

REPORT OF ACCESS & RIGHTS OF WAY MANAGER

SUBJECT: THE MANAGEMENT OF THE PEMBROKESHIRE COAST PATH NATIONAL TRAIL

Purpose of Report

To update members on the management of the Pembrokeshire Coast Path National Trail and outline some of the challenges the National Park Authority faces in managing the National Trail.

Background

The National Park Authority has a long running involvement in the management of the Coast Path. The former National Park committee was responsible for the establishment of the Coast Path in the 1950s and 1960s and since its formal opening in 1970, the National Park Authority has remained the managing authority in terms of the maintenance and improvement of the Coast Path. The Coast Path is one of 15 designated National Trails in the UK. It is one of three National Trails in Wales, the other two being Offa's Dyke Path and Glyndwr's Way. National Trails were originally established as Long Distance Routes under the National Parks & Access to the Countryside Act 1949. For the most part the Coast Path runs along public rights of way and some permissive paths, with some sections running along roads and pavements in the urban areas it passes through. The Pembrokeshire Coast Path also forms part of the Wales Coast Path, which was completed in 2012.

The Coast Path is 186 miles (300km) in length with an additional 30 km of managed alternative routes at tidal crossings and military firing ranges. It is a constant feature of the Pembrokeshire coastline and one of the main ways that visitors can explore and enjoy the coastline of the national park. It is therefore an intrinsic part of the national park offer and an attraction in its own right. In terms of usage, on the basis of information provided by visitor surveys it is estimated that 1 million people use the Coast Path each year. There are also seven concealed user counters situated along the route with a total of 154,000 users recorded for 2017, showing a steady increase of 15% over the last four years. Usage tends to fall into a seasonal pattern in common with the wider tourism industry of Wales.

The maintenance and improvement of the Coast Path is funded by Natural Resources Wales (NRW) in the form of two annual grants. A dedicated National Trail Officer is funded 100% by one grant (£40K pa) and a maintenance grant covers 75% of the cost of approved routine work. The annual award of the maintenance grant is matched 25% by the National Park Authority. In 2017-18 the total cost of the maintenance of the Coast Path was £184,000. The majority of the maintenance grant is used to fund the time spent on the Coast Path by the Park Authority warden teams. The maintenance grant also funds two sections of the Wales Coast Path outside the national park at Amroth and St Dogmaels, totalling 3km.

Research demonstrates that country walking is the dominant leisure activity for visitors to Pembrokeshire, whether walking is the main purpose of the visit or an activity incidental to the stay or day trip. As such, expenditure generated directly and indirectly by the Coast Path has been variously estimated to be worth £8M to £20M to the economy of Pembrokeshire. It is also a major recreational resource for residents of the county. As well as providing opportunities for long distance walking, the Coast Path offers over 60 distinct circuit walks incorporating the wider network of public rights of way that link to the Coast Path, many of these walks are promoted on the National Park Authority website. Research shows that the majority of users walk short sections of the Trail. In recognition of this the Coast Path Challenge promoted by the Authority encourages people to walk the entire route in stages. The Coast Path also has its own dedicated website hosted by the Park Authority, with footage of the entire route on Google Streetview providing useful information on planning a walk. The Coast Path has an international profile, the National Geographic magazine voted Pembrokeshire as being the second best coastal destination in the world, Coast magazine voted it the best UK coastal path and the Pembrokeshire Coast Path was used as the model for the establishment of the Wales Coast Path which was completed in 2012.

By and large the promotion of the National Trail is not the role of the National Trail Officer but delivered by other parties. There are four websites currently promoting the National Trail: the National Park Authority website; NRW website; the Pembrokeshire County Council website and a UK National Trails website which is currently managed by a private sector company, Walk Unlimited. The NRW and UK Trails websites promote the family of National Trails in Wales, whereas the County Council and National Park Authority websites provide more detailed information for planning a walk and a booking visitor accommodation in Pembrokeshire.

The National Trail Officer undertakes a detailed survey and risk assessment of the entire route of the Coast Path each year, generating a prioritised work programme for the warden teams of the Park Delivery section. The maintenance falls into a seasonal pattern with vegetation control being the prime task between May and September, together with visitor management. In the winter months, the repair and replacement of structures, surfaces and signage is the dominant task. Along the Trail there are 475 gates, 31 stiles, 536 Signposts, 158 waymarker posts, 149 footbridges, 115 culverts and 273 runs of steps with a total of 3779 steps. In recent years over 500 stiles have either been removed or replaced with gates. This notable achievement to improve accessibility was made possible by the close working relationship between the National Park Authority and the many landowners and farmers along the coast. At the last count there were in excess of 180 separate land holdings along the Coast Path.

The key priority is to maintain the route and strike a reasonable balance between the safety of the walker and the quality of their walking experience. A Safety Statement guides the approach to risk assessment and improvements for the benefit of visitor safety. There is, however, always scope for improvement, even with such a well-established route. Improvements include re-grading and widening of path surfaces to remove narrow ruts, replacement of stiles with gates, distance and destination signage and realignments where the route is prone to coastal erosion.

Each year the National Trail Officer prepares an interim and annual report together with a funding claim and funding bid for the coming year. A costed Action Plan identifying desirable improvements is kept updated and a National Trail Quality Standards report is also submitted each year to monitor performance.

Challenges to Management

Going forward, the main challenges for the management of the Coast Path are identified as follows:

- **Funding**
The level of funding provided by NRW has fluctuated in recent years. For many years the National Trail grant covered 100% of the maintenance costs, however, this grant now only funds 75% of the maintenance costs. The National Park Authority has therefore been obliged to make up the shortfall in funding from its own revenue. At present funding is approved by NRW on an annual basis and over the last six years, the 75% contribution from NRW has averaged at £138K per annum, however, this can vary by as much as £10k from year to year making financial planning difficult. The uncertainty with regard to the future level of funding for the core activity of maintenance is a concern in the long term, especially since this is now decided on a year by year basis rather than having the security of a fixed term. At the time of writing this report NRW confirmed that the maintenance grant for 2018-19 will be £128K, a reduction of 14% on the previous year (this reflects the reduction in NRW's Grant in Aid from Welsh Government). This will require the Park Authority to accommodate the shortfall. The anticipated decline in the rate of financial support from NRW will have implications for the financial planning of this Authority in the years to come.

In previous years additional funding has been available in the form of ad hoc improvements and storm damage repairs grants. Depending on the nature of work, the intervention rate of these grants is 75%-100% of approved costs. This funding, however, is often awarded at short notice with a limited timescale for delivery. The uncertainty of the availability of this funding does not aid forward planning or the implementation of the improvements identified in the Action Plan. In the absence of any indication to the contrary the Authority has to plan on the assumption that there will be no improvements funding for 2018-19.

- **Seasonal vegetation cutting.**
Much of the Trail runs through marginal coastal slopes that are not grazed and the path verges require cutting up to three times in a season in places. Regular cutting is essential in many places to prevent fast growing verges from closing in and obstructing the Coast Path. This is achieved by six warden teams simultaneously cutting the Coast Path across the national park. This makes considerable demands on the time of the warden teams (22% of Park Delivery warden time is spent maintaining the Coast Path with vegetation cutting accounting for over half of this time). The north and west coast in particular have many bracken covered slopes where regrowth can be rapid in between cuts in the damp and humid weather conditions that usually prevail. Cutting serves to not only make the path accessible and convenient to walk

but also helps to define the path surface for safety on narrow sections in close proximity to cliff edges. The Park Authority continues to adapt the Trail so that it can be cut by self-propelled pedestrian mowers to improve efficiency, however, due to the nature of the terrain much of the Coast Path is still cut manually with brushcutters and strimmers. Contractors are used to a limited degree to supplement the warden teams but the recruitment of additional seasonal labour has always been crucial to ensuring the Coast Path remains passable in the main summer season. Seasonal wardens supplement existing teams enabling them to operate more efficiently. Clearly the task of cutting is a resource issue, directly relating to funding discussed in the above paragraph. A commitment to cutting must be maintained for the safety and quality of the visitor experience.

- Coastal erosion

This is a continuous challenge both in reacting to sudden storm events and monitoring “at risk” sections of the Coast Path and taking proactive action to realign the path before instability requires its closure and realignment of a route. A proactive programme of realignment is generally resource reliant and classed as an improvement where not considered urgent. Considerable staff time is taken up in securing agreements with the affected landowners and occupiers regarding compensation for land take, boundary alteration works and the appropriate documentation by a Public Path Creation Agreement. The last few winters have resulted in a number of unexpected coastal landslips where the Coast Path has fallen away or become undermined, necessitating a prompt response from staff of the Direction and Delivery teams. Preserving the continuity of the Coast Path is of course a priority but the recent number of incidents has placed extra demands on staff time. The vast majority of landowners co-operate readily in the reinstatement of the route and for this the National Park Authority is grateful.

- Welsh Government legislative proposals

Legislative proposals on countryside access in Chapter 4 of the Welsh Government consultation Sustainable Management of Resources if enacted, would have major implications for the Coast Path. Specifically, concerns relate to the proposals to introduce a right of cycling and horse riding on public footpaths and the extension of a right of access on foot to coastal land, which would have significant impacts and require a change in management. Few sections of the Coast Path would be suitable for the introduction of cycling and horse riding. Most of the Coast Path runs along public rights of way classified as public footpaths, these are characterised by a narrow path width often running along the cliff edge, it would not be considered safe therefore to introduce cycling and horse riding to the Coast Path. The natural surface of the path would also not sustain such usage and the enjoyment of the many thousands of walkers would be compromised as a result. The extension of access rights to coastal land would also have implications for Trail management. The extension of access rights seaward of the coast path into a potentially hazardous natural environment of cliffs and coastal slopes would be counter to the Authority’s key message of keeping to the path to stay safe and accordingly maintaining a well-defined route. The extension of access rights inland of the Coast Path would generally affect productive agricultural land and any advantages would be outweighed by problems of implementation

and an adverse impact on the Authority's relationship with coastal landowners. If the intention of this proposal is to make it easier to realign coastal paths where they are compromised by coastal erosion, then changes to rights of way legislation would be more appropriate in order to deliver swift realignments. The three National Park Authorities of Wales have responded to the Welsh Government consultation to raise concerns with regard to the above proposals, suggesting alternative solutions.

- **Mass running events**

It has been observed in recent years that the number of competitive running events is increasing, together with the size of events, with 600 competitors entering one event last year. Even overnight endurance events are now being staged. Principally our concerns are for the safety and enjoyment of other Coast Path walkers during the event, where narrow cliff edge sections are used and the impact on the path surface, which is generally maintained in its natural state. Proactive liaison with organisers on the management of events is the key to ensuring that the events do not have adverse impacts. The timing of events, selection of routes and the need to brief their competitors on the potential dangers and the fact that other people will be walking the route, are all important considerations. Many events take place without consultation with the National Park Authority so liaison with event organisers remains an important role of the National Trail Officer if we are to ensure that such activities are sustainable in the long term.

Comparisons

In terms of its National Trail designation, the South West Coast Path is the only National Trail in the UK to share the same particular challenges of the Pembrokeshire Coast Path, however, more sections of the England Coast Path are now becoming operational. The Pembrokeshire Coast Path was used as the model for the establishment of the Wales Coast Path, which was opened in 2012 and the maintenance of the Wales Coast Path is now funded on the basis of the costs of managing of the Pembrokeshire Coast Path.

Options

Much of the Coast Path is made up of public rights of way (260km/161 miles), notwithstanding its designation as a National Trail there would still therefore be a duty for the National Park Authority to maintain this linear network of coastal public footpaths under the Authority's Public Rights of Way Delegation Agreement with Pembrokeshire County Council.

Financial considerations

The National Trail entails a significant expenditure in terms of staff and budgets but is considered to be an appropriate sphere of activity for the National Park Authority, generating a proven return for the local economy and therefore justifies the Authority's contribution to the investment in its management.

Risk considerations

The commitment to maintain the National Trail presents the National Park Authority with the liability to keep the footpath network in a state of reasonable repair. The Authority meets this responsibility by undertaking an annual inspection and risk assessment of the entire route to identify remedial work and accordingly implements

annual maintenance and improvements programmes. Claims for personal injuries are very rare and this is due in part to the surface of the majority of the Coast Path being maintained in its natural state. The Country Paths User Survey 2016 demonstrated high levels of satisfaction with the standard of the Coast Path. There is clearly a need to continue to adequately resource the Coast Path and given its national status, it is appropriate that NRW meets this commitment. As noted above the declining level of their contribution has implications for the financial planning of the National Park Authority.

Compliance

The Coast Path has a significant role to play in delivering the second statutory purpose of National Parks to provide opportunities for people to enjoy the special qualities of the National Park. It also makes a contribution to the duty to foster the economic and social well-being of resident communities. In addition to being an economic asset, the Coast Path provides opportunities for healthy exercise and therefore complies with several well-being objectives of the National Park Corporate Plan, providing clear linkages to the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015.

Human Rights/Equality issues

Many sections of the Coast Path have been adapted and improved for the passage of wheelchairs and to extend the range of walking opportunities for people with mobility problems. Accessibility improvements include hard surfacing and removal of barriers such as stiles. Many improved sections of the Coast Path now feature in the Authority's Walks for All promoted routes and the Coast Path is a major resource for initiatives such as Walkability.

Biodiversity implications/Sustainability appraisal

The landscape of the Coast Path has numerous nature conservation and archaeological designations with 110km of the route affecting Sites of Special Scientific Interest and a large number of Scheduled Ancient Monuments along the route. Depending on circumstances, improvement work can therefore require consent from either NRW or Cadw. The management of the Coast Path can and does contribute to the Local Biodiversity Action Plan; for example vegetation control has been adapted to allow coastal flowers and plants to seed. There is scope for more integrated work to benefit nature conservation objectives as the coastal slope offers a substantial connective corridor for biodiversity.

Welsh Language statement

All National Trail signage and promotional material provided by the National Park Authority is bilingual, compliance with the Authority's Welsh Language Standards.

Conclusion

The Pembrokeshire Coast Path is often taken for granted by residents and visitors, however, a sustained commitment to adequately resourcing the work of the National Park Authority is essential if we are to meet the challenges outlined in this report and to ensure that the Coast Path remains an intrinsic feature of the national park and a major asset for the tourism industry of Pembrokeshire.

Recommendation

That Members note the Report.

Background Documents

National Trail Officer Annual Report 2016-17

(For further information, please contact Anthony Richards, Access & Rights of Way Manager 01646 62484 anthonyr@pembrokeshirecoast.org.uk)

Author: Anthony Richards