

Annual Parish Meeting 2025 – Footpaths Officers Report

Being the parish Footpaths Officer is akin to spending my time walking up a down escalator. I am getting somewhere, but it's a stiff uphill walk where if you stand still, even briefly, you go backwards.

A year ago, at this meeting, footpaths were only touched on briefly, so I am delighted to be asked to report this year. Since then, at which I provided an information board displaying our 12 miles of parish footpaths, while highlighting both pertinent issues and points of interest, I have spent more time on footpaths than I envisaged would be needed – which was clearly a schoolboy error on my part.

As footpaths officer I have since established and maintain a mailing list of those who are interested in the parish footpaths. It currently stands at about 35 people, to whom I write a monthly news email keeping them abreast of what is happening in respect of their public rights of way.

I use that mailing list, and the Kingland News to which I also contribute an article each month, to advertise the regular footpaths officer walks, which includes a map of the intended route, that I facilitate along our parish footpaths and surrounding C-Roads.

On average about a dozen people join me on these walks each time, which are usually on the second Saturday each month; the aim being to enjoy a pleasant walk around the parish with friendly, like-minded folk. The other advantages are easy to see; it helps keep the paths clearer, than were they not walked, and identify any maintenance issues along the way such as broken stiles or excessive growth.

Which leads me to two other initiatives I have instigated: Firstly, in October, tri-fold leaflets were printed showing my contact details, the Countryside Code and photographs taken around the parish. On the inside of the leaflet there is a map, to be used purely as a rough guide, showing the depth and breadth of all our footpaths. Placed, and replaced as needed, in the old 'phone box they are there for anyone who wants one – of the original 500 printed, I only have around 200 or so left.

Secondly, the parish council, at my request, purchased a strimmer. After producing the relevant risk assessments etc, I use it on a regular basis along the most used footpaths around Kingsland. In the last few weeks, which is perhaps typical for this time of year, I have used it for approximately 18 hours saving the parish council about £450, a figure that could easily treble over the course of the growing season.

A big win since this meeting last year was the successful submission to Herefordshire Council for a PROW grant iro £8k. While meeting the strictures of the submission was both time consuming and not a particularly easy undertaking it was, it transpired, much easier than actually trying to spend the ensuing grant.

The first step was to get agreement from the many owners of land within the parish boundary. Landowner engagement with me has been everything from fantastic, and massively empathetic, through to passive, pedantic and ghosting. (Which is defined as 'abruptly ending communication without explanation'!)

Obviously I prefer the first two descriptions rather than the latter but can't complain, it's not my land. All I ask is a fair hearing and that they meet their obligations to the law and wider local community who use the public rights of way.

To use a footpath simile, another stile I have constantly been climbing is while engaging with Herefordshire Council PROW Team. Towards the latter end of last year my attempts to contact them often went unanswered for weeks on end. When they did eventually contact me, after much prompting, the answers were often incomplete, out of date or irrelevant.

I was therefore buoyed up considerably, after attending both the Parish Council Summit and the Footpaths Officer training session recently. I was given the newly issued footpaths officers handbook and a few hand tools, which was a huge leap forward and very encouraging. I have also taken full advantage of the new online reporting system for our use.

While this new online system seems to work well, at least I get a response every time although I suspect it is a standard reply, the PROW team, sadly, seem to be as elusive as ever. I last wrote to them on 28th April, receiving a 'read receipt' reply, and despite writing twice more, on the same issues, in the intervening month I heard nothing from them – until half past four this afternoon, someone must have tipped them off!

But it's not all doom and gloom!

As I have just alluded, a lot of progress has been made in the last year considering my starting point, not least of which is the appointment of our new Lengthsman with whom I have had several constructive conversations. With parish council permission I intend purchasing our first tranche of new gates, (cost iro £3k to be reclaimed from the grant), for him to install, the cost of which will fall to us!

Thank you for listening to this report, with your agreement, of course, I intend remaining your footpath officer and hope to continually climb the down escalator on your behalf for another year.