

COTSWOLDS AONB WALKING AND EXPLORING AMBITION

Summary: (1) to update the Executive on current actions in relation to Walking and Exploring, and to pay tribute to our staff and volunteers who are making this happen, (2) to identify opportunities and future directions for this work.

Recommendations: To note the progress and discuss potential opportunities and future direction.

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Context

Walking and Exploring are a core part of the ambition of the CCB, and are reflected (amongst others) in Outcomes 12, 13 and 14 of the current Business Plan. They are also a part of our pitch for National Park status. Judging from the experience of the similar South Downs NP, walking opportunity is a key part of their offering and appeal to their local and regional populations.

The CCB Business Plan actions are regularly reviewed and progressed by the Working Group.

A summary of current actions, resources, and delivery

Resources to support the CCB ambition amount to:

- Part of the Communications Officer role
- Part of the Cotswolds Trail and Access Officer
- Supplemented by Wardens and Members input
- The Natural England Cotswolds Way Trail grant.

The grant achieves the support for the Cotswolds Voluntary Wardens, who in turn deliver the maintenance of the Cotswolds Way, through CTAP (the Cotswolds Trails and Access Partnership Board - which NE requires the CCB to have in place to manage the grant for the Cotswolds Way). This grant, which requires a minimum of 25% matched funding, funds the CTA Officer. The Cotswolds Way must be maintained to NE-set standards.

In addition, many initiatives to extend traditional access to Cotswolds walking have been piloted, including youth work, and outreach to neighbouring urban areas. The successful commercial deal to enable the Discoverer Pass and the redesign of the AONB website, all contribute to these achievements.

Alongside these significant achievements are a couple of major projects which are at the heart of the Walking and Exploring ambition, but which are not properly funded. These include the Gateways project (ten towns with new footpaths, interpretation boards and waymarks) and the huge Bathscapes project. Gateways will conclude by December, and we are awaiting an invitation to tender for the Bathscapes circular and radial pathways work.

These are excellent achievements. However it is clear to the Board members on this group that the existing staffing is inadequate for the many projects and commitments being undertaken, and these successes have relied on the dedication of those staff and of our volunteers.

Working in partnership

The CCB, AONB employees, and the Wardens, cannot begin to encourage and manage access to the 3,000 miles of Cotswolds footpaths on our own. Many other partners are engaged, some with the CCB through CTAP, and some as separate commercial enterprises. So, while the AONB website has excellent coverage of walking opportunities (<https://www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk/visiting-and-exploring/walking/>), if you google “Cotswolds walking” nearly all of the entries for several pages are for commercial companies offering walking holidays.

In addition, many third sector organisations including Cotswolds Way Association, National Trust, Ramblers, Macmillan, and our Wardens support walking including in the Cotswolds. Others offer sponsored walks especially on the Cotswold Way and our local Tourism Offices also provide information.

Recognising the reality of our current very limited resources, and of our partnership working, the CCB needs to be clear, and realistic, about what it’s offering really is, and then to adjust our focus accordingly. Failure to focus will lead to scattergun initiatives with no discernible theme and with limited impact, and our staff will struggle to cope.

What do our partners want us to uniquely contribute so as to maximise their own input? A clear lesson from the Working Group is that we should not chase sources of funding just because money might be available, bids should be part of a coherent and properly funded programme. But we also have ambitious intentions which aim to significantly expand what we achieve.

Measuring our impact

How to measure the impact of walking and exploring on the landscape, the economy, and the heritage of the Cotswolds? There is no single measure, but we do have quite a bit of information.

- In terms of available paths (c.3,000 miles) we are huge.
- In terms of website hits for long distance paths, we are second only to the South Downs Way.
- In terms of hours of support for walking both physical maintenance and education and walking leaders, in 2018/19 Wardens led 313 guided walks in the Lion programme for 4,678 walkers. Parish Wardens spent 3,529 hours patrolling 185 km of path and liaising with landowners and parishes. Over the last year 104 gates were installed to improve access and 1,133 metres of path resurfaced and revetted. 28,753 hours were spent on work party activity, with at least 60% of this time spent on access related work. Reaching a younger audience, Wardens worked with 25 schools and 555 children.
- In terms of impact on the local economy, the 2013 Cumulus economic impact study made no explicit reference to walking but identified that the very important tourism sector relied heavily on the high quality environment in the Cotswolds (the study is available to Executive and Board members).
- The addition of Google Analytics to our website will also give us much more information on, e.g. downloads of our walking route PDFs.

Suffice to say the Cotswolds for many locals and visitors alike symbolises iconic English countryside which is best explored on foot, by bike or on horseback. It is the

clear belief of the Working Group that it is this aspect of the Walking and Exploring Ambition which should be concentrated on, rather than the dry statistics.

Positioning the AONB going forwards - (1) CTAP Cotswold Trails and Access Partnership

CTAP, as an existing and mandatory vehicle, should be the route by which the CCB delivers its ambition for walking and exploring. Suggestion that some alternative or parallel structure should be created so that CCB can “own” the process fails to understand the nature of partnerships. But the Delivery Framework for CTAP does identify that the CCB as the “Lead Body” should have a representative member, and could also provide the Chair. In October the Chairman of our Working Group has been voted in as the Chairman of CTAP.

Positioning the AONB going forwards - (2) impact, income

All parts of CCB need to contribute to core funding of the AONB. However, the footpath network is open to free public access, so designing income-generator possibilities needs careful consideration. But we can take action to increase our impact. Three suggestions for discussion:

- a. All CCB projects at their inception should be challenged to adopt the walking and exploring ambition so as to encourage whole-organisation support (e.g. Evenlode Green valley project).
- b. Businesses which derive benefit from the Cotswolds Way and from Cotswolds paths - and which are referred to in CCB publications, web-sites and Gateway displays - should be required to participate in Caring for the Cotswolds, i.e. no participation = no promotion.
- c. Large sponsored events should be expected to seek a per capita contribution towards Wardens funds, and in turn, Wardens could be requested to attend such events with promotional materials.

Positioning the AONB going forwards - (3) health and social inclusion

There have been some small but excellent initiatives related to health improvement, and widening social inclusion but there are no resources within the CCB to sustain these or to roll them out. At the same time, the climate of opinion is such that these initiatives are pushing at open doors, in terms of partners being keen to engage with them. For example, “Social Prescribing” by family doctors is now widely practised in our area, and support for simple and safe walking activities in towns and villages across the Cotswolds, supported by NHS Commissioning Groups of GPs and by Health and Wellbeing Boards would be very well received.

To take these ideas further will require additional resources which our partner organisations might already have, but some core additional staffing both on footpath development and on web-site support will be required. This needs to be the basis of a funding bid. The Executive may well want to reflect on the overall balance of conservation effort compared with communications effort.

The Walking and Exploring “Brand”

It is the view of the Working Group, after several discussions, that the best branding for Walking and Exploring will work hand in hand with our CTAP partners, and the branding will also reflect the theme of Cotswolds as iconic English landscape – as reflected in poetry, literature, painting and music. While there is good information to support assertions about our walking offering, other parts of the UK have equally

important but differing contributions. It is the Working Group's view that seeking to demonstrate superiority (as opposed to excellence) over other areas risks grating with those areas, and it doesn't sit well with visitor motivations in coming to the Cotswolds.

A suggestion for a branding strapline is "England's Walking and Exploring Treasure", but other ideas would be very welcome.

Walking and Exploring Working Group
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