

Public Rights of Way – in a nutshell

South Gloucestershire Council's Public Rights of Way team has three officers each looking after an area of about 13 parishes. We are responsible for maintaining footpaths (not footways/pavements), bridleways and restricted byways for use by the public; advising on planning applications which may affect existing public rights of way or provide opportunities for new ones; doing legal work concerning adding, diverting or removing paths from the network; and liaising with landowners, developers, contractors, user groups, the public and parish councils.

Maintaining paths in a useable condition involves dealing with complaints, contacting landowners, and carrying out improvement works where needed (which can include major resurfacing, especially on bridleways). Many people do not know that broken or overgrown stiles and gates are the responsibility of the landowner, as are overhanging hedges. The Council is responsible for the surfaces of paths but does not usually own the land over which they run. We are continually in touch with landowners about the repair or replacement of worn or broken path furniture, access for surface works, or about paths which have become obstructed for a variety of reasons because, legally, it is a landowner's responsibility to keep their paths clear. However, it is the Council's policy to assist landowners subject to budget restraints. We arrange a twice yearly vegetation cut of around 250 paths in the SGC area which are the most well used and we also have a Ranger who carries out clearance work and some repairs/replacements. We rely heavily on the public and user groups to let us know about problems and it is very helpful if people are prepared to carry secateurs! We also have two very good Avon Ramblers volunteer workparties who carry out clearance and installation work on a fortnightly basis as well as internal and external contractors who carry out larger or specialist works. We are always very busy and juggle many jobs at once – endless lists of things to do and red flagged emails!

The flip side of talking to landowners about their paths is trying to help them with their complaints about irresponsible walkers; especially dog walkers who do not keep to the paths, do not pick up after their dog or allow their dogs to chase livestock. Many people do not realise that dog faeces can easily get into the food chain, either via contaminated crops or ingested by farm animals. Contaminated food crops or livestock may be rejected and cattle particularly are at risk of liver damage and the meat may be condemned. Pregnant animals that have been chased by dogs will often abort, if they are not more badly injured. This has significant financial implications for food producers and they find it frustrating that they have little protection. We make up signs for them to put up near their footpaths and in some cases we liaise with the dog wardens and the Police.

Public paths are classified as highways and have the same legal protection as roads. People often assume that if a path isn't used for a number of years it will cease to exist, or that it can be moved a few metres for convenience. However, the legal line of any path is recorded on the Definitive Map, which was created following the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act and was the subject of a process that lasted many years. The legal line prevails and no changes can be made to a path without a legal order. Although there are some disputes about whether or not a path exists or is in the right place, which generally needs to be settled by a court, these are relatively few. However, we get several applications each year for paths to be added to the Definitive Map as a result of long use, or for existing paths to be diverted. These have to go through a legal process and meet certain criteria before being submitted to a SGC Sub Committee, and can result in a public inquiry if they are controversial.

We are always happy to talk to people and answer questions so anyone who wants to know about public rights of way in the Alveston area and neighbouring Parishes can ring me (Lindsay Saunders) on 01454 868646, email rightsofway@southglos.gov.uk or visit the Council's website www.southglos.gov.uk