

Countryside Access Strategy for Shropshire 2008-2018 Review

Contents

Executive Summary

The Countryside Access Strategy for Shropshire was published in 2008 and is due to be rewritten for publication in 2018. It acts as the Rights of Way Improvement Plan in accordance with the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. This paper reviews how well the strategy has been delivered, considers any issues or barriers and makes suggestions for improvements for the future.

The statutory duty for maintaining Rights of Way rests with Shropshire Council, along with farmers and landowners. Delivery of the Countryside Access Strategy is the responsibility of the Outdoor Partnerships Team within Shropshire Council, along with a wide range of partners; farmers and landowners, other Public Bodies, users, charitable organisations and businesses.

Over the past three years, the budget and staffing for the Outdoor Partnerships Team has halved and this is having an impact on the ability of the team to fulfil its statutory duty and to find the capacity to develop access beyond the statutory minimum. The impact of this is likely to be felt more acutely in the period following the end of this strategy.

The reduction in Council funding is being counteracted in part by finding new ways of working to increase the amount of income to the service from a variety of means.

The review of the Countryside Access Strategy will inform a new Outdoor Partnerships Strategy (2017-2022) and a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (2018-2028).

Working with Communities

Achievements

- 1,700 volunteers contributing £x worth of time
- Rights of Way improvement work with Bishop's Castle Community College and Shrewsbury School students involving young people
- X session with corporate volunteers
- Over 9,000 hours contributed by the Community Payback scheme, equivalent to £72,500 labour
- John Muir Award achieved by 11 Community Payback participants

Issues

- Potential volunteer fatigue and difficulties in recruitment due to other pressures
- Insufficient capacity to offer the required levels of support to Volunteer Rangers on Parks and Sites and to engage more with young people
- Conflict between different types of users and some anti-social behaviour by a few users
- Lack of engagement with the cycling community
- Lack of ongoing funding to support the Community's Payback Team
- Insufficient integration with other community priorities, health and the economy

Priorities

- Engage more with cycling community, including mountain biking to identify opportunities
- Identify further support for Volunteer Rangers, 'Friends of' groups and work with young people
- Training and support for different user groups on Rights of Way, planning issues and responsibilities as a user and landowner and identifying local access priorities
- Renegotiation of contract with Community Payback team
- Better partnership working to help support volunteering and site management and to deliver landscape scale projects
- Development of a new Shropshire's Great Outdoors Strategy Board to replace the Local Access Forum, ensuring better integration with other agendas, such as community, health and the local economy

Making Local Journeys

Achievements

- Integration of the Countryside Access Strategy with the provisional Local Transport Plan
- Agreement of Unclassified County Roads management by the Countryside Maintenance Team
- Delivery of the Local Sustainable Transport Fund with 96 new promoted walks and 78 cycle routes from town centres, the new 185 mile Shropshire Cycleway and 1.5 mile off-road cycle route between Pontesbury and Minsterley
- Better links between communities through the development of the Shropshire Way and the Humphrey Kynaston Way bridleway
- 900 people taking part in led cycle rides and over 2,500 people on led walks
- 6,833 people received journey planning advice and 53 schools were advised on travel plans
- Promotion of all these routes is on the Shropshire's Great Outdoors website

Issues

- The Local Transport Plan was not formally adopted by Shropshire Council and is now out of date. It is unclear whether this is going to be a political priority going forward
- No funding for this work currently and there is no capacity within existing teams to take this forward. A new Local Transport Plan will be needed before any further external funding can be sought.

Priorities

- If a new Local Transport Plan is developed, the Outdoor Partnerships Service will seek to be actively involved, ensuring that walking and cycling for local journeys is a priority.

Access for Everyone

Achievements

- Around 750 stiles have been replaced by gates to make access easier for those with limited mobility
- Shropshire Outdoors project worked with 153 people with access issues
- Facilitation of activity between health and environmental organisations has led to better engagement and understanding
- Development of 16 all ability routes
- Publication of the 'Easy Access in Shropshire' and 'Family Friendly Walks' guides
- Walk designed for those with sight loss issues and an accessible bird hide built at Severn Valley Country Park

Issues

- All ability routes are expensive to create and maintain
- These routes are not currently monitored to assess how popular they are
- There is limited engagement with disability networks and groups

Priorities

- Better engagement with disability network and groups to identify opportunities and get feedback on current facilities
- Better monitoring of existing routes

Visiting the countryside

Achievements

- Outdoor recreation is worth £17 billion/ year to England's economy and contributes 500,000 jobs
- A wide range of promoted routes have been developed across Shropshire, which are prioritised in terms of maintenance to help ensure a good quality experience
- Environmental considerations have been included in the development of routes and access to parks and sites, with relevant physical improvements, interpretation and sustainable transport options
- Shropshire is a hotspot for Walkers Are Welcome, with 10 accredited towns
- There has been some work with businesses to help improve returns from outdoor activity
- The £2.2m Southern Shropshire LEADER Programme has been launched along with other EU funding, so there are more opportunities for businesses to get financial assistance

- Shropshire has been featured many times in the media as a walking, cycling and horse riding destination and the Shropshire's Great Outdoors website had 100,000 users in 2016/17
- Facebook has become increasingly important as a marketing tool
- There are a good range of festivals and events throughout the year, with seven walking festivals, the Meres and Mosses Festival and many walking, cycling, running and riding events
- X people have been trained as walks leaders

Issues

- Lack of strategic direction for cultural heritage and visitor economy development
- Insufficient recognition of the Outdoor Economy and its impact on economic growth in Shropshire
- Poor engagement with and involvement of outdoor activity providers and other relevant businesses
- Maintenance of high quality routes, parks and sites is a challenge with reduced funding
- Lack of investment in key countryside assets is limited economic returns

Priorities

- Development of externally funded projects that increase investment in key assets for economic growth
- Involvement in rural development programmes for the future, building on the LEADER experience
- Working with outdoor activity providers and other relevant businesses to access funding, identify development opportunities and grow their businesses, possibly through a new business network
- Increase the understanding and capacity of Council managed countryside assets to help mitigate climate change
- Increase awareness of the role of access to the countryside as a driver for businesses and individuals to relocate to Shropshire
- Offer opportunities for training for young people
- Ensure high quality parks and sites management
- Support Walkers Are Welcome towns, festivals and events through User Forums
- Seek to develop new multi-user routes along disused railways and support the Canal and River Trust to develop canal towpaths

Introduction

The Countryside Access Strategy for Shropshire¹ was published in 2008 in response to the requirement for Local Authorities to deliver a Rights of Way Improvement Plan in accordance with

¹ <https://www.shropshire.gov.uk/media/268126/countryside-access-strategy-for-shropshire-2008-2018.pdf>

the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000². The strategy analyses the Public Rights of Way network and how it meets the needs of local people and visitors and provides a plan of action for Shropshire Council to improve the network, taking into account health and wellbeing, the local economy and protection of the environment. There was considerable consultation with users, visitors and landowners and the strategy aimed to address the opportunities and issues that arose.

It applies to all access opportunities, not just those provided through the Council’s statutory obligations.

The Countryside Access Strategy (encompassing the Rights of Way Improvement Plan) is a statutory document and forms part of Shropshire’s Local Transport Plan³, which is also due to be refreshed soon.

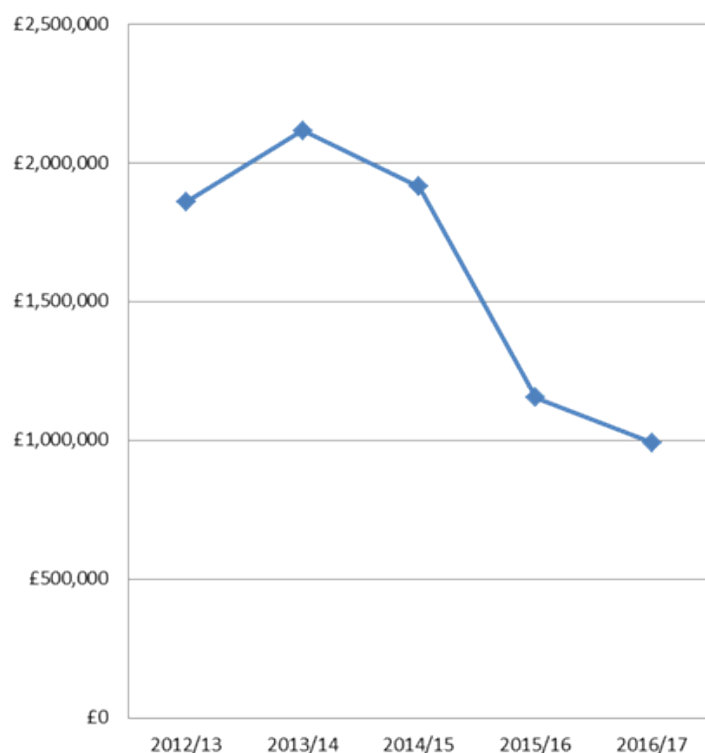
This report reviews how effectively the strategy has been delivered, highlights barriers to further improvements and prioritises actions to help inform the development of a new Rights of Way Improvement Plan to be published in 2018.

Scope

The strategy applies to:

- 5,600 km Rights of Way network across Shropshire
- Over 10,000 ha of open access land and commons
- The 23 Country Parks and Countryside Heritage Sites managed by Shropshire Council
- Land managed by partner organisations such as the National Trust, Wildlife Trust and Forestry Commission
- Permissive routes agreed with landowners
- Relevant activities by other partners

Outdoor Partnerships Controllable Budget



It takes into account the benefits of good countryside and urban access across a number of agendas including health and wellbeing, the economy and the environment.

Challenging times

² <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/37/contents>

³ <https://www.shropshire.gov.uk/public-and-passenger-transport/local-transport-plan/>

The strategy was developed to contribute to other plans and strategies across Shropshire. Many of these and the political climate in which they were written, have now changed. This has impacted on the delivery of the action plans and will need to inform the development of a new strategy.

Political pressures over the period of the strategy and into the future include:

- The UK decision to leave the European Union and any impact on the Common Agricultural Policy and Rural Development
- Impact of Rights of Way being a devolved power in Wales
- Government austerity measures and the aspiration for Local Authorities to be funded through local Council Tax and Business Rates by 2020
- A move towards localism, commissioning service to Town and Parish Councils and the aspiration for devolved authorities
- Focus on economic growth and development, potentially at the detriment of the environment
- Creation of extensive new housing and development of employment land
- Impact of austerity on the NHS, Public Health and Adult and Children Services

As a result there is considerable political uncertainty and unprecedented financial cuts which need to be addressed by a more sustainable and resilient approach to Service delivery.

The Outdoor Partnerships Service, including maintenance and development of Rights of Way, has had its share of the budget cuts and the Country Parks and Countryside Heritage Sites were amongst the services threatened with closure in the Financial Strategy published by Shropshire Council in January 2016.

We are not alone, Natural England are facing 50% cuts in management budgets for the National Nature Reserves, the Forestry Commission has undergone significant restructures and Shropshire Wildlife Trust is concerned about the impact of changes to the Countryside Stewardship schemes following Brexit.

The impact on the quality of access and outdoor recreation available to residents and visitors in Shropshire as a result of these cuts could be considerable and should be taken into account in the development of the new strategy. Set against this must be the contribution that the outdoor recreation economy makes to the local economy in Shropshire.



A new approach has been adopted by the Outdoor Partnerships Team; to attempt to increase income to offset future reductions in budget. The income generated by the team has been growing over the last few years, as shown in the graph above, but it is unlikely to meet all requirements. The following strategy will need to focus on consolidating and managing what we have rather than ambitious plans to increase or develop access.

Review of progress against the Countryside Access Strategy aims

This report will review each of the high level aims of the strategy, outlining activity that has helped deliver these aims, consider where they have not been met and make recommendations for future delivery.

Countryside Access- 'Ensure that the access network meets the needs of Shropshire residents and visitors whilst recognising the special qualities of the landscape'

The strategy aimed to:

- Increase and improve opportunities for everyone to access Shropshire's hills, woodlands and watersides and balance with conserving what makes them special
- Increase our knowledge of the infrastructure and maintenance issues on the ROW network
- Overcome and reduce the number of barriers on RoW network
- Improve provision of information and promotion for users
- Increase number of short circular walks from centres of population and walking opportunities in areas of poor provision
- Overcome some of the specific barriers to increased walking; availability of parking, guided walks programmes and dog-friendly places
- Improve opportunities for cyclists to access the countryside
- Develop more bridleways and improve opportunities for horse riders to access the countryside
- Provide sustainable management of byways and Unclassified County Roads (UCRs) and improve accessibility of these

Achievements

Maintenance and obstruction issues are logged on a Countryside Access Management System (CAMS). A one off survey of the ROW network was undertaken as part of the Parish Action Project, which started in 2003, with 44% of the network surveyed before funding ceased in 2012. 5% is now surveyed annually as part of the ease of use indicator programme (BVPI). The results of the surveys are held on CAMS and the BVPI database for action as priority and funding allows. Whilst there is a considerable backlog of issues, this has, along with a system for prioritising routes depending on usage, helped identify and prioritise work.

In 2007/8 at the time of Publication of the Countryside Access Strategy the BVPI score for accessibility of the rights of way network had risen to 78.7% (from a low of 36%). This was largely as a result of the capital funded Parish Access Project which invested over £1.6m over a 6 ½ year period. At the end of the Parish Access Project this figure reached a height of 85%. The impact of reduced maintenance staff and budgets on the accessibility of the network is demonstrated by the latest figure being 70%.

Access infrastructure improvements have continued, with efficiencies from activity such as the team making the kit wooden bridges rather than buying them in. Since 2009 over 5,000 individual

improvements have been made and over 200 km of Rights of Way have been cleared. This would not have been possible without the considerable contribution made by Parish Paths Partnership volunteers (see below). In 2015/16, for example, the volunteers contributed around 8,000 hours of time, equivalent to £61,500 or two full time members of staff.

A new ploughing and cropping campaign was launched in 2016, aimed at encouraging landowners to keep RoW through crops and ploughed fields accessible all year. This was accompanied by a new landowner guide, highlighting the legal responsibilities of landowners with regard to RoW across their land. Over 2000 leaflets have been distributed to landowners, interested parties and many Parish Councils.



[Results from year 1? –See Below]

Over 120 letters were sent to landowners and farmers where there had been recorded cropping or ploughing issue in the last few years. This revealed that the main area was in the north.

- North Shropshire/Oswestry area 61%.
- South Shropshire 20%
- Shrewsbury and Atcham and Bridgnorth (South). 18%

Initial letters prompted a number of responses from landowners who informed us that the paths would be cleared, or there were landownership changes or errors in original reporting, etc.

Inspections were then carried out at most of the outstanding locations, with the Ramblers assisting with this task in the North Shropshire/Oswestry area.

The results of the inspections were:

- 21% routes had been cleared and reinstated
- 18% were not cropped in the current season
- 11% were partially reinstated, whether by use by walkers or inadequate action by the landowner
- Of the identified cropped paths 45% had not been cleared.

Further action was taken in May by sending a further letter to those who had failed to fulfil their obligations. They were informed that action would be taken if they did not clear the crop. This prompted a number of positive responses from landowners which was particularly helpful in developing contacts which could be useful in the future.

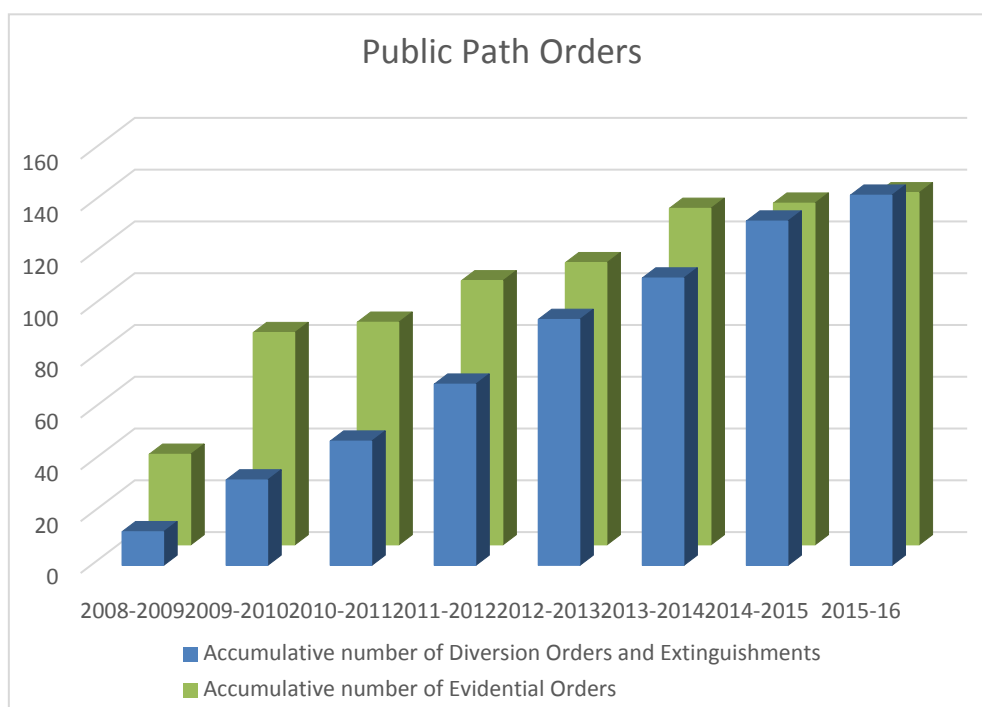
Officers then undertook further inspections of the remaining issues to which earlier correspondence had resulted in no response. This resulted in six legal notices being served and immediate action being taken by the landowners.

General Enforcement of the Public Rights of Way network has ??????????????????????

During this period amendments have been made to the Definitive Map to ensure that it is kept up to date and records routes correctly and protects them for future generations. This has included preferential Orders under the Highways Act and Town & Country Planning Act – These are usually in the interest of the landowners and often move routes out of gardens or from cross field to field edge, or undertaken as part of the planning process when Public Rights of Way are affected.

Legal Orders confirmed April 2008 –April 2016

The chart below shows the number of Diversion Orders, Extinguishments and Evidential Orders carried out since 2008/9.



Since 2008 a total of 22 km of Public Rights of Way have been added to the Definitive Map where evidence has shown that they were public.

- 13.3 km of footpath
- 6.1 km of bridleways
- 2.5 km of restricted byways
- 190m of Byways open to all traffic

In addition 3.8 km of routes have been removed from the map as they were proven to have been recorded in error.

A total of 206 preferential orders have been processed since 2008 which have brought in over £208K to the service.

Wherever possible Officers have tried to negotiate with landowners affected by claims and since 2008 have been successful in obtaining 13.3 km of routes through dedications rather than having to publish legal orders.

Some examples of these are:

- Montford Bridge where working in partnership with The Highways Agency, Nesscliffe and Hills Parish Paths Partnership Bridleways group and Preston Montford Field Studies Centre a 1.7 km bridleway was created. This allowed existing bridleways to be linked and a safe crossing of the busy A5 to be created. This was undertaken as part of the Paths For Communities fund run by Natural England.
- The Rea Valley where 4 kms of footpath were dedicated by Shropshire Council to ensure the well-used, but not definitive paths could not be lost due to development.
- Dedication of field at Montford?
- Others?

A new post, Land Charges and Planning Support Officer, started in 2016. Alongside giving advice on the compulsory Land Charges questions, this officer is working with developers to advise on access and green space provision in new planning applications and should be able to influence the quality of provision going forward. An agreement was reached with the Highways Department to adopt and maintain some of the unsurfaced Unclassified County Roads (UCRs). This has resulted in £35,000 per year being spent in xx and the team are currently agreeing priorities for UCR improvements for 2017/18.

A Business Case was agreed in 2015 to commit some of the Countryside Maintenance Team's time to increase income earned through external contracts, a member of staff was recruited to help deliver this and the extra income has helped ensure improvements to Rights of Way continue.

A number of new promoted routes have been developed, including:

- Redevelopment of the Shropshire Way, with new routes in the north of the county
- New long distance bridleways: The Humphrey Kynaston Way linear and circular routes, Blue Remembered Hills Bridleway and the Jack Mytton Way extension
- A series of Walking with Offa pub walks and walks using local bus and train services
- Circular routes from the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail, along with the ongoing improvement to the route through the National Trail network
- Oswald's Trail around Oswestry
- A series of World War 1 walks
- A series of short circular walks from market towns as part of the Local Sustainable Transport Plan

Access improvements in our Country Parks and Countryside Heritage Sites

An annual user survey has been conducted to gather views of users and help prioritise activity.

Issues

Continued lack of Rights of Way including bridleways in northern Shropshire, especially in the north eastern part of the county which may be due to this area not having had the Review of the Definitive Map.

Whilst the Countryside Maintenance team has been tasked with securing external funding to help cover the costs of the team going forward, there are concerns that this may reduce the capacity of the team to deliver the statutory responsibility of the Council. This will need to be carefully managed.

The development of the Shropshire Way, whilst offering some fantastic promoted routes for people to enjoy the Shropshire countryside now lacks a single identified Long Distance Route, which is requested by some walkers. This has caused concern and the Shropshire Way Association has been reformed to address the issue.

Lack of funding for large scale capital works, such as bridges. There is currently £300,000 worth of improvements needs to bridges, the funding for which has yet to be identified. If funding can't be secured these routes will need to be closed. [more? Rich]

Safety concerns about some of the quarry faces in the Countryside Heritage Sites means climbing may be more hazardous.

All market towns are undergoing major developments in terms of housing and employment land, which will bring in more people, may impact on Rights of Way and increase pressure on the existing network.

Despite more work being undertaken to tackle landowners that are not complying with their legal duties to keep Rights of Way clear, there are a few persistent offenders who need further action.

It is not always clear where the Rights of Way are on parks and sites, or clear which routes are of a higher status.

Not always easy to know which routes are closed.

Cycling UK campaign to increase off-road cycling routes.

Priorities

Prepare for the likely increase in claims for unrecorded routes as a result of The Deregulation Bill and historic cut-off.

Further Prioritisation of outstanding Formal Applications

Prioritisation of the Case files from the Discovering Lost Ways Project which looked at potential routes in the North.

Prioritise action on the following:-

- Higher access anomalies
- Legal dead ends that form important links
- Missing links that would join a priority route

- Mapping anomalies
- Revision of the Definitive Map and Statement

Securing capital funding for major works such as bridges will need to be a priority to keep the network open.

Work with the Community Enablement Team to help prioritise access and greenspace in Neighbourhood, Town and Parish Plans, optimising the use of Section 106/ CIL planning gain funding.

Outdoor Partnerships need to continue to advise the Planning Department, encouraging a broader settlement view on access and green space provision. We should work with the Planners to identify opportunities to gain new access or green space in or around new developments where possible.

Better mapping of access routes and type of access on Country Parks and Heritage Sites to help people understand which routes are suitable for which users

Contact climbing groups to discuss quarry walls and cliffs and ensure these are being used safely. Erect signs where there are potential issues to warn climbers of dangers.

Continue the Ploughing and Cropping campaign, taking landowners who continue to not comply, despite legal letters, to court to ensure Rights of Way are kept open.

Highlight any route closures on the interactive map on the Shropshire's Great Outdoors website.

Off-road cycling action plan and policy.

Clearer signage/ maps for parks and sites in car parks and online.

Working with Communities- encourage and support local communities wishing to make use of and develop access to Shropshire's Countryside

The Strategy aimed to:

- Provide advice and support at a local level to communities wishing to improve their access to the countryside.
- Have a Parish Path Partnership group in every parish in the county.
- Keep up to date with local community needs and desires for access improvements and keep Action Plans updated and relevant.

Achievements

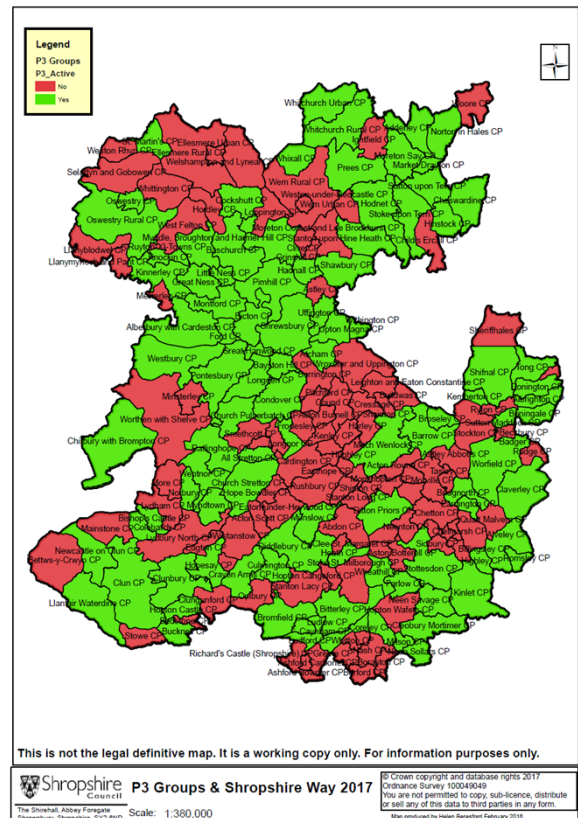
Community involvement in access improvements is led by the Area Rights of Way Officers and the Country Park and Sites Officers. They are talking to landowners, Parish Councils, local user groups and other members of the public to advise and support access improvements. A dedicated P3 officer is currently funded by Public Health. Some progress had been made through Parish Planning but there is more work to do, especially as the new Neighbourhood Plans are being developed.

Parish Paths Partnerships

The Parish Paths Partnership (P3) scheme has been running for over 20 years in Shropshire. The scheme encourages local groups of volunteers to help manage and maintain their local network of Rights of Way network through a variety of activities. The Outdoor Partnerships Team supports this through the supply of tools, training, materials, expert advice and small grants.

The benefits of this are numerous, including:

- Assistance in maintaining paths that otherwise would fall into disrepair
- Local prioritisation for maintenance where best use of resources should be targeted
- Benefits to participants in physical and mental health through active volunteering, being part of a group and doing something to help the local community
- Economic benefit through an improved tourism resource locally to attract visitors including the development of information for visitors
- Increased opportunities for others to enjoy the network locally, with the health benefits that arise from this.
- Ability to draw in funding that otherwise would not be available to Shropshire Council due to the proven local community benefit and local networks



In 2008 there were 52 active Parish Paths Partnership groups, involving more than 250 people. In 2017 this has increased to 71 active groups with around 370 people involved, with the Shrewsbury P3 acting as a 'roving' group, working in other areas. The aspiration for every parish to have a group is ambitious. Presently the groups cover more than half the county geographically but as some of the groups work outside their parish, the Parish Paths Partnership volunteers are helping maintain Rights of Way across much of the county. The volunteers contributed around 8,000 hours of time in 2015/16, equivalent to £61,500 or two full time members of staff. They are essential to the ongoing maintenance of the Rights of Way network.

In 2016, the Parish Paths Partnership Officer worked with Bishop's Castle Community College to include maintenance of Rights of Way as an option in their Enrichment Programme and two work programmes have been completed with Shrewsbury School students, thus encouraging young people to better understand public access to the countryside and the maintenance of ROW.

Walford and North Shropshire College have been involved previously and opportunities are now being explored with Harper Adams University College. Corporate groups such as the Shropshire Housing Association have also volunteered to improve Rights of Way.

"Working in Pontesbury P3 team is a win, win, situation. As team members we get exercise, new skills and good fun (especially with a team of rebels and comedians), the Parish get a superb network of paths, the older folk get a set of user friendly paths for Walking for Health, tourists get access to beautiful country side and Shropshire Council gets a lot of labour for not a lot of money. Personally, I get a lot of white hair." David Jones – Pontesbury P3 Co-ordinator



Volunteer Rangers

Shropshire Council owns and manages some of the most iconic heritage sites in Shropshire. Many people are passionate about their local sites but the staff resources of this team means that the capacity to support volunteers has been limited, especially following the decision to take on urban greenspaces when the Council became Unitary. The urban greenspaces are now being managed by Environmental Maintenance, which means that the Parks and Sites Team can focus on the 2 Country Parks and 21 Countryside Heritage Sites that we have

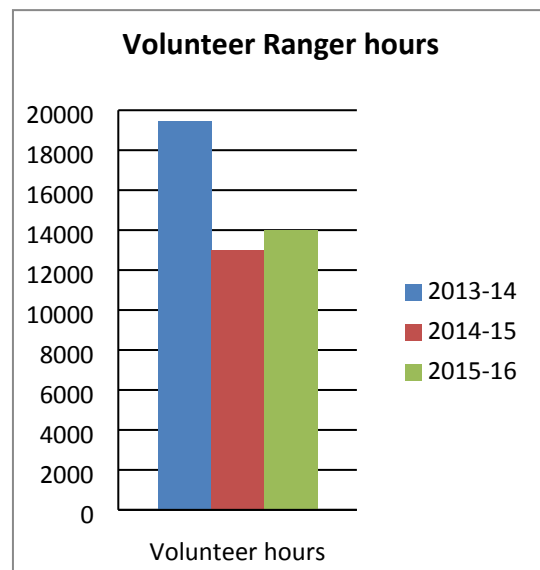
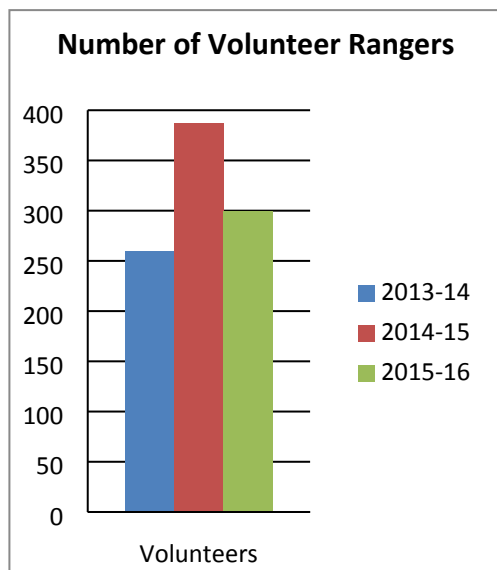


retained. These are those larger sites, which have more complicated management requirements due to natural or cultural heritage designations and priorities. They are used by a range of people from beyond the local community and contribute to the local economy as well as the health or residents and visitors.

The development of volunteering on these key sites will be a priority going forward.

Key Achievements

- In 2016 there were 372 volunteers helping manage the sites, contributing an estimated 15,293 hours of volunteer time, equivalent to £118,520/an.
- At Severn Valley Country Park, where there has been more officer support, a committed volunteer team meet weekly and are integral to the successful management of the site. There are now 23 regular volunteers, making this the largest Outdoor Partnerships volunteer group across the county.
- Corporate volunteering parties have occurred at Severn Valley Country Park (others?).
- The RAF have helped with conservation tasks on Nescliffe Hill.
- The Parks and Sites are regularly used by schools, Field Studies Council and Duke of Edinburgh groups.



“I'd like to mention the great work done by countryside officer Wendy around The Mere at Ellesmere. Many thanks to her for her commitment.” Annual Survey participant

Community Payback

Outdoor Partnerships has spent the past two years working closely with Warwickshire and West Mercia Community Rehabilitation Company. In 2015/16 they contributed 9,364 hours to parks, sites and Rights of Way management, equivalent to £72,571 of labour.

A new scheme was piloted in autumn 2016 to introduce the John Muir Award to participants and their supervisors. It aimed to encourage people to discover, explore, conserve and share a ‘wild’

place, with the aspiration to encourage probationers to gain a better understanding and enjoyment of the countryside that they will take with them, possibly encouraging them to volunteer after the Community Service is complete.

During August (Long Mynd) and October (Nescliffe Hills Countryside Heritage Site) the Outdoor Partnerships team ran two pilot awards. The students learned about the geology, fauna, flora and history of the “wild places” and explored the sites with the use of map, compass and GPS.



Bridleway repair and maintenance

The students carried out conservation tasks on both sites consisting of installing gates and repairing the surface of a bridleway on the Long Mynd and clearing invasive Rhododendron on Nesscliffe Hill. The groups also produced and installed bird nesting boxes and created habitat for hibernating amphibians.

In total 23 people took part in the award to a varying degree, completing a total of 65 days. However only 11 participants achieved the required number of days to gain an award. The majority of participants entered into the spirit of the scheme but due to a variety of factors could not commit to enough sessions.

Issues

Conflict between different types of users e.g. mountain bikers, dog walkers and horse riders has caused concern on some routes and Countryside Heritage Sites.

Some antisocial/ uninformed behaviour on Rights of Way from a minority of those using the routes including some school groups and dog owners.

Finding volunteers may become more difficult and there is concern that existing volunteers may be asked to do more. People are working longer or having to look after grandchildren or other family members. The focus on community service delivery means more people will be asked to volunteer for a wider range of services. Getting younger people involved has always been an issue and is unlikely to become easier in the current financial climate.

The cycling community has been difficult to engage with since the Cycling Forum has been disbanded. This means that they are not currently represented on the Local Access Forum.

There is a lack of staff resources to co-ordinate the Volunteer Rangers due to falling staff numbers. A drop of 79 volunteers was recorded between 2015/16 and 2016/17 to date.

Reduced funding overall for Outdoor Partnerships has put pressure on the £10,000 annual grant to the Community Payback team. This, along with Outdoor Partnerships no longer managing amenity green spaces means the contract with Warwickshire and West Mercia Community Rehabilitation Company needs renegotiating.

Insufficient integration with other community priorities and agendas, such as local services, health and the local economy.

Priorities

- Find opportunities to talk to mountain biking clubs, cycling businesses and off-road cyclists to help manage Rights of Way more effectively for all users and identify opportunities to improve off-road cycling routes, in consultation with other users.
- Identify funding to improve support for Volunteer Rangers for Parks and Sites.
- Campaign to help increase understanding of Countryside Access and the Countryside Code with Town and parish Councils, schools, dog owners, off-road cyclists, horse riders and walkers.
- Renegotiation of the contract with Warwickshire and West Mercia Community Rehabilitation Company to reduce funding allocation but retain as much benefit for both parties as possible.
- Continuing to grow the Parish Paths Partnership groups and set up new groups where there is currently no coverage.
- Enable volunteers to access CAMs and be able to update database.
- Funding could be secured to increase access to the outdoors through any local grants post Brexit. The Local Access Forum needs to decide on recommendations for the Government to progress this.
- Provide support to local members and Town and Parish Councils, including specialist advice on greenspace management, Place Plan development and the opportunities to include outdoor recreation in the consideration of priorities for CIL and Section 106 funding
- Provide advice on planning applications
- Work with partners across Shropshire and cross border to encourage more effective, joined up approaches to management of outdoor recreation and volunteer co-ordination
- Co-ordinate a new Shropshire's Great Outdoors Strategy Board and other user forums
- Support any new landscape scale projects or other partnership schemes
- Work with local communities to identify priorities for ROW management and protection
- Develop new 'Friends of' groups for parks and sites and prioritise volunteer co-ordination where possible

Making Local Journeys- 'increase peoples' use of the Rights of Way network for local journeys to support a sustainable transport network'

The strategy aimed to:

- Work to integrate the implementation of the Countryside Access Strategy and the Local Transport Plan
- Take forward significant improvements to local walking and cycling networks that encourage walking and cycling for local journeys
- Improve provision, marketing and promotion of the Rights of Way network in urban areas and the associated health benefits of this physical activity

The need for more circular walking routes from urban areas has been reinforced by the results of the Annual User Survey, which has consistently shown that these are the most used routes and that there was demand for more.

Achievements

Much of the progress on this strategic aim was through the Local Sustainable Transport Fund managed by Shropshire Council, through the Local Transport Plan.

Integration with the Local Transport Plan

The provisional Local Transport Plan (LTP) 2011-2026⁴ is published on the Shropshire Council website but was not formally adopted by the Council. The policies are integrated and include priorities for the Countryside Access Strategy such as:

- Placing a high priority on walking and cycling routes used by commuters
- Improving access to stations by cycle or foot
- Assisting the development of workplace and school travel plans that encourage walking and cycling
- Improving the cycle network and encouraging cycling
- Improving access for pedestrians and encouraging walking, including Walking for Health
- Introduction of quiet lanes and safe links for horse riding

There is an agreement in place with the Highways Department to ensure tarmacked routes are maintained by them and unsurfaced Unclassified County Roads are maintained by Outdoor Partnerships.

There are some gaps however, including no mention of outdoor activities and their relevance to the visitor economy and no specific mention of encouraging walking and cycling when planning new developments.

⁴ <https://www.shropshire.gov.uk/public-and-passenger-transport/local-transport-plan/>

Shropshire Council is discussing the development of the new LTP4, however, due to other pressures, it has not been possible to identify funding to take this work forward. If this funding can be secured, the vision for the new document is that it would be a much leaner strategic overview supported by a portfolio of policy and strategy documents. The Countryside Access Strategy could be one of these. The LTP would also contain an area focus aligned to the Place Plan areas.

Improvements to local walking and cycling networks

Over the past eight years there have been considerable development of short circular routes. Outdoor Partnerships has worked with local communities to upgrade routes from market towns and some of the larger villages:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|----------|
| • Cleobury Mortimer | 22 walks |
| • Craven Arms | 5 walks |
| • Ditton Priors | 9 walks |
| • Ellesmere | 4 walks |
| • Hodnet | 7 walks |
| • Ludlow | 7 walks |
| • Much Wenlock | 6 walks |
| • Oswestry | 17 walks |
| • Pontesbury and Minsterley | 5 walks |
| • Shrewsbury | 4 walks |
| • Whitchurch | 10 walks |
| • TOTAL | 96 walks |

In addition, there have been town map boards installed in Much Wenlock, Oswestry, Cleobury Mortimer, Minsterley, Pontesbury and Whitchurch.

In total, by working with a range of partners, around 280 circular walks have been produced, with leaflets, alongside 88 linear routes. The development of these have included improvements to the urban Rights of Way network. The Walking Forums help develop and promote routes, encouraging more local use of promoted walks.

The Humphrey Kynaston Way and Shropshire Way improvements were designed to link communities and offer better off-road connections between settlements.

The Local Sustainable Transport Fund supported the development of a range of activity to help local journeys. This included:

- 78 circular cycling routes from the market towns in Shropshire, including 16 family- friendly routes.
- Distribution of 15,000 cycling leaflets
- A new 185 mile on-road route called the Shropshire Cycleway
- A new 1.5km off road cycleway alongside the main road between Pontesbury and Minsterley
- Two new family friendly routes are now available in the Meres and Mosses area
- A new off-road cycle facility at the Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre to encourage inclusive cycling

- Weekly bike bus to Meadows Primary School, Oswestry
- Three new 'Products of the Landscape' walking and cycling routes were developed by the Stiperstones and Corndon Hill Country Landscape Partnership Scheme.
- 900 people took part in led cycle rides
- 2,504 took part in led walks
- 6,833 people received journey planning advice
- 53 schools advised on travel plans

All of the walking, cycling and riding routes are now available to download on the Shropshire's Great Outdoors website.

Issues

The previous Local Transport Plan wasn't finalised and is now out of date. A bid for continued Local Sustainable Transport Fund grant was unsuccessful and there is no longer a team responsible for cycling within the Council. This means that improvements to National Cycle Routes as well as local routes are unlikely to be funded and it is unclear on the mechanism to report these issues.

Local journeys and sustainable transport do not seem to be considered a political priority for Shropshire.

Priorities

As there were so many new routes derived through the previous round of Local Sustainable Transport Funding, the priority for the next strategy is to maintain these routes rather than develop new ones. If further funding was secured within the scope of the strategy, Market Drayton and the surrounding area should be prioritised.

Parish Paths Partnerships should be encouraged to identify key routes for local people from their communities to ensure they remain well maintained and sign posted.

Outdoor Partnerships should be involved in the development of a new Local Transport Plan where appropriate.

Clarity on the maintenance of cycling routes needed within the Council.

Health and Wellbeing- *'improve people's health by encouraging more people to be active in the countryside'*

The importance of increasing activity in the outdoors has been recognised by Public Health England and Sports England. [HM Government 'Childhood Obesity' strategy recognises the health benefits of physical activity for children. 'Everybody Active, Every Day' Public Health Strategy.] The benefits have been well researched and include improvements to physical and mental health and general wellbeing. The new Sports England Strategy has a clear focus on getting inactive people active and encouraging walking as a part of 'sport'.

Whilst it is difficult to put an economic value on the improvements to physical and mental health that access to the countryside accrues, according to the 'Marches Ecosystem Assessment'⁵ published in 2016, estimates based on reduced mortality alone amount to £147 million/ an.

"Based on these assumptions it was estimated that the existence of green infrastructure in The Marches prevents about 46 deaths annually. The health benefit of reduced mortality due to 'green' exercise (walking and cycling only) was valued at nearly £147 million annually. This results in a capitalised value of almost £3.1 billion over the next 25 years."

Marches Ecosystem Assessment 2016

As outlined above, there have been at least 96 circular walks specifically developed from centres of population and around 100 cycle routes. These all help encourage people to be more active.

Outdoor Partnerships are increasingly working with Energize, the Public Health department, Adult Social Care, Help2Change and Shropshire CCG to ensure the Rights of Way network and the publically-accessible outdoor spaces are as accessible as possible to encourage health and wellbeing. The Public Health Department has funded the Walking Co-ordinators, Walking for Health and a new Shropshire Wild Teams initiative, which all help facilitate those with physical and mental health issues to access the countryside.

The strategy aimed to:

- Improve promotion of the benefits that access to the countryside brings to both mental and physical health
- Provide more outdoor recreation activities through work with Energize, Shropshire PCT and other leisure providers
- Increase the number of Walking for Health schemes and ensure the groups are sustainable
- Provide accessible, high-quality walking and cycling routes close to where people live
- Promote and encourage people to increase physical activity levels through progression into other activities
- Increase the number of people undertaking 'active' volunteering through Parish Paths Partnerships

⁵ <https://new.shropshire.gov.uk/media/2737/marches-ecosystem-assessment-2016.pdf>

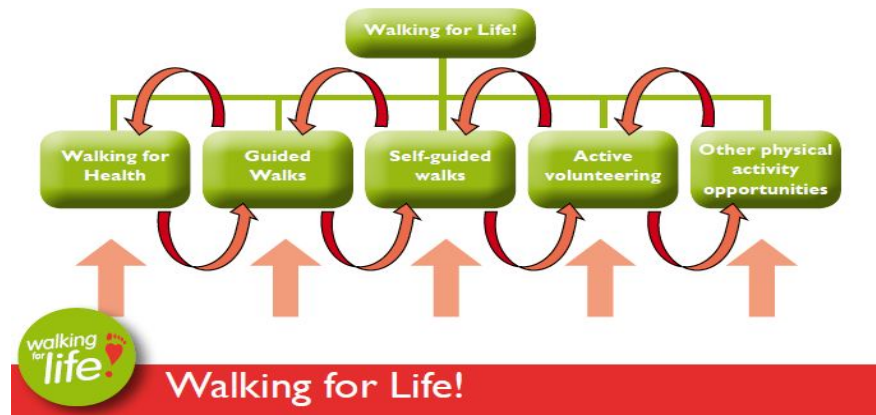
Achievements

Walking for LIFE!

The Walking for Life project was active at the beginning of this strategy and was instrumental in the development of Walking for Health, Shropshire Outdoors, the Shropshire Wild Teams and the continued focus on active volunteering.

The model is based on a providing a series of progression activities, ranging from Walking for Health, through guided walks, to self-guided walks and into active volunteering opportunities. It recognises that people's needs change over time as either they become more active or maybe need to gear down their activity with older age. Walking for Life self-guided walks leaflets can still be downloaded from the Shropshire's Great Outdoors website.

In 2016 a new partnership approach to workplace engagement has begun, working with Energize, Help 2 Change and Shropshire Wildlife Trust. Outdoor Partnerships is developing a package for businesses to develop new routes and encourage lunch time/ after work walking. This approach has yet to be tested.



The quality of routes is generally assessed through the BVPI condition survey, which is conducted annually.

Outdoor equipment and facilities

In September 2015, 6 pieces of outdoor gym equipment were installed at Birchmeadow Park, Broseley using Section 106 fund (money that is made available from local housing developments). The equipment is designed to gently work lots of different muscle groups and is perfect for people who do not feel comfortable in an indoor gym. It is already proving popular with a group of older residents in Broseley who meet at the community centre and do walks around the town and wanted a way of doing some slightly more strenuous exercise.



In March 2016, a BMX track was also installed at the park (again using Section 106 funding). The idea for this was developed following consultation with local teenagers. They were keen to get the track developed to give them a high-adrenaline way of keeping active! The track was built by Shropshire firm Clark and Kent who also built the Olympic BMX track. It is proving an extremely popular attraction with people travelling some distance to test themselves against the ramps and jumps.

Walking for Health

Walking for Health has been actively promoted by Shropshire Council for twelve years. There are currently one full time and two part time Walking Coordinators employed to lead on Walking for Health in the northern, central and southern areas of Shropshire. Funding for these posts in 2015/16 was from the Public Health Dept. Funding has been committed by the Public Health Dept. to ensure this service continues in 2016/17 but the future of the work after this point is uncertain.

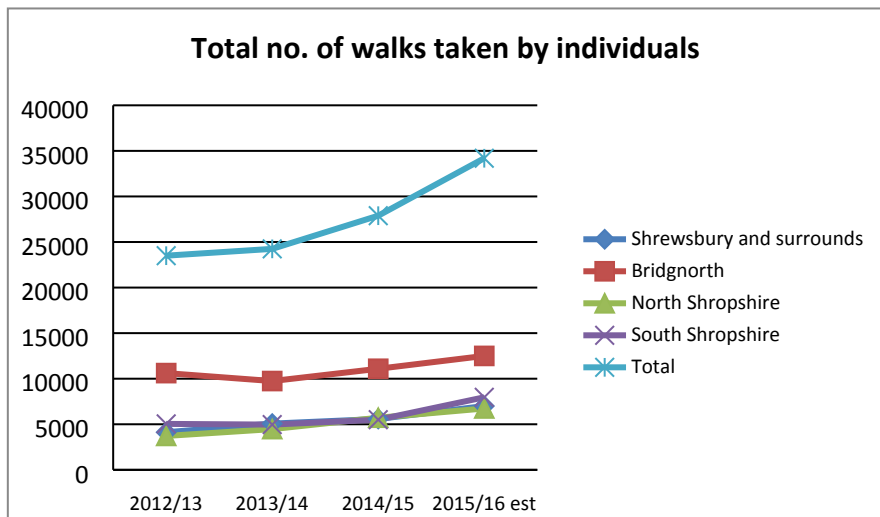
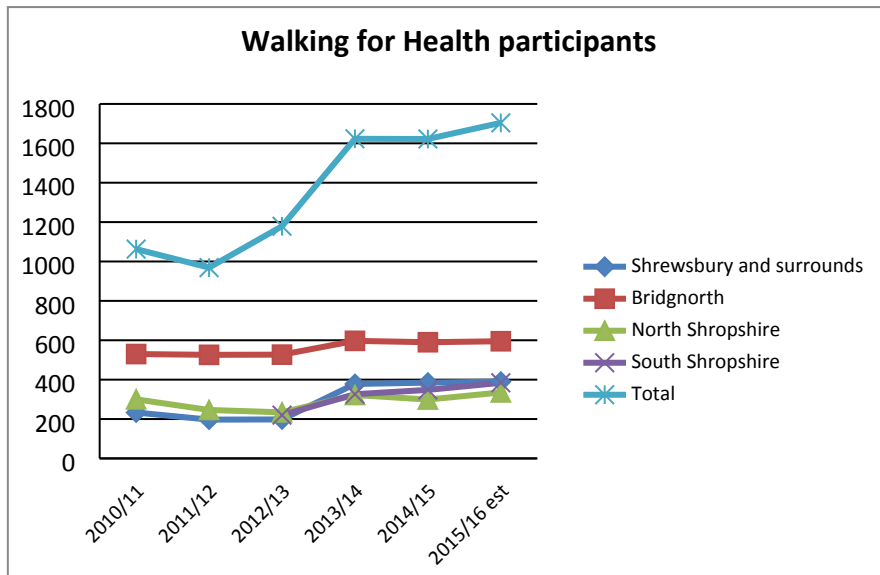


Key achievements in 2015/16

- 49 active groups throughout Shropshire
- 1,700 participants, with around 700 walking weekly
- 336 active volunteer walk leaders
- 90 new walks leaders trained
- 28% of participants joined this year, which is higher than the national average
- 14% new walkers
- 52% of participants exercising for at least 30 mins three times per week this year compared to 57% last year
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that walking with Walking for Health encourages people to do other activities during the week



Participants were most likely to be over 55 (83%) and female (63%). Only 6% were referred by a GP or health professional, so most walk of their own accord.



Ongoing support from the Co-ordinators remains important, especially for the development of Stage 1 and 2 walks, which are targeted at more inactive people, promotion of existing groups and creation of new groups.

“Before Walking for Health I was worried about getting old and infirm, but less so now as I don’t feel it is just around the corner. I am looking forward to keeping going, doing more walking and being more active.”

Walking for Health participant and Walks Leader

Shropshire Wild Teams

Shropshire Wild Teams provide volunteering opportunities in countryside management and other outdoor activities for people who most need support. The project especially caters for



people with physical disabilities and mental health issues including those receiving support from health or care services. The Wild Teams are co-ordinated by a full-time officer.

The teams travel around Shropshire’s amazing landscapes taking on projects such as:

- Ground clearance
- Habitat management
- Footpath maintenance
- Hedge laying
- Gate installation
- Wildlife survey work

Volunteers can also take part in other activities such as walking, basic map reading, natural navigation and bushcraft, including foraging and tracking skills (and any other preferences voiced within each team).

The Project Officer supports team members to develop their skills and introduces them to the network of outdoor professionals, as well as familiarising them to new landscapes and environments. As individual and group confidence builds the Project Officer will support the group to become self-sustaining, and then take a step back from direct on the ground support while the team continues to run as the local Shropshire Wild Team for their area.

Key Achievements

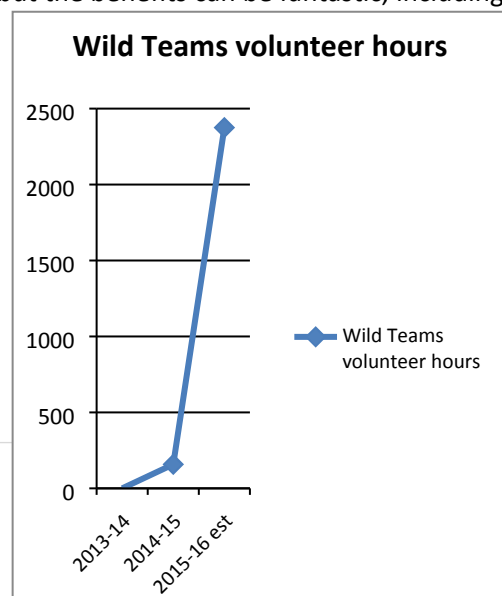
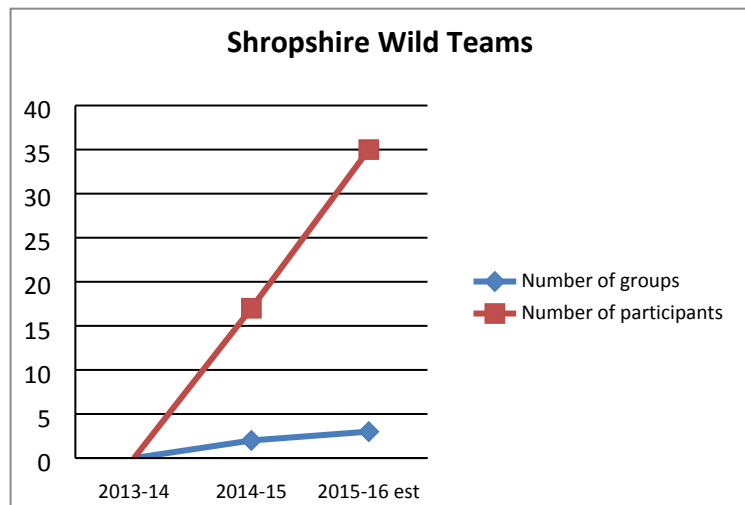
- Volunteer numbers grew to 41 in 2016/17.
- Teams run from Craven Arms, Shrewsbury and Oswestry, with another has been introduced in Bridgnorth.
- The number of volunteer hours committed to the Wild Teams has increased greatly in the past 12 months.

The nature of the project and the personal issues the volunteers are experiencing means the Wild Teams

are resource intensive and numbers are necessarily small but the benefits can be fantastic, including:

- Increased personal and social confidence
- Overcoming depression, anxiety and agoraphobia
- Reduction in self-harm incidents
- Skills development

The Wild Team project brings together health and conservation professionals to share skills and perspectives on the health and environmental benefits of the Wild Teams.



Chronic low motivation levels of some service users with chaotic lifestyles or relapse of others have been the primary challenges to maintaining engagement. Adverse weather conditions have a negative impact on engagement, so further new activities and locations are currently being organised with the potential for further positive outcomes.

“And a big thank you Simon to Shropshire wild team and all participants involved it is one of the best learning teams I have ever joined:) Thank you again:) And have a great weekend I am going to be out again walking which would not have happened I take some glory and glory to the wild team:) M.”

Volunteer, Craven Arms group

“Both Mr MM and Mr OR came to the Wild Team at a time when they were experiencing poor mental health. The group enabled them to experience the benefits of nature whilst also benefiting from a sense of worth by being part of a team..... Without the Wild Team their journey towards recovery would have taken a lot longer and meant that they could both be discharged from mental health services earlier.”

Support Time and Recovery Worker, Ludlow Community Mental Health Team.

I HAVE A HISTORY OF SELF HARMING, I FEEL THIS IS NOW GOING BEHIND ME AND THAT IS BECAUSE I HAVE SKILLS I UTILISE NOW TO KEEP ME BUSY AND THIS CAN NOT BE A BAD THING I ACTUALLY FEEL MORE CONFIDENT AND PHYSICALLY STRONGER I THANK SWT SO MUCH. I WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN OUT MY HOUSE WITH CURTAINS SHUT ETC AND YES FRIENDLY GOOD DAYS FOR ME WITH THIS GROUP ON DAYS OUT LEARNING, DOING AND ACHIEVING GOALS.
THANK YOU.

PS I ALSO SUFFER FROM PERIODS OF SECLUSION, I FEEL ONE THING HAS IMPROVED WITH BEING IN THE GROUP AND ITS MYSELF PROGRESSING WHICH HAS NEVER HAPPENED SINCE IVE BEEN ILL.

Healthy Shropshire for Schools

The Healthy Shropshire for Schools pilot has worked with two schools so far to encourage more regular, physical activity. The project helps schools:

- Identify routes within and around the school grounds on varying lengths or difficulty, depending on the environs of the school. These could be for the Daily Mile or for walking/running activities, geocaching, walking clubs at lunch time or after school family activities
- Improve surfaces/ gates etc. to ensure route are easily accessible
- Provide Walks Leader Training
- Create Risk Assessments and address Health and Safety concerns where possible
- Provide leaders for taster sessions of up to six led walks
- Provide descriptions and maps so families can use the routes on their own
- Suggest walking programmes

Results so far:

- St. George's school Clun: Since commencing the Daily Mile (DM) in October 2016, an average of 62 pupils and 4 staff completed the DM (total school =73 pupils) over 47 of the

possible 50 days in the autumn term. Giving a total number of activities (total attendance of 2902) by pupils over the autumn term and an average of 85% pupils participating.

- St. Leonard's school Bridgnorth: also had a whole school approach and since commencing the Daily Mile (DM) in September 2016 and by January they had completed a running total number of miles as a school of just over 17,500 miles. 20 staff take part and pupil numbers participating in the DM are 630, which over the autumn term based on the average daily attendance gives a total number of activities (total attendance over this period) by pupils of 15,144.

Positive feedback has been received from staff and pupils from both schools both expressed 'the children enjoy it.'

Issues

The current initiatives are not always used by those most in need.

Young people not regularly involved in project development, decision making, increased physical activity and practical works.

Priorities

- Support for existing and new Walking for Health schemes and Shropshire Wild Teams
- Support for existing and new active volunteering groups such as Parish Path Partnership and Volunteer Rangers
- Co-ordinate and develop work with the Community Payback teams
- Consider new ways of involving young people
- Provide a programme of events and activities and advertise those of others online and through e-newsletters
- Develop and maintain easy access routes, and all ability paths on parks and sites
- Work with schools to help encourage daily outdoor activity
- Develop a range of 'Daily Miles' on parks and sites
- Work more closely with Adult Social Care, Public Health officers and other organisations to ensure these services are made available to those who are most in need.
- Joint approach with the Health and Wellbeing Board to preventing chronic health conditions by making better use of being active outdoors.

Access for Everyone- 'increase the opportunities for hard to reach groups to access the Shropshire Countryside'

According to the MENE data 2014-15⁶, of the 29,628 visits to the countryside in Shropshire over 7 days, 5,418 (18%) of these were from someone who had a disability. This is a high percentage and reiterates the need to provide easy access.

The strategy aimed to:

- Ensure the mechanisms to improve access to the countryside are maintained and improved applying the 'least restrictive' principle
- Talk to hard-to-reach groups to understand their barriers to access and find out what would encourage them to access the countryside more
- Work to ensure that the opportunities to access the Shropshire countryside are available to everyone
- Improve policy development to embed the overall aim within the work of the Countryside Service and ensure improvements are long-term
- Incorporate the information from hard-to-reach groups regarding improved access within the Action Plans and secure additional resources to implement
- Understand the needs and interests of people with learning difficulties, mental health problems and sensory impairment and make it easier for them to participate in countryside activities
- Ensure the recommendations within the Action Plans are implemented and plans and policies kept under review

Achievements

Policy Statement 2 details the approach to providing easier access to the countryside and outlines the 'least restrictive' principle. Whilst some work has been done on this, there is more that could be achieved.

Least Restrictive Principle

A key way to ensure that there were incremental improvements to Rights of Way over time, and ensuring that they were accessible wherever possible to those with mobility problems was the development of the 'Least Restrictive Principle'. The 'Least Restrictive Principle' as a Shropshire Council policy requires that any new structures placed on rights of way are the least restrictive option possible. Stiles present an unacceptable barrier to many potential users of public paths and modern pedestrian gates should not pose any stock proofing difficulties.

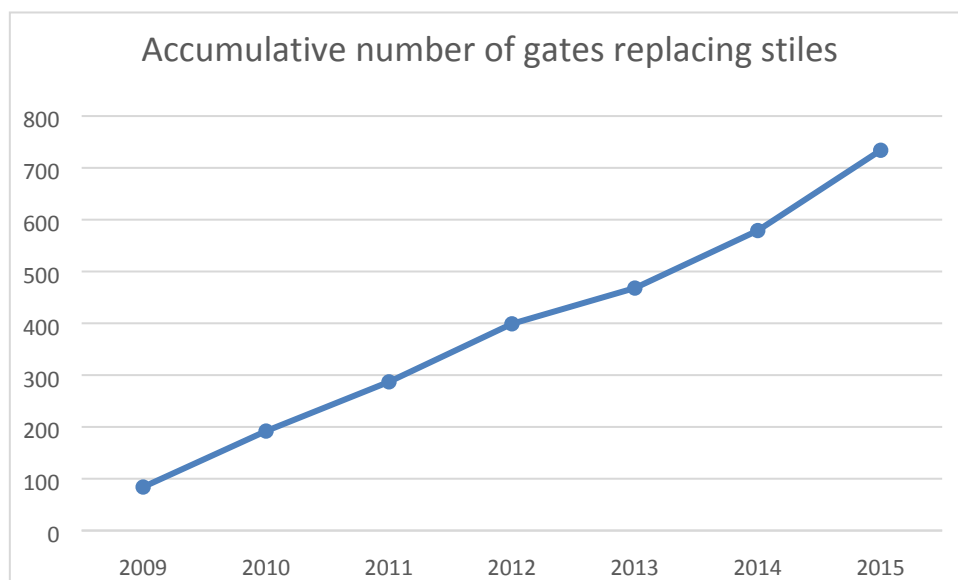
Shropshire Council requires any new barriers to be gates rather than stiles and we will encourage the replacement of existing stiles with gates. However many farmers did not like the normal metal kissing gates saying they were not stock proof. To counter this we designed and had produced a new higher kissing gate which has proved more acceptable to farmers.

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/monitor-of-engagement-with-the-natural-environment-survey-purpose-and-results>

Over the period our work in this area has increased and we have replaced around 750 stiles with gates with support from the landowners that make the network more accessible.



New high metal stock proof kissing gate



The Shropshire Outdoors Project.

Commencing in December 2007 the Shropshire Outdoors Project was developed by Shropshire Council, Shropshire PCT and Shropshire Wildlife Trust to improve health and wellbeing and to address health inequalities experienced by disabled people. The project has targeted sedentary people (such as people with learning disabilities, physical disabilities and mental health problems) and increased physical activity levels by providing 'green exercise' opportunities. Participating organisations included:

- Mental health – Mind, Community Mental Health Teams
- Adults with Learning Disability – Mencap, Shropshire Council ALD services
- Physical Disability – Shropshire Enablement Team, Headway
- Countryside – Shropshire Council, Shropshire Wildlife Trust, Natural England, National Trust, Severn Trent

- Community – Craven Arms Volunteer for the Environment (C.A.V.E), Friends of Ifton Meadows

The project allocated funds to improve access to eight countryside sites, Brown Moss, Onny Meadows, Poles Coppice, Walkmill Meadows at Market Drayton, Reabrook Valley in Shrewsbury, Ifton Meadows at St Martins, Llyncllys Common and Monkmoor Community Woodland.

The project also worked alongside 14 health and social care organisations and has involved 153 project users in 170 green exercise sessions, such as practical conservation, access maintenance work and guided walks.

The Project helped to raise awareness about disability by facilitating partnerships between countryside and health and social care organisations. Training delivered to countryside staff ensured that they could better understand and meet the needs of project beneficiaries. “Working with Vulnerable Adults” and “Understanding Barriers to the Countryside” were training courses delivered by project beneficiaries and by partners, Shropshire Council and Disabled Holiday Information.



Shropshire Outdoors Project – Volunteers working alongside our Access Maintenance Team

Easy Access guide

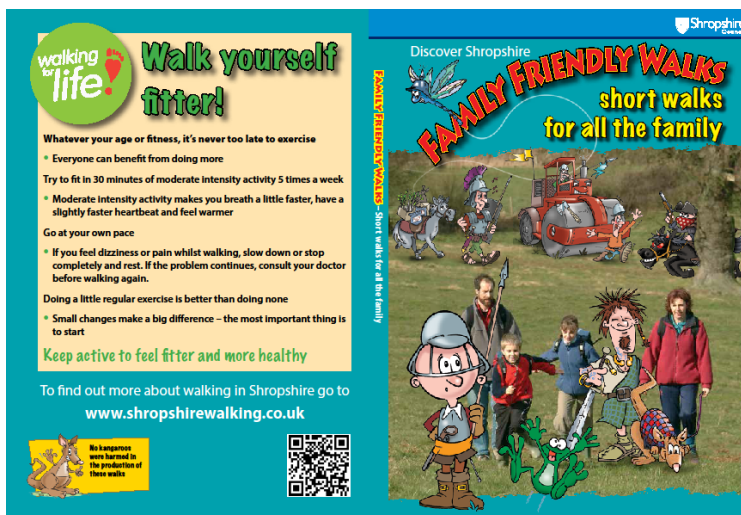
One point noted in the Annual survey was the requirement for more wheelchair friendly easy access routes.



The Outdoor Recreation countryside sites and other potential sites were surveyed by experts from the Disabled Holidays Charity and routes chosen. In total 12 walks were chosen, the paths upgraded and the guide launched in 2010. Since then 4 more all ability trails have been created at Colemere, Whixall, Bettisfield and Much Wenlock.

Family Friendly walks

Another point noted within the Strategy was that more walks aimed at families were needed and we needed to ensure more young people were engaged with the countryside. This has led to a series of 12 walks being created based around our Countryside sites and the guide book published in 2010 aimed at young families. They proved so popular that a reprint was needed in 2013.



Severn Valley Country Park has a walk designed specifically for those with sight loss but is also suitable for those in a wheelchair or for people with pushchairs. The path around a wildlife pond is tarmacked and has boards at the edge to help those using a white cane and has recently been upgraded. There is also an accessible bird hide looking out over the wetland area of the park.

The Country Parks and Heritage Sites have a range of easy access routes and facilities, which are included in the Easy Access Guide and on the Shropshire's Great Outdoors website. Other walks can be found on partner sites such as The Stiperstones NNR owned by Natural England.

Issues

All ability routes are expensive to create and maintain. It is essential to ensure those that are developed are well promoted and maintained. We currently do not have the evidence to establish this.

Engagement with disabled networks and groups needs improving to establish where further developments might be necessary.

Priorities

Better engagement with disabled networks and groups, along with the Adult Social Care providers to establish future opportunities.

Monitoring of and feedback about the existing routes and facilities.

Visiting Shropshire's Countryside- 'to provide a high quality access network that supports a thriving tourism economy'

According to the 'Reconomics Plus'⁷ report published in February 2017, the impact of outdoor recreation is estimated at £17 billion each year in England and the sector accounts for almost 500,000 jobs in England.

'Marches Ecosystem Assessment'⁸ is a new report commissioned by Shropshire Local Nature Partnership in 2016, which estimates tourism is worth £1 billion to Shropshire. In a survey carried out in 2012, 80-90% of visitors gave the natural environment as their primary reason for visiting the county and a third would go walking as part of their visit. The last Shropshire Visitor Survey (2007) demonstrated that 12% of visitors specifically came to the county to walk, which would relate to walking contributing around £120 million to the economy of Shropshire, whilst a third went walking whilst they were here. The Marches Ecosystem Assessment also estimated that the total recreational value of the countryside in the Marches was £446 million. It is clear that the quality and accessibility of Shropshire's countryside is making a considerable economic contribution.

"The cultural ecosystem service 'recreation' is part of general leisure, and is not always easily distinguished from other services such as education or aesthetic appreciation. It usually refers to doing things and interacting with others. Accessible greenspace provide the settings for a wide range of human activities including walking, running, cycling, climbing and horse riding. It also provides space, for example, for picnicking or observing nature, including bird watching, and for informal relaxation. Recreational activities raise individual wellbeing and are therefore a value in itself. But there are also strong links between recreation and health benefits. The Marches tourism offers are largely based on heritage and countryside and therefore Natural Capital dependent. 'Hotspots' for countryside visits and rural activities can for example be found within the 'golden triangle' of Shrewsbury, Ironbridge Gorge World Heritage Site and Ludlow. Other popular visitor destinations include the three Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) that are found within the Marches – The Shropshire Hills AONB, The Malverns AONB and The Wye Valley AONB."

Marches Ecosystem Assessment, 2016

The strategy aimed to:

- Ensure that promoted walking, cycling and horse riding are maintained to the highest standard and have good interpretation
- Implement a higher standard of maintenance on well used, promoted routes
- Ensure that access promotion is compatible with environmental considerations and promote understanding of these aspects to visitors and providers
- Encourage local businesses to relate their services to promoted routes, to maximise economic benefit and improve facilities for businesses
- Improve the recognition of Shropshire as a destination for walking, horse riding, cycling and sustainable tourism
- Provide an increased number of promoted routes
- Provide a co-ordinated approach to access promotion that is of a high standard

⁷ <http://www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/policy/research-publications/reconomics-plus1>

⁸ <https://new.shropshire.gov.uk/media/2737/marches-ecosystem-assessment-2016.pdf>

- Develop support for walking festivals, events and guided walks

Achievements

Considerable progress has been made on all of these objectives over the past ten years.

High quality promoted routes

There are now over 280 promoted walking routes, x cycling and x horse riding routes across Shropshire. Major new or improved routes over the past eight years include:

- The Shropshire Way
- The Humphrey Kynaston Way- linear and circular routes
- The Jack Mytton Way extension
- Blue Remembered Hills Bridleway
- The series of Walking with Offa pub walks
- Walking with Offa bus walks
- Offa's Dyke Path circulars
- Oswald's Trail
- World War 1 walks series
- The Blue Remembered Hills Bridleway

Other routes are in development including those by the Stiperstones and Corndon Hill Country Landscape Partnership Scheme.

A hierarchical quality control system has been introduced and the routes that are important to visitors are amongst those prioritised for maintenance. Where possible the 'least restrictive' principle is applied, making them as easy as possible for everyone to access. A work programme has been in place for these routes and major improvements have been made to some routes that are especially popular, such as the Shropshire Way.

Environmental considerations

Special natural and cultural assets and the wider landscape have been interpreted through interpretation boards, promotional leaflets and on line to help increase understanding of the landscape and heritage and reduce any potential issues. Some especially sensitive routes, such as those across the Long Mynd have been upgraded to help reduce any potential damage to natural or heritage assets.

A number of routes are now promoted as 'car-free', train or bus routes as they are accessible by public transport. These include routes using the Shropshire Hills Shuttle buses, Heart of Wales line and buses from Shrewsbury. Information on public transport options is included in many of the walking leaflets, for example the Walking with Offa series.

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership led on the development of a Sustainable Tourism Strategy for the popular Shropshire Hills and Ludlow area [ref].

Recognition as a destination for walking, cycling and horse riding

Shropshire is now a real hotspot for Walkers Are Welcome towns. The Walkers Are Welcome UK Network is a nationwide initiative launched in 2007 to encourage towns and villages to be 'welcoming to walkers'. There are only 25 Walkers Are Welcome towns in Central England and Shropshire has 10 of these, so Shropshire is a real hub and this will be helping promote the county as a walking destination.

Walkers Are Welcome accredited towns:

- Bishop's Castle
- Church Stretton
- Cleobury Mortimer
- Clun
- Ironbridge
- Ludlow
- Much Wenlock
- Oswestry
- Wellington
- Whitchurch

A leaflet increasing awareness of Walkers Are Welcome and the towns involved was published for the Shropshire Hills in 2010⁹, followed by one for the county in 2015¹⁰.

Working with businesses

The Shropshire Way was developed in partnership with businesses and is now the flag ship route around Shropshire. The Walking with Offa pub walks series was developed to help improve business for rural pubs and cafes.

The Shropshire Hills AONB Partnership has also worked with businesses through the Shropshire Hills Buy Local Scheme to encourage better understanding of the landscape, more sustainable practices and to encourage more walking.

In 2014, the Outdoor Partnerships Team took on the management of the £2.2m EU funded Southern Shropshire LEADER Programme. The LEADER Local Development Strategy seeks to implement the six national LEADER priorities:

- Increasing farm productivity in ways which enhance natural capital;
- Developing sustainable micro and small enterprises and farm diversification;
- Building rural tourism making the most of Shropshire's assets;
- Improving rural services to support business growth and development;
- Enhancing the natural, cultural and heritage attractions of the area;
- Increasing woodland and forest productivity in ways which enhance natural capital.

⁹ <http://www.shropshirehillsaonb.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Walkers-are-Welcome-booklet.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www.shropshiresgreatoutdoors.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Shrops-Walkers-are-Welcome-final.pdf>

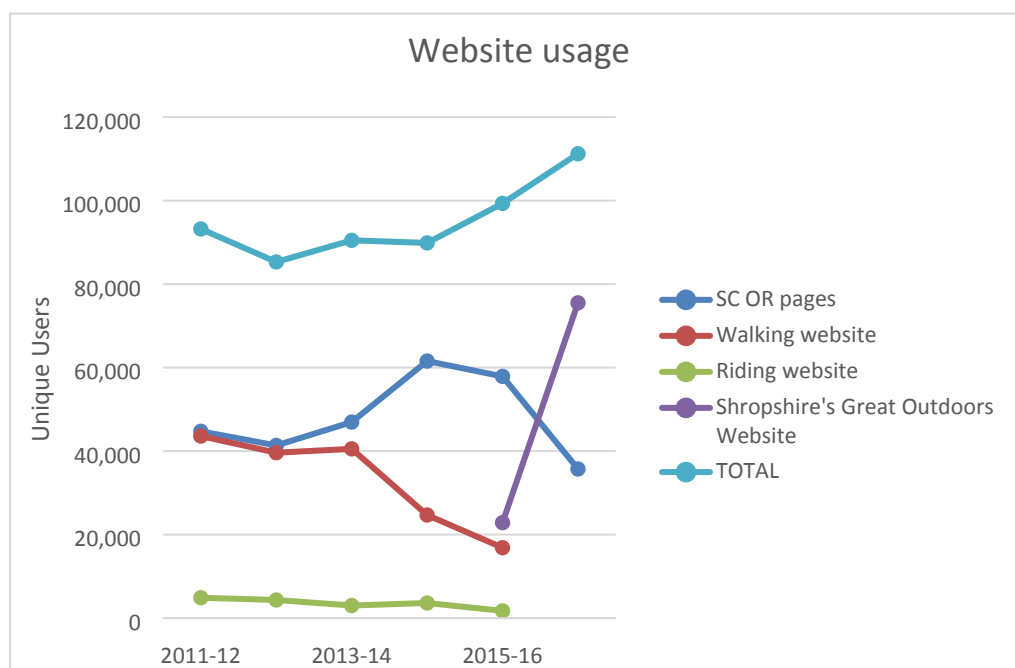
Within these priorities there are opportunities to improve access either by improvements to routes for economic benefit or through additional access improvements as part of wider applications.

Access promotion

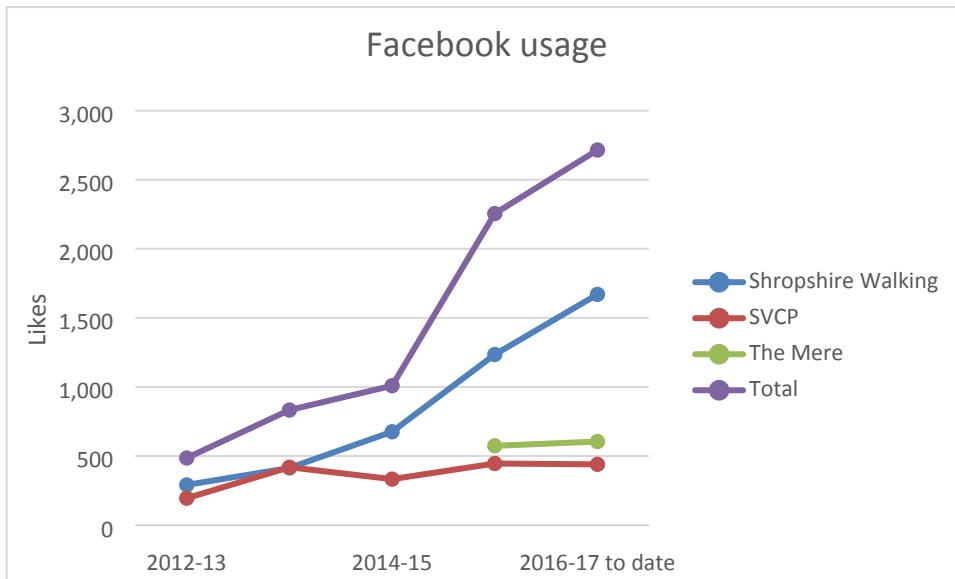
Whilst a marketing plan has not been drawn up, there has been a concerted approach to develop co-ordinated, high quality promotion. The Shropshire Walking and Riding websites have now been replaced by the Shropshire’s Great Outdoors website, which is the focus for all access opportunities in Shropshire. The aim is to work more closely with partners to better represent all publically-accessible open space.

Promotion of the county as an outdoor activity destination has improved, with some active lobbying of the walking magazines and National Press. This has led to numerous articles of the beauty of the landscape and its exceptional walking offer, two Countryfile programmes that featured Shropshire, Off The Beaten Track coverage and two TV news features. Extensive coverage of Much Wenlock in the build up to the Olympics helped raise international coverage of the county as an activity destination.

Online promotion has also improved, with the development first of the Shropshire Walking and Riding websites, which have now been replaced with the Shropshire’s Great Outdoors website- an interactive map based platform highlighting an array of promoted routes, parks and sites and ‘Top Experiences’ to encourage people to explore and appreciate the countryside. It is estimated that the number of users of the new website will be near 100,000 in 2016/17.



The importance of social media is highlighted by the increased usage of Facebook and Twitter over the past few years.



Festivals and events

Walking and other festivals and events are largely organised by volunteers, who work with their local communities to develop these initiatives. They have been highly successful, with seven of the market towns in Shropshire now having an annual walking festival and many other walking, running, riding and cycling events are held. Outdoor Partnerships has worked with these volunteers where possible to prioritise improvements on popular routes, develop new promoted routes for this purpose and promote events through websites, social media and newsletters.

A series of guided walks are held at Severn Valley Country Park. These help improve understanding of the park and are an opportunity for visitors and local people to mix.

Guided walks training has been offered through a number of projects, most recently through the Meres and Mosses Landscape Partnership Scheme. The training helps encourage volunteers and others to lead guided walks across the county. [\[results\]](#)

Issues

Whilst some work has been done, there is more progress needed to fully integrate the outdoor activity sector into the tourism and business offer for Shropshire, with more recognition of the importance of the Outdoor Economy and of access to the countryside as a driver for making Shropshire an attractive place to relocate.

Engagement with and involvement of outdoor activity and equipment suppliers has been poor and there have been few applications for Rural Development Programme funding from this sector.

The reduction in funding for the service means that high quality maintenance of promoted routes is a challenge and consolidation and improvement of the existing promoted routes should take priority over the development of new ones.

Lack of investment in some of our key assets and those managed by partners, is limiting the economic returns to the Council and relevant businesses.

There is a lack of strategic direction of the development of visitor and heritage assets as there are no current cultural or visitor economy strategies for Shropshire.

Priorities

- Be actively involved in the development of coherent visitor economy and cultural strategies for Shropshire by helping identify opportunities for Council owned green space and the Rights of Way network to act as a catalyst for business growth in the visitor economy, outdoor activities and heritage sectors for market towns. Aspirations include:
 - Revamp of the Severn Way, increasing walking and cycling opportunities along the river and development of a new Shropshire Canoe Trail, focusing on connections to businesses and communities.
 - Business opportunities at Swan Hill Depot, Ellesmere
 - Development of the Visitor Centre and a new Interpretation/ Education space at Severn Valley Country Park
 - Increased commercial activity at The Mere
 - Development of a new Country Park/ mountain biking centre at Poles Coppice/ Nils
 - Team building business development
- Work with the Marches LEP, Defra and neighbouring authorities to disseminate learning from the Southern Shropshire LEADER Programme and help inform new programmes for rural development and agritech.
- Better utilise the Southern Shropshire LEADER Programme and other funding to help the development of the access infrastructure and outdoor activity businesses.
- Work with the University Centre Shrewsbury to understand how Council managed green space and promoted routes can be used as environmental resources and help mitigate climate change impacts.
- Develop a forum for outdoor activity and heritage businesses to identify and help address barriers to business growth.
- Continue to manage and develop the Rights of Way network and Parks and Sites as part of the high quality natural environment to help shape the proposition of Shropshire as a place to live and work and support economic growth.
- Offer apprenticeship, sandwich year and/ or post-graduate placements to help retain and upskill a younger work force.
- Explore ways in which conservation and other active volunteering can help get unemployed people ready for work.
- Ensure high quality management of parks and sites, including Management Plans for all sites, securing Green Flag status for our Country Parks, Countryside Stewardship applications to ensure management for biodiversity and protection of designated landscapes – SSSI, SAM, AONB, RIGS etc.
- Support Walkers Are Welcome towns, festivals and events, where possible, through the User Forums.
- Development of multi-user routes should be a priority where possible, for example along disused railways, including a feasibility of a new multiuser route from Ironbridge to Bishop's Castle.

- Work with Canal and River Trust to develop access to and along canals.

Conclusions and Recommendations

[To add]