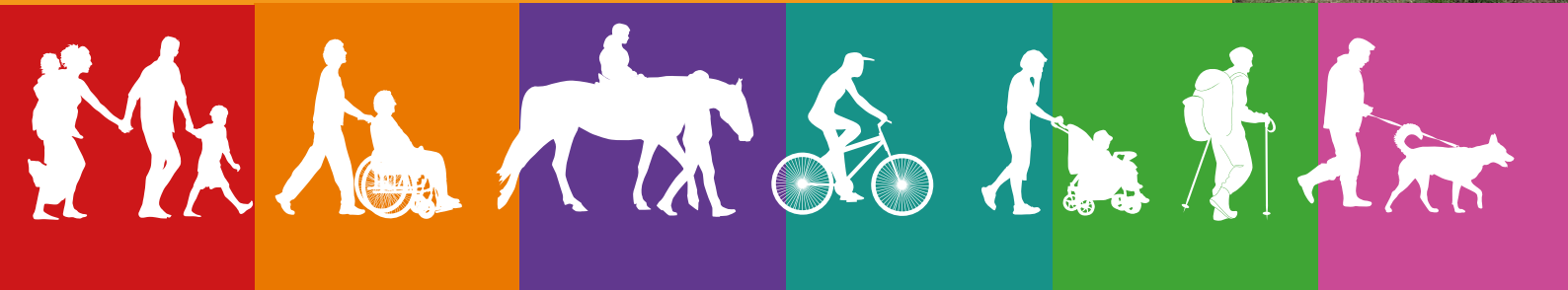


Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2025 – 2035

Final September 2025



WestBerkshire
COUNCIL



Foreword



Councillor Nigel Foot
Portfolio Holder for Culture,
Leisure, Sport and Countryside
West Berkshire Council

As Portfolio Holder for Culture, Leisure, Sport and Countryside, I am pleased to present West Berkshire Council's Rights of Way Improvement Plan. This document outlines our shared strategic vision for a more accessible, sustainable and inclusive public rights of way network—one that supports the health,

mobility, and wellbeing of all who live in, work in, or visit our district.

West Berkshire boasts over 740 miles of public rights of way, connecting our towns, villages, and countryside. These routes are not only vital for recreation and tourism but also play a growing role in sustainable transport and climate resilience. This strategy has been informed by extensive consultation with residents, landowners, user groups, and statutory partners. With over 1500 responses, it is clear how important public rights of way are to the public in West Berkshire.

Our survey revealed that 91% of people responding used public rights of way once a week or more frequently, and 40% used them every day. People value the network for many and varied reasons, including for health, relaxation, exploring nature, and engaging in hobbies and as safe off-road links. Public rights of way also play a significant role in West Berkshire's visitor economy.

Public rights of way are rooted in and valued by communities, and we will take steps to involve communities and other groups much more in the work that we do. With this improved dialogue, we can target our efforts in relevant ways, and invite communities to assist us to achieve some of the goals. We will seek to improve the accessibility of the network for people with mobility impairments of all kinds, through engaging with these groups much more than before. We also recognise the importance of education and engagement—encouraging responsible use and fostering a shared sense of stewardship.

There are actions to prioritise surface improvements and vegetation clearances more effectively, and to publicise aspects of the rights of way network and countryside in more imaginative and helpful ways. The 'green lane' routes of the network, many ancient in origin, preserve features of historical and ecological value, amongst many other aspects of interest. In an era of concern about the environment, the ROWIP seeks to protect and enhance these precious qualities.

This ROWIP is set in the context of currently available resources but is aspirational and seeks to add value by working with others. Its delivery will contribute significantly to making West Berkshire a great place to live

As we move forward, we must also be realistic about the challenges. Budgetary pressures, climate impacts, and competing land uses require us to be strategic, transparent, and community-focused in our approach. But with a clear plan and strong partnerships, we are confident in our ability to deliver meaningful improvements.

Our rights of way are not just paths through the countryside—they are pathways to wellbeing, sustainability, community and the natural environment. This strategy sets out a bold and practical vision to protect and enhance this vital network for everyone who lives in, works in, or visits West Berkshire.

I invite you to explore this strategy and join us in delivering its ambitions. Whether you are a seasoned rambler, a local landowner, or someone discovering these routes for the first time, your voice and your support are essential to making this plan a success.

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West Berkshire's Rights of Way Improvement Plan

Every local highway authority must, by law, produce a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP). This is a council's strategic document setting out its goals and priorities for public rights of way. ROWIPs must be reviewed every ten years. This is West Berkshire's second ROWIP.

Assessment of Needs

To produce a ROWIP, an assessment of the needs of the public in using public rights of way must be carried out, considering use now and in the future.

The assessment must fully consider the wider public and not just those who already use public rights of way. It must assess how public rights of way can encourage exercise and recreation and support use by those who are blind or partially sighted or have mobility problems. It must also set out a statement of action.

In reviewing West Berkshire's ROWIP a new assessment of evidence was carried out. The views of the public and a wide range of stakeholders were gathered. Stakeholder engagement undertaken included:

- **Online Public Survey**- carried out between March and May 2021 and receiving over 1500 responses;
- **Parish and Town Council Survey**- 42% of parish and town councils completed a survey between March and May 2021.
- **Elected Councillors** - West Berkshire Councillors were sent a briefing and invited to complete the public survey.
- **Landowner Survey** - an online survey for landowners was distributed by the National Farmers Union and Country Land and Business Association

- **Stakeholders** - 66 stakeholder organisations were contacted, including user and interest groups and community organisations.
- **Local Access Forum (LAF)** – The LAF was briefed on the ROWIP at all regular meetings. All West Berkshire LAF members were invited to comment, and dedicated meetings were held.

An analysis of West Berkshire's public rights of way was carried out and an extensive evidence base was reviewed. The findings are set out in two evidence reports:

- **Evidence Report 1** – Network and Needs Analysis; and
- **Evidence Report 2** – Surveys and Stakeholders Report.

About this Report

The ROWIP is set out in four themes:

- **Theme 1: Looking after Public Rights of Way**
- **Theme 2: An Evolving Network**
- **Theme 3: Healthy and Prosperous Communities**
- **Theme 4: Effective Delivery**

Priorities and Actions

There are 10 priorities for the ROWIP. Under these priorities there are 46 actions .

Summary – Main Findings and Priorities

Below are the main areas the ROWIP aims to address. These are based on what the public and stakeholders said were important and what research has revealed.

The public said that the maintenance of public rights of way is their highest priority.

Residents of West Berkshire highly value their public rights of way. They are one of the most used public assets with 91% of people using them once a week or more often. Maintaining public rights of way so that they are easy to use was the public's highest priority. They wanted paths to be clear of vegetation, structures to be in good condition and paths well signed. Landowners are key partners in this, and the council will provide support and advice to them.

The priority which delivers this is:

Theme 1 Priority 1: To protect the network and maintain it in the best condition possible, prioritising safety and areas of greatest need and seeking improvements where possible.

The second highest priority for the public was protecting existing public rights of way.

Of particular concern were negative impacts associated with development. The public wanted good outcomes from development and improvements to be secured, with new and improved routes created for a wide range of users.

The council also carries out important legal work which protects public rights of way.

The priorities which deliver this are:

Theme 2 Priority 4: Ensure that the network evolves to meet current and future needs of users and that connectivity is improved.

Theme 2 Priority 5: To uphold the council's legal duties to provide an up-to-date definitive map and statement.

Public rights of way are important for health and wellbeing. People value them highly and say they improve their quality of life. However, not everyone has the same opportunity to use and benefit from them.

Three quarters of the public said they use public rights of way to improve their health. However, disabled people, those in poorer health, younger people and those of 'non-White' ethnicity use public rights of way less. Improving the condition and accessibility of public rights of way will help more people to access them, including disabled people. More and good quality information is also important.

The priorities which deliver this are:

Theme 2 Priority 3: Ensure that access is strategically planned and delivered to meet the needs of West Berkshire's residents.

Theme 3 Priority 6: Improve the accessibility of public rights of way so that more people can use them for enjoyment, health and mental wellbeing.

Theme 3 Priority 7: Improve information provision to enable more people to use public rights of way, support the economy and reduce conflicts.

There is wide variation in the provision of public rights of way in different parts of the district. Some of the most populated areas have fewer and disconnected routes.

The difference of provision means that not everyone has the same opportunities. There are more people, fewer and more disconnected public rights of way, more traffic and poorer health outcomes in the eastern Kennet Valley and south of the district compared to the north. This has an impact on public rights of way users. Going forward, the council will need to consider how to address these inequalities.

Equestrians and cyclists in particular have to use roads to connect their journeys, especially in the parts of the district where there is more traffic.

The priorities which deliver this:

Theme 2 Priority 3: Ensure that access is strategically planned and delivered to meet the needs of West Berkshire's residents.

Theme 2 Priority 4: Ensure that the network evolves to meet current and future needs of users and that connectivity is improved.

Environmental sustainability, protecting the natural world and adapting to climate change are important in a changing world.

Sustainability and protecting the outstanding natural assets of the district are important priorities. Also important is responding to climate change and the effects it will have on public rights of way. Public rights of way also have a role to play in supporting people to make sustainable travel choices.

The priorities which deliver this are:

Theme 1 Priority 2: To improve environmental sustainability of public rights of way maintenance and contribute to environmental and climate stewardship.

Theme 2 Priority 3: Ensure that access is strategically planned and delivered to meet the needs of West Berkshire's residents.

Theme 2 Priority 4: Ensure that the network evolves to meet current and future needs of users and that connectivity is improved.

The ROWIP is ambitious. To deliver it fully will need allocation of resources, new ways of working and linking with partners with common goals.

The consultation process engaged with many organisations. Some of these were existing partners, but many were new. There was interest in working together to maximise opportunities. The existing volunteer group already delivers valuable work but there is more that can be achieved. There are also opportunities to work in partnership with parish and town councils.

The priorities which deliver this are:

Theme 4 Priority 8: Ensure that this ROWIP is resourced and delivered, and that progress is monitored and the plan reviewed.

Theme 4 Priority 9: Increase involvement and working with partners, communities and volunteers.

Theme 4 Priority 10: To continue to maintain high levels of customer satisfaction and seek ways to improve.

Delivery, Monitoring and Review

The actions in this ROWIP go beyond what is required by law for maintaining public rights of way. Some aspects of the ROWIP may be delivered using existing resources and workstreams, but additional funding will be needed to deliver many of the actions. The resources required to deliver each action are indicated in the action tables for each Theme. The following table provides an indicative guide to the resourcing required and whether the action can be delivered with current funding levels.

Key to Action Tables - Resourcing

Core business
This action covers existing core business of the Public Rights of Way Service. The action will drive improvement in delivery. Likely to be deliverable within current financial resources but delivery will be reduced if less resource is available.
£
Partially deliverable with current financial resources but additional resources will be needed to fully deliver this action.
££ - £££
Some progress may be possible but increased resources will be needed. This will be significant in some cases.

More detailed targets, based on the high-level actions in this plan, will be put forward in a Delivery Plan. These targets will be formed by reviewing the current delivery of actions, available resources and priorities. The Local Access Forum will be involved in the process of formulating the Delivery Plans.

Whilst it is not foreseen that there will be a need for a full review of this ROWIP within its ten-year timeframe, at year five the ROWIP will be assessed to ensure it continues to align with West Berkshire’s priorities and takes into account any new information. A full review will take place after ten years to assess whether the ROWIP still fulfils the purpose required and will be amended as necessary.

Access in West Berkshire

Public Rights of Way

A public right of way (PROW) is a public highway. In law, a PROW is part of, and connects with, the wider highway network. Although they are mainly in the countryside, there are public rights of way in towns and villages too. There are four types of public right of way

➔ **Public footpaths** – a public right of way only for pedestrians (including dog walkers, users of wheelchairs, mobility scooters and people with buggies);

➔ **Public bridleways** – As per public footpaths, and in addition can be used by horse riders and cyclists;

➔ **Restricted byways** – As per public footpaths and bridleways, and in addition can be used by horse-drawn carriage drivers;

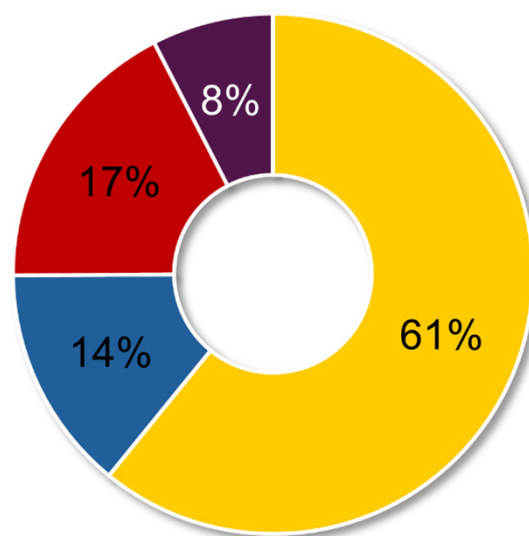
➔ **Byways Open to All Traffic (BOATs)** – a public right of way for all users, including motor vehicles.

All public rights of way together are called 'the public rights of way network'. The length of the public rights of way network is comparable with the road network. A map of the network can be found by selecting Layers/Countryside/Public Rights of Way on this map: <https://gis2.westberks.gov.uk/webapps/OnlineMap/>

There are also some paths which are allowed by landowners but are not public rights of way, known as permissive paths. They can improve the connectivity of the PROW network.

Parts of The Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails pass through West Berkshire.

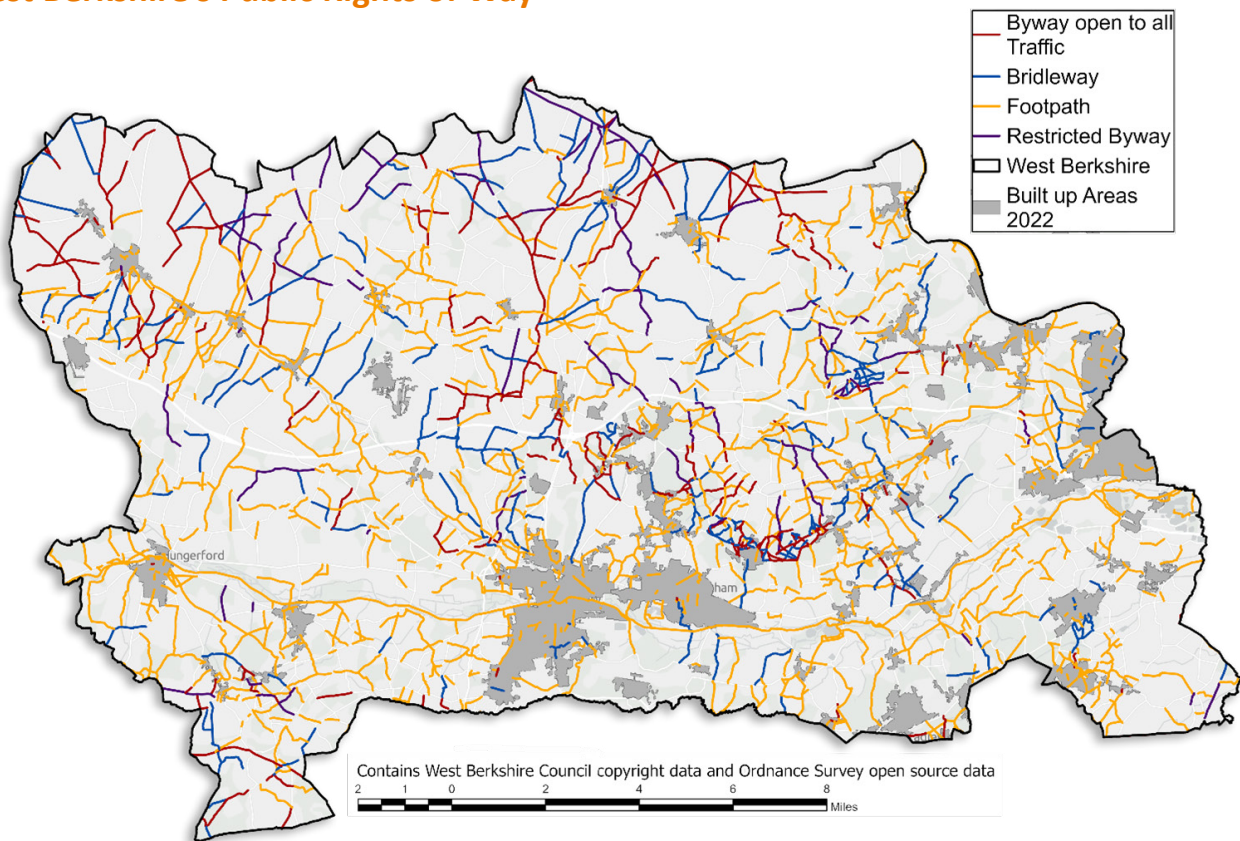
West Berkshire's Public Rights of Way



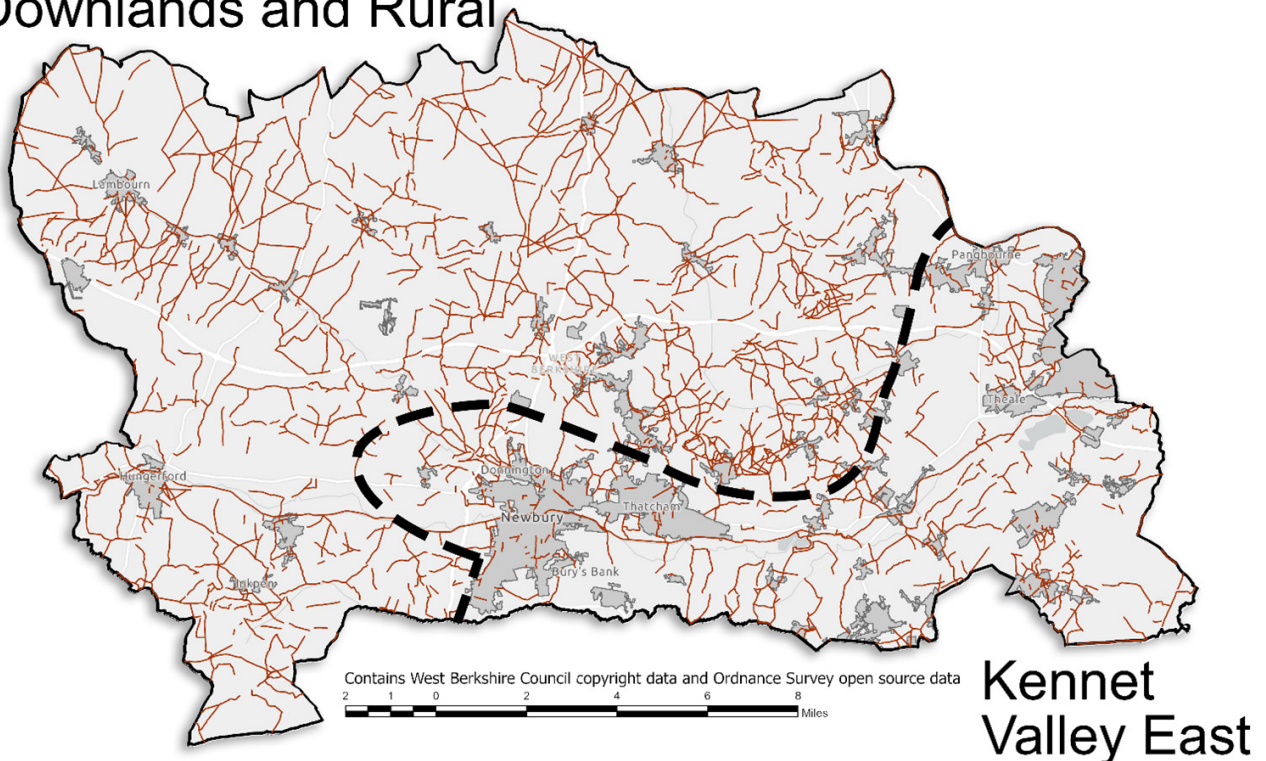
■ Footpaths ■ Bridleways
■ Byways open to all traffic ■ Restricted byways

	KM	Miles	%
Length all PROW	1192	740	100%
Footpaths	725	451	61%
Byways open to all traffic	167	104	14%
Bridleways	209	130	18%
Restricted byways	91	56	7%
Average density	1.69km per square km		
Average metres of PROW per person	7.5m		

West Berkshire's Public Rights of Way



Downlands and Rural



The density of public rights of way varies across West Berkshire. The lowest provision of public rights of way per person is in the main urban areas in Newbury, the eastern Kennet Valley, and the outskirts of Reading within West Berkshire. Those areas with a lower length of public rights of way per person potentially have more people using each route, or more 'traffic' and demand on the routes.

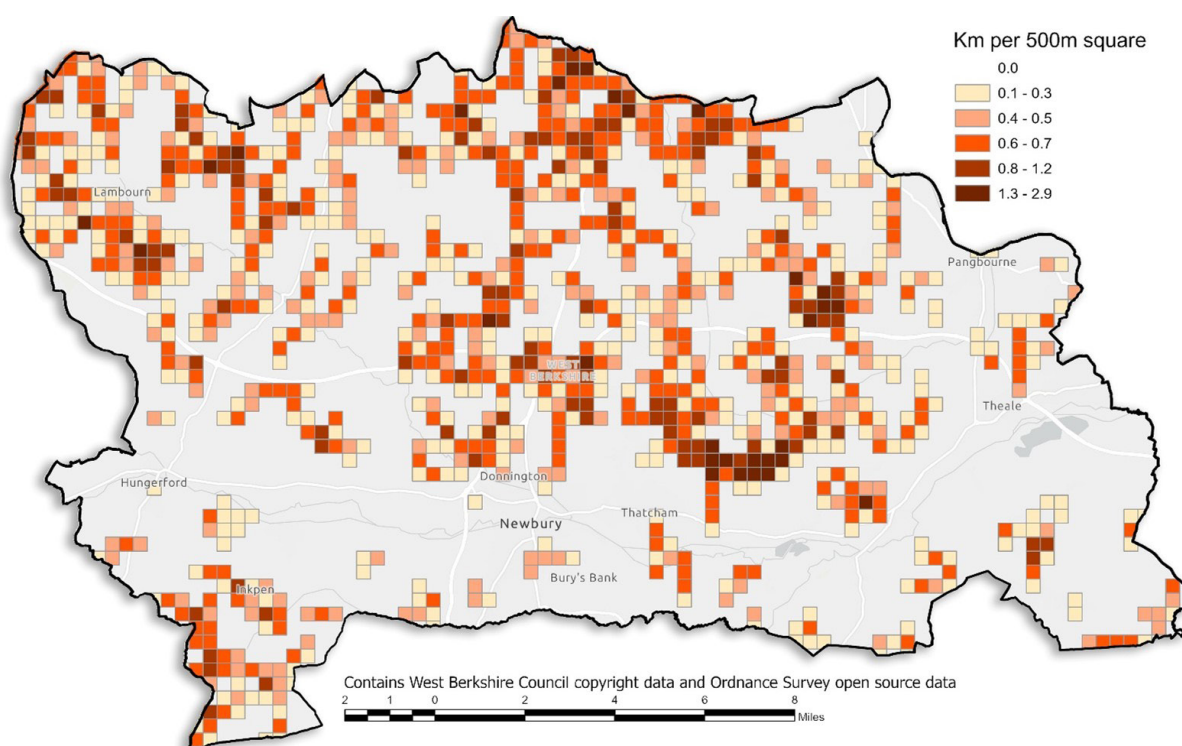
The network of bridleways, restricted byways and byways is also not evenly spread across West Berkshire. Whilst, overall, 39% of the network is made up of these types of routes, in the lower populated Ridgeway and Lambourn Wards, these types of public rights of way form over 50% of the network. There are fewer in the higher-populated Kennet Valley and urban areas and they often do not connect well. In Newbury Central, Newbury Clay Hill, Thatcham West, Theale and Tilehurst South and Holybrook Wards there are none of these types of public rights of way.

This is important, because equestrians, cyclists, carriage drivers and motorised vehicle users are not permitted to use public footpaths and the roads are busy in these parts of the district.

There are also busy major roads, such as the M4, A4 and A34 which cause breaks in public rights of way. This creates barriers to all users, but especially equestrians.

All of these factors have an impact on public right of way users.

Distribution of Bridleways, Restricted Byways and Byways Open to All Traffic



Green Spaces

There are several popular countryside sites. Whilst they are outside the scope of the ROWIP, public rights of way often cross them.

West Berkshire's only country park is Snelsmore Common. Greenham and Crookham Commons are also large publicly accessible areas. All of these are Sites of Special Scientific Interest where recreation needs to be balanced with protecting nature.

Other registered commons which are publicly accessible by walkers, and sometimes by cycles and with horses, include Hungerford Common, Bucklebury

Common, Padworth Common and Wokefield Common, amongst others.

The Nature Discovery Centre in Thatcham, a former gravel pit, offers the chance to see wildfowl and other wildlife, with a café and playground.

The Kennet and Avon Canal is a popular recreational route, with sections forming part of National Cycle Route NC4.

The public have a right of access on foot to land that is recorded as Access Land under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. In West Berkshire, this includes most Registered Commons.

Public Rights of Way Users

Walkers

From the 2021 survey for this ROWIP:

- **99% of people walked; and**
- **58% walked without a dog, and 41% walked with a dog.**

Sport England's Active Lives Survey (2021) showed that 90% of people in West Berkshire walked for leisure in the past year and that walking is increasing.

There are six Ramblers' Association groups in and around West Berkshire and several independent walking groups.

Increasing walking is an effective and low-cost way of increasing physical activity.

Issues affecting walkers are disconnected routes, traffic, lack of information and the condition of the paths.



Cross-field footpath through crops

Cyclists

From the survey:

- **25% of people cycled, either on a cycle path or off-road (mountain-biking).**

Cycling is popular and a wide range of people take part. Public rights of way provide traffic-free routes, which are preferred by inexperienced riders, children and family groups, as well as popularly termed 'mountain bikers'.

Cycling is only allowed on bridleways, restricted byways and byways open to all traffic. There are more of these in the north and east of the district and around Bucklebury and Hermitage. There is also a network of cycle routes, mainly in urban areas, for active travel. These are not usually public rights of way but add to routes where people can cycle.



Off-road cycling, Bucklebury Common

National Cycle Route 4 follows the Kennet Valley with much of this route traffic-free. The sections following the towpath are particularly popular.

Issues affecting cyclists are disconnected routes, increases in road traffic and inconsiderate drivers, lack of information, difficulties on shared use paths and surfaces.

Equestrians

From the survey:

- **10% of people rode horses; and**
- **1% drove horses with carriages.**

Recreational equestrianism includes horse riding (hacking) and carriage driving. Horse activities engage a high proportion of people with disabilities, women participants and participants over the age of 45.

In 2021 there were an estimated 8,719 equine passports registered in postcodes covering West Berkshire, which is above the national average. Using a conservative estimate, this equates to a £43m annual contribution to the economy.

Horse riders are only allowed on bridleways, restricted byways and byways open to all traffic. These are not evenly distributed across the district with more in the north and fewer in the south. The Kennet Valley has fewer public rights of way available for equestrians along its entire length and there are no routes at all running east to west along the valley. Roads therefore need to be used to form riding routes, but these are often busy. Routes are also disconnected where they cross busy roads, such as the A4, A34 and M4.

“Need safer routes for horse riders. When we have to use the roads it’s terrifying. People drive so fast. They just don’t think about what they may meet around the next bend”

Respondent to 2021 survey



Carriage-Driving

Issues affecting equestrians are disconnected routes, surfaces which are not suitable, poor quality equestrian gates, issues with other users causing distress to horses, e.g. dogs off lead, motorbikes, increases in road traffic and cars travelling too fast, lack of information.

Motorised Vehicles

From the survey:

- **5% used a motorised vehicle on the public rights of way network.**

Mechanically-propelled vehicle users can only use byways open to all traffic. These are concentrated in the northern and central downland areas, particularly around Lambourn, as well as Hermitage and Bucklebury.

Some users belong to the Green Lane Association, LARA (Land Access and Recreation Association), the All Wheel Drive Club and the Trail Riders Fellowship (TRF). Some of these organisations have local groups in West Berkshire. LARA, the TRF and The Ridgeway National Trail have produced good practice guides.

As well as benefits of social connection, enjoyment, challenge, and getting out into the countryside, motorised vehicle use enables those with reduced mobility to access the countryside to benefit their physical and mental health.

“I enjoy being in the fresh air meeting and greeting fellow users with a friendly response. I am 86 and disabled. I find riding my little motorcycle a joy and a reason to live, cannot walk 50 yards without discomfort. I make it my aim to put all other users at ease. My open face helmet helps people to see me better! I like seeing their faces when I tell them I’m 86!”

Respondent to 2021 survey

Vehicles on public rights of way can damage surfaces, which can make it difficult for others to use the route. Sometimes there is major or deliberate damage. Driving without due care and attention or damaging the surface is an offence.

West Berkshire Council's Public Rights of Way Vehicle Maintenance Policy sets out the approach to managing damage by motorised vehicles. Information, codes of conduct, liaison with user groups, monitoring and repair of priority routes are tried first to resolve issues. If these are not successful Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs) may be made to protect the route. There are some permanent TROs and others which close routes over the winter months. There are TROs on parts of The Ridgeway National Trail.

In the public survey concerns were raised by other users over deterioration of surfaces, intimidating behaviour and presence on paths that motorists were not entitled to use. Conversely, there were comments made from motorised vehicle users about intimidating behaviour towards them from other users and challenges over their right to legitimately use byways open to all traffic.

Issues affecting motorised vehicle users are lack of information, challenges from other users, lack of routes they can use in some areas and the condition of the paths.



Motorcyclists on a downland byway

Disabled People

Disability covers a wide range of conditions, including mobility difficulties, visual impairment, learning difficulties, neurological problems and mental health problems.

20% of people in the 2021 Census, identified themselves as being disabled. Whilst this had not changed significantly from the last Census, West Berkshire has more older people which will lead to an increase in the number of disabled people.

Disabled people and groups were consulted for the ROWIP. They related a range of barriers which deter or prevent disabled people from using public rights of way:

- Physical barriers, such as steps, steep gradients, stiles and gates;
- Lack of accessible information;
- Lack of accessible toilets;
- Lack of confidence, not feeling welcome, fear over safety or getting lost;
- Lack of convenient and accessible public transport; and
- Lack of places to rest or shelter.

“My husband is unable to come with me due to climbing stiles. He is disabled and unable to climb. Accessibility is of high importance to me.”

Respondent to 2021 survey

Minority Ethnic Groups

National research shows that people from Black and minority ethnic population are less likely to spend time in nature than the total population.

97% of people answering the 2021 ROWIP survey were White or White British, compared to 92% overall in the West Berkshire population (2021 Census). This means that other ethnic groups were less represented than in the wider population.

An interview was held with Community United in developing the ROWIP and opportunities to increase engagement with minority ethnic communities through this and other organisations was discussed.

Theme 1: Looking After Public Rights of Way



Introduction

West Berkshire's public rights of way are in high demand. The condition of public rights of way has a direct impact on the enjoyment of their many users. Most resources are therefore devoted to maintaining public rights of way to as high a standard as possible and to ensure public safety.

Maintaining Public Rights of Way

Public rights of way are public highways and, with few exceptions, are publicly maintainable. West Berkshire Council is obliged under law to maintain public rights of way to a standard that meets the requirements of the ordinary traffic of the area at all times of year.

There are many thousands of structures on public rights of way, as well as surfaces which need to be maintained and vegetation which needs to be cleared.

Maintenance responsibilities are split between the council and landowners, with whom West Berkshire works in partnership. A summary is shown in the table below, but this is not exhaustive. There is more information on maintenance on West Berkshire Council's website.

A summary of types of furniture and structures is shown in the next table, along with their condition.

Some Public Rights of Way Maintenance Responsibilities

Council responsibilities	Landowner responsibilities
Keep the surface fit for public use.	Reinstating and clearing paths crossing arable land.
Clearing surface vegetation.	Cutting back trees or hedges overhanging the path.
Make sure obstructions are removed.	Keeping the route clear of obstructions.
Maintain steps and some bridges.	Not ploughing or cropping field edge paths.
Contribute to landowner costs for replacing gates and stiles for controlling livestock.	Installing and maintaining gates and stiles for controlling livestock.
Signs where a public right of way leaves the road and waymarking along the route where needed.	Provide bridges if the need arises from the action of a landowner, e.g. widening a ditch.



A damaged byway in Enborne

Condition Survey

A condition survey of all public rights of way was carried out in 2022. A summary of the main types of furniture and structures

Summary of Infrastructure and Condition - 2022 Survey

	Total	% Satisfactory	% Unsatisfactory
Steps	129	53%	47%
Sign at Road	1781	82%	18%
Sign not Road	1103	68%	32%
Waymarkers	1139	84%	16%
Bridge	707	90%	10%
Stile	533	27%	73%
Gate	1592	76%	24%

Management Priorities

The council receives around 350 reports of problems on public rights of way every year.

West Berkshire Council currently prioritises these problems with those needing urgent attention for health and safety reasons the highest priority. Other reports are prioritised based on factors such as usage, inconvenience to the public, level of complaint, public benefit, cost effectiveness and potential for deterioration.

West Berkshire Council is working towards a more strategic approach to maintenance and improvements which will also take into account the priorities identified in this ROWIP. For example, improvements in accessibility could be prioritised around urban areas or where there is higher demand. This includes working with parish and town councils and others to identify priorities consistent with West Berkshire Council's priorities and this ROWIP.

Vegetation

Overgrown paths reduce the pleasure and ease of use of public rights of way. Overgrown paths were the most frequently encountered problem. 54% of people said they had experienced this, with the issue the highest concern for parish and town councils.

Keeping paths clear is a challenge faced every growing season. Surface vegetation is the responsibility of the council but vegetation overhanging the public right of way, and crops, are the responsibility of the landowner.

The council implements an annual vegetation clearance schedule covering routes to school and its promoted recreational routes. It also responds to reports of issues. The council will review the annual clearance schedule to ensure that the highest priority routes are included. Cost-effective ways of managing vegetation will be explored, including working with landowners and parish councils. Consideration will be made to the conservation of biodiversity and habitats in implementing vegetation management.

Signs and Waymarking

West Berkshire Council is responsible for ensuring there is a signpost where a public right of way leaves a hard surfaced road. The council may also place waymarker signs along the path to help people to follow the route.

The 2022 survey recorded 1,463 signposts next to roads, 746 other signs and 959 other waymarking signs.

The repair and replacement of signposts and waymarkers takes place during the winter when less vegetation clearance takes place. When roadside fingerposts are replaced, the council will consider adding the destination of the path.

Bridges

There is a wide range of bridges on public rights of way, ranging from simple timber bridges to complex, large span structures. West Berkshire Council maintains most bridges which are crossed

by public rights of way. The 2022 condition survey recorded 707 bridges, with 90% in satisfactory condition.

All bridges are inspected for safety on a rolling programme and any defects scheduled for repair. When replacing bridges, wherever possible, accessibility will be improved through, for example, increasing widths on footpath bridges, installing ramps and providing handrails.

Stiles, Gates and Gaps

Stiles are allowed where they are needed to control livestock. Landowners are responsible for maintaining stiles.

Stiles create difficulties for less mobile people or, if poorly constructed, able-bodied. Through consulting with stakeholders it is clear that reducing the number of stiles was a high priority for disabled people. In the public survey, 31% of all users had encountered a stile in poor condition.

Overall, there was a reduction of stiles between the 2009 and 2022 condition surveys and an increase in gates and gaps where there is no structure at all. The volunteer maintenance group has replaced at least 200 stiles with gates since 2009.



Volunteers celebrating installation of 300th gate

West Berkshire Council will continue to prioritise the removal of stiles and replacement of these with gates or gaps. Paths around urban areas and villages will be a priority.

Gates can also create difficulties and hazards for both horse and rider if they are in poor repair or do not meet recommended standards. The condition survey of 2022 showed that while only 7% of gates were unusable or unsatisfactory, 22% could be improved to make them easier to use. Where funding allows, the council will make sure any existing equestrian gates conform to the British Standard (currently BS5709:2018).

Path Surfaces

West Berkshire Council is responsible for the surface of public rights of way. Surface condition was an area of concern for both the public and parish and town.

The council should ensure the surface is in a fit state for public use, for the purpose it is used for. The council does this in line with the rural nature of most public rights of way and most are unsurfaced, which is usually suitable for users. Surfacing may not be necessary or appropriate in many countryside settings and other measures, such as drainage improvements, can resolve issues.

If the route is surfaced, care needs to be taken to ensure the surface is suitable for all users. Hard surfacing is, for example, more often needed for routes used for walking or cycling to work or school. However, whilst cyclists prefer hard surfaces, horse riders prefer more forgiving surfaces, and tarmac can be slippery for hooves.

Surface condition can also be adversely affected by use. This is particularly true in West Berkshire which has a higher than average proportion of byways open to all traffic, which can be used by motor vehicles (see Evidence Report 1).

Maintaining the surface of these public rights of way can be very costly, because a new more durable surface is often needed. In some cases the byway must be closed, usually over the winter months, to prevent unacceptable damage. A list of permanently or seasonally closed byways is listed on West Berkshire Council's website.

Ploughing and Cropping

Paths crossing arable fields should not be ploughed but, if this can't be avoided, the landowner must make sure the path is levelled and clearly marked within two weeks. The public right of way must also be kept clear through the crop. Rights of way following the edge of a field (headland) must not be ploughed under any circumstances.

The council works in co-operation with landowners to make sure they are aware of their responsibilities. Landowners are regularly contacted to remind them of their legal duties regarding paths over cropped land. Improved information recording has helped to target potential problems in advance

Working with Landowners

Landowners and managers are vital partners in the maintenance of public rights of way. In the survey for this ROWIP, all landowners who responded thought that the public rights of way on their land made a positive contribution to their local community.

To help landowners, West Berkshire Council provides advice on their rights and responsibilities, including around cropped paths, vegetation, stiles, fences and obstructions. The survey highlighted the need for continued partnership working and clear communication with the Council's Public Rights of Way Service.

West Berkshire Council further supports landowners through supplying and advising on structures and signage, through providing waymarking or other help to solve problems.

The main area of concern for landowners was irresponsible use of the countryside. All of the landowners surveyed had experienced issues with dogs off leads bothering stock and 89% had experienced issues with trespassing, littering, disturbance or damage to the nature conservation interest of their land. The need for the public to exercise responsibility alongside access rights is an important area to address in this ROWIP.

Enforcement

It is illegal to obstruct a public right of way, for example through fencing or locking a gate across it, installing unauthorised structures, reducing its width, dumping rubbish or interfering with its surface. Crops can also obstruct a public right of way if the route is not reinstated or kept clear.

Although negotiation is the preferred way to resolve issues, sometimes enforcement is needed to protect the rights of the public. West Berkshire Council prioritises the resolution of issues requiring enforcement action.

Occasionally the police will be alerted to illegal activities. West Berkshire Council also works with the police and local stakeholders to tackle illegal vehicular activity at The Ridgeway and Bucklebury Common.

Our Environmental Responsibilities

West Berkshire Council is committed to protecting and enhancing the natural environment. The Council has declared Climate and Ecological Emergencies. The measures set out in this ROWIP are consistent with the objectives of the Council's Environment Strategy, which aims to achieve Net Zero carbon emissions for Council operations by 2030, and to integrate environmental considerations into all Council activities. In 2021 the 'Biodiversity Duty' for local authorities was strengthened. The environment and climate change are considered in public rights of way management in the following ways:

- The surfacing and drainage of paths within and close to wetland and riparian designated nature conservation sites, to account for potential runoff, especially close to the Special Areas of Conservation of the Kennet and Lambourn;
- The environmental impact of vegetation management, its extent and timing, especially in relation to designated nature conservation sites; sustainable drainage;

- Managing public rights of way as functioning links in West Berkshire's green and blue infrastructure network;
- Climate change and potential environmental impacts are considered during procurement. Sustainable materials with a longer lifespan will be sourced where possible;
- The climate change impact of operational activities, including travel, use of machinery and tools;
- The maintenance of paths within and around 'honeypot' sites which are designated for nature conservation, to minimise impact and help to disperse visitor pressure;
- The environmental impact of contractors working on the council's behalf, who will also be expected to minimise environmental impacts; and
- The risk to structures from climate change impacts, particularly damage to structures and surfaces from increased flooding.

Theme 1 Priorities and Actions: Looking after Public Rights of Way

All actions must be read in conjunction with the full text of the ROWIP.

Number	Action	Resource
Priority 1: To protect the network and maintain it in the best condition possible, prioritising safety and areas of greatest need and seeking improvements where possible.		
1	Engage with landowners to support them and provide advice on the good maintenance of public rights of way.	Core business
2	Survey the condition of all public rights of way every ten years, using volunteers in between.	££
3	Ensure priority PROWs are kept clear of vegetation and keep the priority maintenance list under regular review.	Core business
4	Resolve signage defects by April each year, alternating urban and rural locations. Add destinations at strategic locations.	Core business
5	Create 1 to 3 year specific targets for dealing with unsatisfactory structures on PROWs.	Core business
6	Annually review all seasonal Traffic Regulation Orders and create management plans for the PROWs involved.	Core business
7	Promote the use of best practice for the surfacing of multi-user paths.	Core business
8	Regular checks of signage and access points to statutory open access land (CROW Act land).	Core business
Priority 2: To improve environmental sustainability of public rights of way maintenance and contribute to environmental and climate stewardship.		
9	Include environmental sustainability in all public rights of way works and plans.	Core business
10	List public rights of way within ecologically sensitive or heritage sites and create appropriate management plans.	£
11	Identify popular 'honeypot' locations and work with partners to disperse recreational pressure.	££
12	Plan measures to reduce the impacts of climate change on PROW structures and surfaces, including management of drainage.	££



Theme 2: An Evolving Network

Introduction

Change is happening all the time. The climate emergency means that changes are needed in travel choices, with a shift to sustainable travel modes. There will be new housing in West Berkshire, moving the boundary of where the countryside meets the towns and resulting in more people wanting to access the countryside. There will be an ageing population, leading to more people with a range of disabilities.

Development in West Berkshire

Making sure public rights of way are protected and new routes created through development was one of highest priorities for both the public and local councils and was raised by several stakeholders. Priorities were around the need to protect public rights of way, to plan access strategically, create new access routes, improve routes for cyclists, horse riders and disabled people. Comments were made around disruption and closures during building and increased recreational use of public rights of way around new developments due to more people.

“Consideration needs to be given to planning new rights of way alongside and as an integral part of planned new housing developments. More people enjoying the existing paths and a growing population means that erosion and deterioration of paths is occurring faster than it was a just few years ago.”

Respondent to 2021 survey

West Berkshire’s adopted Local Plan is the strategic document which sets out the framework for future development. The Local Plan proposes larger housing allocations around Newbury and Thatcham, with smaller development throughout the district.

Public rights of way are included in the green infrastructure policies of the Local Plan. These set out the need to protect and enhance green infrastructure, address deficiencies and protect against loss.

Public rights of way are an important element of green infrastructure. As part of West Berkshire's Green and Blue Infrastructure approach, recreational access will be considered strategically, including the contribution of the public rights of way network to wider access provision.

Development affects public rights of way within the development site but can also have impacts beyond the site as more people use the network. It is important to ensure that existing public rights of way are protected and enhanced. A strategic assessment of access within and around the site should be made to take into account increase use and strategic linkages.

When development takes place, the following may be sought in relation to public rights of way:

- An assessment and access plan which details provision of access within and links beyond the development site;
- Provision for the long-term maintenance of access routes;
- New access connections where these enhance the access network;
- Provision of multi-user routes – accommodating as many users as possible. This could include equestrian access in areas where there is a deficiency of this type of public right of way. Upgrades in status to accommodate new users will be sought where possible. This may mean an increased path width is required;
- High levels of accessibility to accommodate disabled people; and
- Consideration of the impact of recreational use beyond the development 'red line' and the overall access in the area. Developer contributions may be sought to improve paths which will receive higher use, make paths more accessible and provide information for users.

Active Travel

The aim of active travel initiatives is to encourage people to make more of their everyday journeys by sustainable travel modes rather than in private motor vehicles.

Active travel is taken forward by the council's Highways Service through the Local Transport Plan and the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan.

Although active travel focuses on utility journeys rather than leisure, there are overlaps between active travel and walking, cycling and horse riding for leisure. Often, in practice, active travel routes are used both for utility and recreation.

Public rights of way can form part of active travel networks as multi-user routes. They can also link into and provide circular routes from the active travel routes, providing added benefits to the investment. The Eling Way north of Newbury is an example of a successful strategic, multi-purpose route where active travel and public rights of way ambitions can align.



Eling Way

"The Eling Way is a great asset to the community."

Respondent to 2021 survey

The Kennet and Avon Canal towpath is another important route for both leisure and active travel.

“In order to reduce our carbon footprint we need to reduce car use. It is possible to commute from Thatcham and east / central Newbury to Aldermaston along the canal.”

Respondent to 2021 survey

Multi-user routes need to be well-designed to avoid user conflicts. Equestrians need to be accommodated wherever possible, especially where there is a lower level of provision, disconnected routes for these users and busy roads.

Evolving the Network for Users

Equestrians and Cyclists

The public rights of way network for equestrians and cyclists is, in some parts of West Berkshire, disconnected with a limited length of number of routes. This means that equestrians and cyclists are forced to use roads; and both are vulnerable road users. Cycling has also grown in popularity and traffic-free routes are particularly important for inexperienced and family cyclists.

The area with the smallest and most disconnected network, the eastern Kennet Valley, is also the most populated area, with more people and more traffic. It is also in this area that new development will be taking place, increasing people, traffic and recreational demand on public rights of way.

It is the aspiration of the council to connect routes for these users through creating new, suitable, public rights of way. A priority for this will be in areas of high need and demand. However, it is acknowledged that creating new routes, for example through upgrading a public footpath or dedicating an entirely new public right of way, is difficult and time-consuming. The number of projects which can be delivered within the timeframe of this ROWIP will be small. Therefore every opportunity to increase the access network should be sought.

Each potential scheme should be fully assessed and start with the assumption that it will be multi-user. However, the range of users may be limited, for example, due to width restrictions. Consideration needs to be given in the design to the suitability of surfaces, structures, bollards, widths and exits onto the road, amongst other features, to ensure that the route is suitable for many user types. It should also be assumed that routes created for active travel will also be used for recreation and this should be taken into consideration.

Additional funding will be needed for new routes. The council will secure funding through partnership working and development. The evidence of this ROWIP and further research will be taken into account when determining priority projects and areas for improvements.

Some public rights of way are dead ends, and some bridleways, restricted byways and byways change into public footpaths along their length, meaning that users cannot follow the entire length of the path. Resolving these issues will help to increase the paths available. Other routes with public access and unmetalled, unclassified country roads could also help to connect public rights of way.

Some routes end at busy roads. Equestrian crossings may be beneficial in some cases.



Users of a downland bridleway

Road verges are often part of the highway and could be used, although these users are not permitted to use footways (pavements). Whilst this may increase the areas available there may be undergrowth and concealed holes which will make them unsuitable.

More research is needed to understand the location of equestrians, where they ride and the specific issues faced. This will help to prioritise projects and will inform active travel and access linked to housing development. Suggestions for new or upgraded routes were made by stakeholders for the previous ROWIP in 2010. This remains a useful resource. The suggestions will be reviewed in liaison with equestrians.

Further information on cyclists is also needed. Data such as Strava Metro, alongside consultation with user groups, will help to understand need and demand. Cycling, including the use of electric assisted cycles, is likely to increase which will bring changes in the levels of demand. Trends will need to be assessed during the course of this ROWIP.

Disabled People

The 2022 condition survey has helped to identify where there is less accessibility for those with reduced mobility and disabled people.

Public rights of way within one mile of the main towns and larger villages were evaluated.

The analysis provides detailed information on furniture or other issues which may reduce access for those with reduced mobility. This will enable targeted improvements to be made in areas of higher demand close to where people live. It will also help to identify accessible routes which can be promoted.

Mapping Public Rights of Way

The Definitive Map and Statement

Public rights of way are covered by many areas of law. This includes around keeping records, maps and descriptions of public rights of way up-to-date and making changes to public rights of way.

The definitive map and statement is the legal record of public rights of way. The map shows all recorded public rights of way and the statement provides further details, for example widths or limitations to the rights of the public. The map, statement and orders can be viewed at West Berkshire Council offices. There is an unofficial online version of the definitive map and statement on West Berkshire Council's website.

The map and statement must be continuously reviewed and kept up to date. Periodically they are 'consolidated' to incorporate all the changes that have been made. West Berkshire's map and statement were last consolidated and published on 1 March 2019.

Making Changes

Changes can be made to the map and statement but each case needs to be evaluated and the legal procedure followed.

A Definitive Map Modification Order (DMMO) can be made to change the map and statement when there are anomalies. The evidence is evaluated and if this shows that a change is needed a DMMO can be made. This might add new rights of way; record additional rights (e.g. turning a footpath into a bridleway); remove rights; delete a right of way; or change some of the details of the route.

Public Path Orders (PPOs) are used to make changes to public rights of way. These can divert, extinguish or create public rights of way. Landowners or the public can ask for a change. The council assesses the application and if it decides it can go ahead, it carries out a consultation.

For the new route, as a principle, the council will seek the highest standard of accessibility and of infrastructure and, where possible, conformity to British Standard BS5709: 2018. The council will also expect new routes to have a sufficient width to ensure that paths are as convenient and accessible as possible for all users.

In August 2023 the Government published guidance on the diversion or extinguishment of public rights of way passing through dwellings or their land, farmyards or commercial and industrial premises. Landowners can also apply for a statement or declaration to prevent the creation of a public right of way.

The process of carrying out these changes can be lengthy and there is a charge for this service. A list of the current map modification orders can be viewed on West Berkshire Council's website.

The Deregulation Act 2015, once enacted in full, will affect the delivery of these services. Changes include more streamlined procedures for unrecorded rights and simplified order-making procedures. It may lead to more applications from landowners to change public rights of way, which may have resource implications as there will be legal timescales for response.

West Berkshire Council prefers that any new access is formally dedicated or created as part of the definitive public rights of way network or has another protected highway status. Paths permitted by landowners may however be considered where they form useful links.

Theme 2 Priorities and Actions: An Evolving Network

All actions must be read in conjunction with the full text of the ROWIP.

Number	Action	Resource
Priority 3: Ensure that access is strategically planned and delivered to meet the needs of West Berkshire's residents.		
13	Plan public rights of way work strategically alongside other council teams, e.g. Highways, Leisure, Health, Planning and Environment. Develop working partnerships to deliver projects.	Core business
14	Ensure that priorities in this ROWIP are included in relevant external plans and strategies and in Neighbourhood Development Plans.	Core business
15	Support projects to increase walking and cycling for short journeys.	£ - £££
Priority 4: Ensure that the network evolves to meet current and future needs of users and that connectivity is improved.		
16	Ensure that high-quality, multi-user access improvements are included in and around new developments, addressing the needs of the area. Ensure that maintenance of new or improved routes is secured.	Core business
17	Seek new and improved traffic-free links for pedestrians, equestrians and cyclists including road verges and permissive access. New links and improvements to be defined and listed with target completion date.	£ - £££
18	Continue to improve understanding of the need and demand of all users, exploring better use of data to identify access needs and trends.	Core business
19	Improve understanding of the needs of equestrians on the PROW network, including a review of desired improvements from the 2010 ROWIP.	Core business
20	Produce a report of all unsatisfactory equestrian gates and obstructions for equestrians. Engage with British Horse Society over priorities for resolution.	£
Priority 5: To uphold the council's legal duties to provide an up-to-date definitive map and statement.		
21	Incorporate legal changes into a new Consolidated Definitive map and Statement by 2030.	Core business
22	Incorporate Definitive Map anomalies into the annual work programmes.	Core business
23	Consider all applications for definitive map modification orders, including for the recording of unrecorded or under-recorded PROWs, and determine these in line with priority criteria.	Core business
24	Review regularly the path orders priority criteria and charging schedules.	Core business

Theme 3: Healthy and Prosperous Communities



Introduction

Public rights of way are the most extensive, free and available way that people can access the natural environment. Research for this ROWIP showed how highly people value public rights of way. It is important that everyone has the opportunity to use and benefit from public rights of way, irrespective of ability.

Supporting Health and Mental Wellbeing

Three quarters of people in the survey for this ROWIP said that health improvement was a reason they used public rights of way in West Berkshire. It was clear how valuable public rights of way are to people's wellbeing and mental health.

Whilst overall health in West Berkshire is good, there are small areas where health is poor, mainly in urban areas. There is also an ageing population which will increase levels of disability and poor health.

Making public rights of way more accessible and providing information will help more people to benefit from them. This could be for public rights of way close to where people live, in areas of poorer health or where people can use them for daily exercise.

There are Wellbeing Walks across West Berkshire for people of all abilities. There are opportunities to work with Wellbeing Walks to improve the routes used and document them so that people can use them at any time.

There are opportunities to work with partners in public health and other organisations to increase use of public rights of way to improve health, for example through green social prescribing.

“Without the use of these, many people, including myself, would never find a way out of depression. They are so important for keeping up mental wellbeing for myself and my daughter.”

Respondent to 2021 survey

Access for Disabled People

There is great diversity amongst disabled people, taking different forms and having an impact on people's lives in many ways.

It is clearly not possible for all routes and paths, even at the most visited sites, to be accessible to all people. However, adopting the 'least restrictive access' principle is important. Working towards British Standard BS5709:2018 for gaps, gates and stiles will improve accessibility of the network over time.

Gates and gaps are more accessible than stiles. Since the first ROWIP, volunteers have replaced at least 200 stiles with gates.

"Now I'm older I find stiles difficult to climb over. Kissing gates are easier and more fun! ;)"
Respondent to 2021 survey



Volunteers complete the installation of a new gate

Condition surveys will help to prioritise where actions will potentially benefit the most people. Maintenance is also important, as damaged structures or overgrown paths present difficulties to users, especially less able people.

Although many public rights of way are accessible, there are currently no routes which are promoted as being accessible to disabled people, although there are high profile paths, such as the Kennet and Avon Canal towpath, and sites, including Snelsmore Country Park, where there are paths with higher levels of accessibility.

Through consulting with stakeholders there is clear demand for more accessible routes in West Berkshire. Routes which could be made more accessible through improvements will be investigated. When planning new accessible routes, provision in the wider access network will be taken into account.

As well as accessible routes, more information needs to be provided about levels of accessibility on public rights of way. Information on surfaces, infrastructure, gradients, parking, toilets and seating can help disabled people to make their own decisions on whether the route is suitable for them before they visit. Some of this information is recorded on the council's public online map and this could be improved.

"As a disabled powerchair user with a dog walks are a vital part of our life when I am well enough to get out."
Respondent to 2021 survey

There are many stakeholders, organisations, groups and individuals who can support this area of improvement and who have already brought valuable insight into the needs of these users. Continued working with these partners will improve understanding of needs, identify routes and help access projects to be delivered.

Information Provision

In the consultation and surveys, all types of users stated that they wanted more information on where to go and routes to follow.

The way that the public find routes for outdoor recreation is changing, with an increasing proportion using specialist websites or smartphone apps rather than paper maps and guidebooks.

West Berkshire Council has, in the past, produced information on recreational routes. Some of this information is now old and out of date. The public survey also showed very low awareness and use of this promotional material, with 75% not aware of it.

The resources to update or provide promotional material are severely limited. These resources must therefore be directed to where actions will make the greatest impact and which meet identified needs. The research for this ROWIP also showed that there are many other websites and sources of information. It is not a good use of resources for West Berkshire Council to duplicate this. The priorities for information provision by the council will therefore concentrate on the priority areas identified in this ROWIP. Additional benefits to rural businesses and tourism and to raise awareness of nature and heritage will be maximised where possible. The existing promoted routes will be reviewed in line with the priorities of the ROWIP.

Priorities for Information Provision

<p>Routes on your doorstep</p> <p>Linking where people live to the routes close to them, linking town with countryside and linking villages together.</p>
<p>Accessible routes</p> <p>Information for disabled people and those who are less mobile.</p>
<p>Equestrians</p> <p>West Berkshire Council will direct users to existing promotion material for equestrians. The council will make it easier for equestrians to find information on suitable public rights of way, investigating how to provide better information through the council’s online mapping function.</p>
<p>Motorised vehicle users and trail bikes</p> <p>West Berkshire Council will make it easier for these users to find information on suitable public rights of way, and show which routes are not permitted to be used. The council will investigate how to provide better information on the council’s online mapping function. There will also be further information on responsible use.</p>
<p>Pop-up Promotion</p> <p>Short-period promotion, highlighting particular routes, areas or public rights of way improvements, seasonal interest or other areas of interest.</p>

West Berkshire Council produces several residents’ newsletters. These will be used more effectively and regularly for ‘Pop-up Promotion’ and to provide information on public rights of way, improvements made and current projects. West Berkshire Council’s social media channels will be used to highlight projects, issues and places to visit.

“Perhaps offer some sort of email service which is a newsletter with monthly information on walking/ cycling routes. A bit like a ‘what’s on’ pamphlet. It could offer information on updates to public rights of way.”

Respondent to 2021 survey

There is an existing online mapping system which shows public rights of way and infrastructure. Over time, this online mapping will be improved to enable people to find routes, find where infrastructure is located and distinguish clearly between routes suitable for different users. It could also include information on public transport, seating or other information which will help people to decide on routes.

“Promote the map of the rights of way on the west Berkshire website, it’s all there on one page, much better than leaflets etc.”

Respondent to 2021 survey

Other promotional material will be delivered when resources allow. Funding may be available through projects with partners, for example for health improvement, through the North Wessex Downs National Landscape or heritage projects.

The Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails produce their own promotional materials and the council will continue to work with the National Trail Partnerships.

Rights and Responsibilities in Accessing the Countryside

Encouraging the responsible enjoyment of the countryside recurred throughout the survey responses. All the landowners wanted improved education of the public around the Countryside Code and their responsibilities while in the countryside, this being their highest priority. When asked about improvements to promotional material, providing information to encourage responsible use of the countryside was the second highest priority for both the public and parish and town councils.

Ways to promote responsible use of the countryside will be explored further. New promotional material will contain information on the Countryside Code and responsible countryside visiting and this will be included on West Berkshire Council's website. Social media and residents' newsletters will be used to remind users of responsibilities. This could be useful to highlight seasonal issues, such as lambing, or nesting birds.

"Promotional material should be clear about the allowed use of each type of right of way. Conflict comes from lack of understanding."

Respondent to 2021 survey

The surveys revealed that there were some tensions between public rights of way users, for example between motorised vehicle and other public rights of way users. West Berkshire Council's Public Rights of Way Service policy paper on motorised vehicles prioritises actions around information provision, codes of conduct and liaison with user groups. User representative bodies have produced good practice guides for their members. The Ridgeway National Trail has also produced a leaflet and code of conduct for vehicles on The Ridgeway. There is scope for West Berkshire Council to promote responsible use and to highlight to other users where motorised vehicle users have the right to use public rights of way.

Climate and the Environment

Some of the most highly visited countryside sites are also protected for their nature conservation interest. Public rights of way have a role in spreading recreational activity and encouraging people to use other areas for some of their visits. The provision of information on routes close to home will support people in using local areas and will also benefit the environment through reducing the need to travel by private car.

"We live in a wonderful area with amazing countryside and wildlife.

These PROW allow access to people who can enjoy the natural environment and will pass on their love of nature to future generations. "

Respondent to 2021 survey

Public transport options will be considered in any information provision. Over time, this information will be added to the online mapping system.

The Public Rights of Way Service will also continue to work with West Berkshire Council Highways to increase active travel.



Footbridge on a public footpath

North Wessex Downs National Landscape

The North Wessex Downs National Landscape covers 74% of West Berkshire. It is an ancient landscape of great beauty, of sweeps of chalk downland and dramatic scarp slopes, with more intimate river valleys, woodlands and commons.

All forms of outdoor recreation are popular in the National Landscape and as well as being accessed by residents, it attracts visitors from surrounding areas to enjoy the outstanding countryside.

Since December 2023 a new duty applies to public bodies, including West Berkshire Council, to 'seek to further the purposes' of the nationally designated landscapes. This purpose is conserving and enhancing natural beauty and furthering the aims of the Wessex Downs Management Plan.

Balancing access with the need for nature conservation, protecting heritage, supporting green tourism, encouraging courteous and responsible use of the countryside, improving connectivity of routes and improved signage and information are all priorities for the National Landscape

Priorities and issues include irresponsible use of the public rights of way, including by motorised vehicles which can cause damage to historic routes. The need for more information for disabled people and greater accessibility for all, alongside an untapped potential to better support health and wellbeing is recognised by the National Landscape. Encouraging non-motorised travel, connecting routes to enable users to avoid busy roads, protecting sensitive nature conservation sites and managing tensions between access and landowner commercial interests are also priorities.

The objectives and actions in this ROWIP deliver these priorities and address the issues of the Wessex Downs Management Plan. Therefore the ROWIP furthers the purposes of the National Landscape.

A meeting was held with the National Landscape during the development of the ROWIP and joint areas of working were discussed. Opportunities for partnership working will continue to be explored during the delivery of the ROWIP.

Theme 3 Priorities and Actions: Healthy and Prosperous Communities

All actions must be read in conjunction with the full text of the ROWIP.

Number	Action	Resource
Priority 6: Improve the accessibility of public rights of way so that more people can use them for enjoyment, health and mental wellbeing		
25	Use data on infrastructure to prioritise removal of unnecessary obstacles and make surface improvements around populous areas.	£ - £££
26	Replace stiles with new easy access gates or gaps at 10 locations per year. Involve volunteers where possible.	££
27	Use data on infrastructure to prioritise accessibility improvements. Upgrade 5 structures per year to improve accessibility, e.g. bridges, steps.	£ - £££
28	Record existing accessible routes and ensure they are maintained as accessible.	££
29	Gain a greater understanding of inclusive access, including for disabled people and under-represented groups. Design suitable access provision and promotion.	££
30	Create and publicise 5 new accessible routes per year, at least one of which should be of the scale of a capital project.	£ - £££
Priority 7: Improve information provision to enable more people to use public rights of way, support the economy and reduce conflicts		
31	Include accessibility information in all new promotion.	Core business
32	Improve public mapping to show levels of accessibility, public transport, and other information so people can make informed choices.	£
33	Review existing promotional material to be consistent with this ROWIP.	£
34	Produce at least 3 promotional items each year.	£
35	Support partners in developing new promoted routes, considering in particular those with health and wellbeing needs, those in deprived communities, and the rural economy.	£
36	Encourage responsible use of the countryside via publicity and use of the Countryside Code.	Core business

Theme 4: Effective Delivery



Introduction

This ROWIP cannot be fully delivered without additional funding. To maximise available resources, delivery will need to be effective, efficient and focus on priorities. Additional funding will need to be secured, with an emphasis on working with partners to achieve shared aspirations.

Working with Communities

Some support is already provided by volunteers, for example through the local Ramblers' Association. There is potential for volunteers and communities to be more involved in many aspects of public rights of way. This could include maintenance work, surveying, research or other roles.

Supporting volunteers and expanding their roles needs staff time and resources. Ways in which volunteer involvement can be increased will be explored.

Town and parish councils also have the potential to take an increased role in their public rights of way, including helping with communication. 30% of parish and town councils who replied to the survey had a 'footpath' representative. These can be an important point of contact for public rights of way matters. Local councils also have a range of powers to maintain public rights of way and take other actions. It is important that if the parish or town council exercises these powers or carries out maintenance that this is in liaison with West Berkshire Council. The Public Rights of Way Service aims to improve partnership working with town and parish councils to resolve public rights of way issues, seek improvements and develop new joint projects.

Customer Focus

From the engagement carried out for this ROWIP, there is generally good public awareness that West Berkshire Council is responsible for public rights of way, but less clarity around how problems should be reported. Most people used 'Report a Problem' online or direct to the Public Rights of Way Service.

There were high levels of satisfaction with how West Berkshire Council Public Rights of Way Service responded to problems. All aspects of service provision were rated as ‘good’, with the highest scoring aspect the council officer’s manner.

There was lower satisfaction around information given on the progress of the problem. Ways this aspect can be improved will be investigated.

Partnerships

Building Partnerships

Through developing this ROWIP awareness of the Rights of Way Service has increased amongst existing and new stakeholders. This needs to continue as there are significant mutual benefits to increased partnership working. Several stakeholders expressed interest in developing collaborative projects. There are opportunities to explore particularly, but not exclusively, in the following areas.

Green and Blue Infrastructure – Public rights of way are a crucial component of green and blue infrastructure. They should feature strongly in green infrastructure plans and policies, including in development planning, as well as projects taken forward by partners.

Health and Wellbeing – A better understanding of the needs of disabled people and projects to improve access provision. Work is needed with new and existing health partners to understand further how public rights of way can contribute to health and wellbeing targets, for example through Wellbeing Walks and social prescribing.

Active Travel – The council will increase its role in delivering both strategic routes and routes for short utility journeys and link these with leisure provision. New multi-user routes in new developments will be pursued.

Economy and Visitor Economy – Public rights of way are part of what supports West Berkshire’s high quality of life, making it a desirable place to work and live. There is potential to raise awareness of this amongst the business community, including the Thames Valley Local Enterprise Partnership. There are also opportunities to enhance the visitor offer in West Berkshire through working with tourism and heritage partners.

Local Access Forum

The Mid and West Berkshire Local Access Forum (LAF) is a statutory independent group which provides advice to the council with the aim of improving public access in West Berkshire, Reading and Wokingham. Its duties are set out in law. Members are volunteers and represent user groups, land managers, councillors and other relevant interests. This wide membership helps to improve public access while making sure the interests of land managers and nature conservation are met. They provide advice, and both challenge and support the council’s Public Rights of Way Service.

The LAF has been involved in developing this ROWIP and will be involved with its delivery. The council will provide regular progress reports to the LAF throughout the lifetime of this ROWIP. It will also continue to seek the advice of the LAF on strategy, policy and targets.

Income and Resources

Whilst some aspects of this ROWIP may be delivered through existing resources and workstreams, additional funding will be needed to deliver many of the actions.

Some of this may be secured from the council, for example through working collaboratively on active travel projects or through developer contributions. Grant sources and additional internal funding may be available, and this will usually require working with partners.

Some services are chargeable. The council will periodically review these to ensure the costs of delivering chargeable services are recovered.

Theme 4 Priorities and Actions: Effective Delivery

All actions must be read in conjunction with the full text of the ROWIP.

Number	Action	Resource
Priority 8: Ensure that this ROWIP is resourced and delivered, and that progress is monitored and the plan reviewed.		
37	Seek additional resources to deliver this ROWIP as necessary.	Core business
38	Work with partners to ensure the priorities of this ROWIP are included in strategies, policies and funding bids.	Core business
39	Produce annual targets against the Actions in this Delivery Plan, to be approved by the Portfolio.	Core business
40	Assess this ROWIP after 5 years to ensure it continues to align with West Berkshire's priorities and new information.	Core business
41	Review this ROWIP after 10 years.	Core business
Priority 9: Increase involvement and working with partners, communities and volunteers.		
42	Develop working partnerships both within the council and with external partners to develop and deliver projects.	Core business
43	Explore and expand volunteering opportunities. Seek a Volunteer Support Officer (voluntary) to expand volunteering and community action.	££
44	Develop partnerships with Parish and Town Councils to deliver improvements to the PROW network and priorities of this ROWIP.	£
Priority 10: To continue to maintain high levels of customer satisfaction and seek ways to improve.		
45	Continually improve visibility of reporting mechanisms for the public, and achieve timely provision of feedback.	Core business
46	Periodically seek customer feedback on provision of services.	Core business

Call to Action

West Berkshire is proud of its PROW network. However, there are some gaps in provision and areas for further improvement, as explained in this document. It is anticipated that delivery of the priorities and actions set out in this Plan will help consolidate existing strengths and help to build a network that will continue to serve future generations of residents, visitors and other stakeholders.