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| 19th February 2020 |  |
|  | Cabinet Office |
|  | Wiltshire Council |
| All Members | Bythesea Road |
| Wiltshire and Swindon Countryside | County Hall |
| Access Forum | Trowbridge |
| c/o The Secretariat | Wiltshire |
|  | BA14 8JN |
|  | Your ref: |
|  | Our ref: ROWC/WSCAF |

Dear Forum Members

Re. Wiltshire and Swindon Countryside Access Forum Formal Advice to Wiltshire Council

On 5th July 2019, Wiltshire and Swindon Countryside Access Forum chairman Nigel Linge, sent a copy of the WSCAF paper, “*Maintaining the Rights of Way Network in Wiltshire: The Need for a Post-Austerity Recovery Plan (PARP)*”, to Wiltshire Council’s Acting Director of Communities and Neighbourhood Services, David Redfern.

I should like to thank the Forum, and Nigel Linge especially, for the time and consideration that has been put into the preparation and writing of the paper, and for the courtesy extended to the officers of the Rights of Way and Countryside Service in seeking their contributions. The paper comprises formal advice from WSCAF to the Forum, to which this letter constitutes Wiltshire Council’s formal response.

There have been two meetings with Nigel to discuss the paper, to look at best practice in maximising the contribution from volunteers during what is likely to continue to be a period of financial pressures.

You will be aware that more recently, Nigel has found it necessary to step down as chairman and that Jessica Gibbons joined Wiltshire Council in November 2019 as the permanent Director of Communities and Neighbourhood Services. Jessica has now discussed the WSCAF paper with me, so I am now able to make a considered response which I hope that you will find helpful.

As the Cabinet Member responsible for this area of the council’s work, I give the paper a very warm welcome. It is very much in accord with the existing aspirations of the service.

The need for substantial financial budget savings in recent years and to prioritise even statutory duties has required expenditure on maintaining, enforcing and improving access to the countryside to be reduced. The WSCAF paper is helpful in the way that it analyses the effects and identifies that to recover the previous extent of accessibility to the countryside there is a need not just for additional financial investment, but also for different approaches to the way we work. This is especially so if we are to work towards bringing the rights of way network in particular, back to the target figure of 85% of paths in Wiltshire being in acceptable condition, which we think is realistic when taking into account the extent of the network and constantly changing circumstances on the ground.

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While the paper proposes the adoption of a post-austerity recovery plan, we cannot yet say that financial pressures are no longer a constraining factor. The challenge of securing additional financial resources remains with us, so the first steps towards recovery will come from improving the ways in which we work. Some of the changes suggested in the paper have already been implemented and others are being made:

* Revisions to the staff structure of the Rights of Way and Countryside service were finalised last summer.
* Capacity has been increased to deal with path maintenance and enforcement issues.
* Work is underway to put in place longer-term formal maintenance contracts from April this year.
* Improvements to the “MyWiltshire” App will be shortly implemented. These will improve ease of reporting, improved feedback and less time required for administration.
* A review of the extent to which we engage volunteers for activities beyond path maintenance and improvement work is underway so that there can be less impact on the time of professional officers for task organisation and supervision.
* Capacity within the Definitive Map and Highway Records team has been increased to reduce the backlog of outstanding work in this area.

To summarise, where objectives are achievable now or within the next six to twelve months, work is already underway. For some of the longer-term objectives to be able to be realised, additional funding will continue to be sought as financial restrictions ease.

Many thanks to every one of you for your support, which really is gratefully received. Yours sincerely

Cllr Bridget Wayman

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