made are always hard to quantify as footfall is difficult to measure but individual business case studies have shown a marked increase in turnover and especially repeat visitors. Indeed some reported a doubling in trade as a result of the projects. Additionally the walking website statistics have shown a remarkable growth in visitor and information downloads since the start of the project.

We do know how the projects have helped engage at a local level and the Parish Paths Partnership in Much Wenlock is worth further mention as one example of this. Before the Shropshire Way was upgraded and the circular walks created there had been an inactive, almost defunct local P3 group in Much Wenlock. The local walking group (who designed all the walks and formed the core of the steering group for the project) realised the need to re-establish the P3 group. This was to help get local volunteers to install the new furniture and signage and ensure the walks were maintained to a high standard, which they did. It is now once again an active P3

group which has subsequently worked with the local Walking for Health group to create even more walks, which has led to the town gaining Walkers are Welcome status and running a successful walking festival. There are many more examples of this type of success throughout the projects.

8. Next steps

To continue with this partnership approach for the remaining areas of Shropshire will require projects to be developed incrementally over time. The focus at this stage needs to be within and around Shrewsbury, as the Shropshire Way crosses our county town and links with the sections upgraded in the south and north of the county. We need to vastly improve the walking offer in this area for local residents and visitors alike.

Ultimately this work would also be focussed around Market Drayton in the north and the east of Shropshire - Bridgnorth and Shifnal and we will take advantage of any opportunities that present themselves to complete this work by capitalising on any existing or new projects that may be developed by our partners to bring additionally to their projects as we have done so previously. We also look eagerly to the new LEADER funding to support this work.

The next phase of the project will be to secure external funding for:

- Upgrading the Shropshire Way in the Shrewsbury and surrounding area and create a number of shorter circular walks, town heritage trails.
- Provide updated guides, web information and digital apps to allow more people to link to the wonderful heritage that this area has to offer with walks on the ground.
- Side by side this work with the local community to secure “walkers are welcome” status for the town.
- More support for local volunteer groups such as the Parish Paths Partnerships to minimise costs to the Council and maximise work on the ground.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)

North Shropshire and Oswestry Visitor Economy Strategy 2012

A Strategy and action plan for sustainable tourism in the Shropshire Hills and Ludlow 2011-2016

Countryside Access Strategy for Shropshire 2008-2018

Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder)

Steve Charmley
Mike Owen

Local Member

Countywide

Appendices

Map of Shropshire showing Shropshire Way

