

Draft Response to ESCC Consultation on Rights of Way and Countryside Sites for approval by the Withyham Parish Council

Q2 Please explain the main function of your organisation or group.

The role of the Parish council is to make their community a better place by:

- Representing the local residents
- Delivering services to meet local needs
- Working to improve the quality of life in the parish

In respect of Rights of Way, the Parish Council (and its Rights of Way Advisory Committee) seek to maintain and improve access to the countryside of the parish of Withyham in order to improve the health and well being of residents and visitors, by enabling them enjoy the benefits of walking, cycling and riding, and for the wider economic and social benefit of the community.

Q3 Which of the following are you actively involved with? Please select all that apply

- Forest Way Country Park
- RoW walking, riding, bicycling
- Other - Rights of way inspection and maintenance

One of our main aims is to enable countryside access and we work with a very wide range of stakeholders to achieve this. This section helps us better understand your relationship to enabling countryside access.

Q4 Which of these best describes how your organisation or group is involved with RoW and countryside sites?

	No involvement	Occasional involvement	Regular involvement	Don't know
Monitoring and management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Education	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Economic or business use (for example, farming, shooting, bike shops or ice creams vans)	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	No involvement	Occasional involvement	Regular involvement	Don't know
Health and Exercise	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Volunteering/community involvement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Enjoyment of the countryside	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Conservation	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other*	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q5 Thinking about achieving your main functions with relation to RoW and countryside sites. Do you have any regular interaction with other organisations or groups when carrying out your day to day activities?

Yes, with:

- ESCC RoW Team
- Wealden District council
- High Weald Unit
- Other parish councils
- Ramblers

Q6 Still thinking about achieving your main functions with relation to RoW and countryside sites. Please tell us which organisations or groups you think you will work with in the future when carrying out your day to day activities

For day to day activities, as Q5 above, plus:

- more parish councils
- Representative 'User groups', i.e. of walkers, cyclists and riders
- Volunteering groups and service providers

And in relation to more strategic initiatives, groups would include:

- Heritage and amenity bodies, e.g. local archaeology and history groups
- Local community organisations and businesses (groups), e.g. horticultural societies, pubs and farmers markets, and local trade associations
- Prominent bodies with interests in the parish e.g. RSPB, Forestry Commission

Q7 How important is it that people have access to the countryside?

	very important	important	neither
For education	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
For health and exercise	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
For conservation	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
For tourism	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
For local economic/business reasons	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
For personal enjoyment/interests		<input checked="" type="radio"/>	

Q8 Are there other reasons why your organisation or group feel that access to the countryside is important?

“...public rights of way are the main, if not only, method by which the public can access the countryside. In rural East Sussex they link villages and sites of interest, provide views and make an important contribution to the rural economy.” [ESCC RoW Improvement Plan]

First, we wish to re-emphasise the importance and value of public access in the areas in Q7. The economic aspect in particular was highlighted during the 4-month closure of the national RoW network because of Foot & Mouth disease 12 years ago. ESCC organised stakeholder meetings to monitor the ongoing situation, and the CLA's members led the call to re-open the network, as many of them were suffering severe financial losses due to the lack of walkers.

This remains the case. In Withyham parish we see substantial numbers of day visitors, despite few specific visitor attractions (e.g. Groombridge Place) and no single main population centre to attract them. Most therefore are drawn by the rural open space and walking; a great many come as day trippers by train from London or drive from towns such as Tunbridge Wells. They provide critical custom for our very few remaining retail businesses, now almost exclusively pubs and farm shops.

The residents too make significant use of the RoW network, at levels similar to National Parks like the Lake District, Yorkshire Dales and Peak District. Recent Department of Transport statistics show that those living in the South East region lead the nation as leisure walkers and cyclists; East Sussex leads the SE region, and Wealden (with Lewes) District, the County. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Withyham parish residents would figure high in the Wealden district.

However this engagement has potential drawbacks. Were access to be lost owing to a degrading of the RoW network, there would be a substantial negative impact on the quality of life of local community and visitors. Especially if that loss takes the form not of a relatively short-term crisis, like Foot & Mouth, but a gradual ongoing decay caused by lack of resource and strategic management.

East Sussex is defined by its rural spaces; its paths access those spaces. It is now well known that the spaces around us affect our health, how we think, feel and act. The condition of those spaces is also an important 'marker' for general well-being of a community. In same way that pot-holed roads (or litter strewn verges) and derelict public parks can both diminish a community and reveal its decline, overgrown or badly-surfaced paths, missing sign posts and broken-down stiles send strong signals to resident and visitor alike (as well as providing an insurance liability). Direct impacts are loss of visitors and income, less exercise for health, a general reduction in quality of life and so on. The associated loss of community cohesion can have more serious effects beginning with (but not confined to) increased vandalism, littering and fly-tipping.

It is essential to preserve the County's Power of Place, which outside the coastal resorts and especially in the Weald, is enabled by a functioning, well-maintained RoW network. The network is a key component in the County's tourism brand and an attraction to visitors, but also contributes to the health and general well-being of the local community. The impact of the loss of such an amenity would be more marked in an area which places a higher than average reliance on that amenity.

Q9 Thinking about what you know about encouraging people to use RoW and countryside sites, what do you think influences how people use them?

	strongly agree	agree	neither agree nor disagree
Distance to walk to the sites	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Personal transport	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Public transport	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The amount of traffic on the roads to reach the path/site	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Parking	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Disabled access facilities	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
Accessible information and	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

strongly agree agree neither agree nor disagree

maps

The condition of the path/site

Facilities (toilets, shops and food)

Attractions (outdoor activities, visitor centres, guided walks)

The amount of people using the path/site.

Time available

Level of interest

Personal impairments (for example illness or disability)

Q9a Please tell us about any other reasons

Expanding on the bullets above:

- Awareness - increasingly, especially for non-residents, people are simply unaware that the ROW network (and rural events) actually exist. ESCC used to publish an excellent list of events bi-annually called 'Exploring East Sussex', which we still receive inquiries about. This should be re-instated, at least in an on-line format. More should be done to highlight the network as a resource in general.
- Competition – there are far more leisure resources than there were and they are better publicised. Expectations have also changed and the public expects 'added value', such as links to other activities/events (see above) or easily accessed information to improve their experience.
- A single bad experience - getting lost on a walk owing to bad signage, having to detour because of a path blocked with barbed wire or, for those with personal impairments (age as well as illness or disability), poor conditions under foot or badly-maintained stiles can prove a major deterrent to any future visit.

very important neither
important

Flexibility to adapt to
changing needs

y

Q11 Are there other needs that you feel are important? If so please state them with a level of importance

The primary need is for a strong lead from the senior-local authority, ESCC, in clear recognition of the importance of the RoW network to our local economy, the County's community identity and the well-being of residents and visitors. At the very least this would be an aid in encouraging volunteers and potential external partners. In short, ESCC needs actively and publicly to pursue the objectives set out in its RoW Improvement Plan.

Specifically, ESCC needs to be seen to be acting in three areas (in order of importance):

1. Maintenance and repair: a well-resourced programme of maintenance and repair would be ideal. However, with the financial constraints in mind, there needs to be further effort to encourage and assist parishes to develop local volunteers to take on maintenance (which should reduce need for some repairs). Implicit in this are improvements to site management data, processes etc highlighted in Q10 to enable collaboration between parish and ESCC representatives.
2. Development and support: if parish authorities are to be encouraged to assist, there needs to be a differentiated strategic plan (i.e. including provision for users of the whole network not just the Honey pot locations and Promoted Paths) for support of the network. This would offer both a clear reference point and assurance to parishes in their own work; it would also assist in negotiations with grant givers and potential partners. Recognising that direct financial support (e.g. to buy tools or produce event publicity) is unlikely, ESCC should exploit its potential as a 'knowledge broker', sharing with parishes the skills of its staff and best practice from around the County, across parish boundaries, from other Counties/Central Government agencies and national bodies. This could include assistance with the preparation of grant applications. ESCC is uniquely placed to provide 'Inspiration and Education', i.e. showing parishes what is possible and supplying some the information they need to deliver.
3. Enforcement: only ESCC can do this.

Q12 As our economic environment changes most of us are looking at doing things differently. Are there other needs you think will be important in the future?

As free or low-cost activities, walking, cycling and riding for leisure and health seem likely to increase (exacerbated by the loss of leisure facilities), increasing use of the RoW network. The reduction in rural bus services (we are aware of the recent Public Transport Strategic Commissioning Strategy Consultation) may also see utility use of the network rise. This could be exploited by active

promotion of walking to re-establish it as a normal form of regular transport as well as a first class, free leisure activity. Local authorities, including parish councils, schools and voluntary organisations should encourage people in this direction. From the walkers' perspective, this depends on a reliable, usable footpath network that is safe from motorised vehicles and enjoyable to use.

Q13 Do you have any suggestions for how we could do things differently or more efficiently in the future? This includes any ideas for saving money or generating additional income to help support the RoW and countryside sites

Whatever proposals there might be for changes in ESCC staffing and resources for RoW, there urgently needs to be work:

- to engage with and utilise the experience and availability of local volunteers to help with the task of maintaining the network. Where necessary, provide training for volunteers in path inspection techniques to Council standards.
- set a base standard of path condition and maintain it with regular inspections, using volunteers where possible.

In both cases, timely maintenance to an appropriate standard is likely to stave off a costly repair, and closure of the path until the repair can be undertaken.

Continuing use of IT to build working relations with parish authorities, to share best practice from around the County and beyond, and to promote the RoW network, events and initiatives within and outside the County. Develop position as knowledge broker; parishes need help: to know what is possible, and with project development (e.g. helping write funding bids). Not only would less time be wasted by local parish members and officers laboriously reinventing the wheel and in many cases failing to complete the initiative, but it should result in a gradual development of capacity at local level which could then be shared.

Use position as 'lead local authority' to leverage resources for use at District, sub-district (i.e. multi-parish) or parish level, e.g. funding streams such as the EU's Interreg cross-border funds. A parallel example from the historic/faith buildings sector was the creation of the Historic Churches Support Officers. The national bodies of the main faith groups in partnership with national heritage bodies (English Heritage, HLF) match-funded new posts at county level to provide specialist advice and support for developments at local/parish level. Chichester Church of England diocese had one of these officers.

Q14 Do you have any further comments you would like to make about our RoW and ten countryside sites?

The RoW Team have a priority system that they use to manage the maintenance of paths. One factor is the estimated use that a path gets. If small, the path gets a low score, which in reality means that problems will never be resolved. However, there is substantial empirical evidence that once such a path is made problem-free, walkers will use it. So the whole issue of ill-maintained low-use paths becomes self-perpetuating. ESCC itself proved this in the laudable 'Paths to Prosperity' initiative in 2003. (Similar 'Catch 22' issues arise with access for those with personal impairments, especially

mobility or visual impairment. Lack of use is misinterpreted as lack of any interested users, rather than the actual reason, which is that it results from the deterrent condition of the path itself.)

We will be holding engagement sessions in February 2015. If you are interested in attending please let us know by completing the questions below. We will provide more information in January.

Q15 Are you interested in attending engagement sessions?

Yes

Q16 Would you prefer the meeting during the day or in the evening?

Evening

Q17 Which location would you prefer the meeting to be held at?

Crowborough