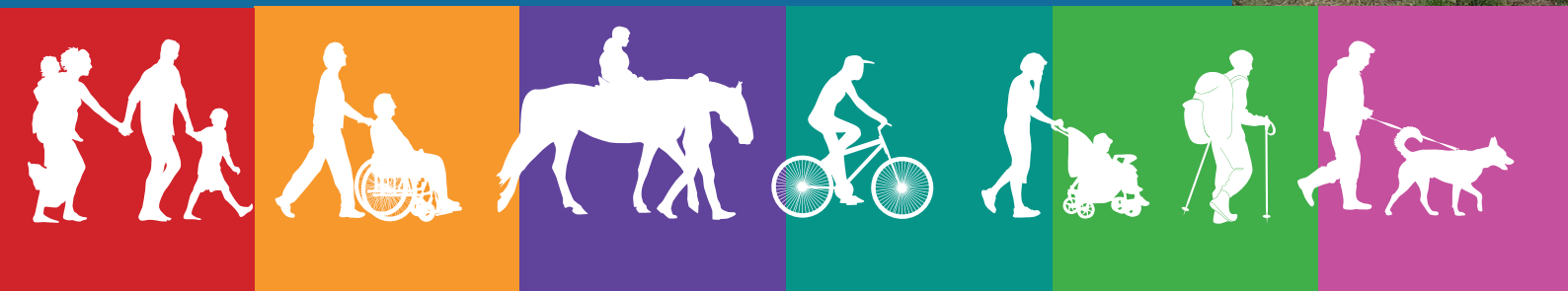


Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2023 – 2033

CONSULTATION DRAFT
July 2023



WestBerkshire
COUNCIL

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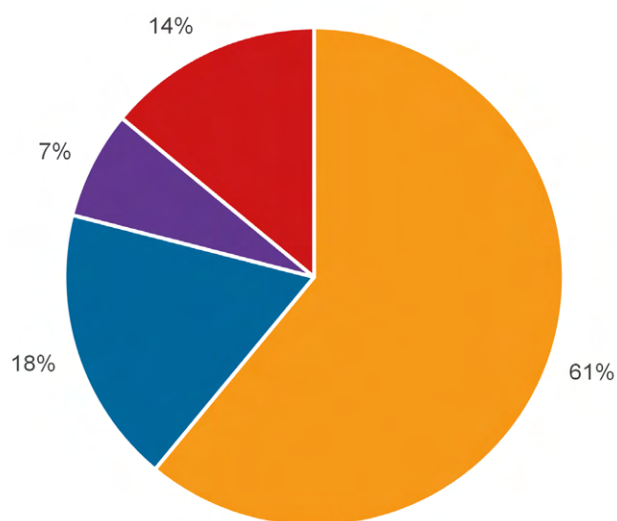
Executive Summary

Public rights of way are an important asset for West Berkshire. They enable people to access and enjoy the outstanding countryside and natural areas of the district, as well as being important to health, mental wellbeing, travel and the economy. West Berkshire Council wants public rights of way to be available for everyone, regardless of where they live.

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

Rights of Way Improvement Plans must carry out a full assessment of the needs of the public in using public rights of way, now and in the future. And set out a statement of action.

This ROWIP is based on extensive engagement with stakeholders and the public and a thorough review of evidence.



- Footpath
- Bridleway
- Restricted Byway
- Byway Open to All Traffic

A public right of way is a public highway. In law, a public right of way 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 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.

There are 740 miles (1192 km) of public rights of way in West Berkshire. Most of these (61%) are public footpaths. Around 18% are bridleways and 21% are restricted byways and BOATs.

A public right of way may also provide private access – for example along a farm track. The use of a right of way can be restricted by a Traffic Regulation Order (either temporary or permanent).

Public rights of way provide many public benefits. The Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan shares many common priorities with other West Berkshire strategies. The ROWIP will help to deliver positive change for residents of West Berkshire (see right).

Through the engagement and research carried out, several areas emerged as important over the lifetime of the ROWIP. These have informed the priorities set out in the ROWIP.

The research found that not everyone has equal access to public rights of way (see below). The distribution of public rights of way varies significantly across the district, with less provision where most people live in the eastern Kennet Valley. This is particularly the case for public rights of way which cyclists, equestrians and motorised vehicles can use, which are scarcer in this area. There will also be a greater increase in people in this area. This discrepancy between need and supply will be important in making future decisions around public rights of way.



	Downlands and Rural	Kennet Valley East
Provision of public rights of way	Lower population, higher density of public rights of way. Higher provision of public rights of way per person	High population, lower density of public rights of way. Lower provision of public rights of way per person.
Byways Open to all Traffic, Restricted Byways, Bridleways	High provision. Many areas well-connected.	Low provision, some areas with none at all. Disconnected.
Traffic and barriers to access	Barriers created by major roads. Some rural roads busier.	Barriers created by major roads. Rural roads busy; several 'rat-runs'.
Socio-economic	Population predominantly in good health and relatively affluent. Rural businesses important.	Main economic and development area. Generally good health, some pockets of poor health. Serves residents beyond district in Reading and other settlements.

Other important aspects which have informed the priorities in this plan are:



Public rights of way are highly valued by West Berkshire's residents – for health, wellbeing, mental health and quality of life benefits, for exercise and for enjoying the outstanding landscapes and wildlife of West

Berkshire. They are one of the most used public assets, with 91% of those surveyed using them once a week or more often.



Public rights of way can play a huge role in improving health and mental health. The network is free and available for everyone. There is unfulfilled need and increasing opportunities to encourage more

people to benefit from public rights of way to improve their physical and mental health, especially through working with partners. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a huge increase in use, including from those who had never used public rights of way before.



Public rights of way are part of the 'active travel' network. Using these routes, and upgrading them for several types of users, can help to reduce congestion, improve air quality, reduce greenhouse gas

emissions and improve people's health. Making the most of this existing asset has the potential to help address the problems of increasing traffic and the challenge of climate change.



Public rights of way are part of what makes West Berkshire a great place to live, work and do business. There are changes ahead, with an increasing but ageing population

and areas of development. Public rights of way are an important part of the green infrastructure which underpins the sustainable prosperity and quality of life of West Berkshire. The network will need to adapt to future changes.



The maintenance of public rights of way is important so that they are available and easy to use for everyone who wants to, whether they want to walk, cycle, or use them with a horse or motorised vehicles.

Some users encounter more problems or have fewer paths available for their chosen activity. Equestrians and cyclists in particular rely on public rights of way as traffic-free routes.



The benefits and the right of being able to access the countryside come with responsibilities. There is a need to help people understand how they should access the countryside- the working

landscape of farmers and landowners- without causing damage or lessening the enjoyment of other users.



There is a need for more accessible routes which can be used by a wider range of people. This is important for those with a range of physical and mobility needs and

will become increasingly important with an ageing population. There are opportunities to work with new partners, to develop new projects and to improve public rights of way for all, and to provide more and better information for these users.



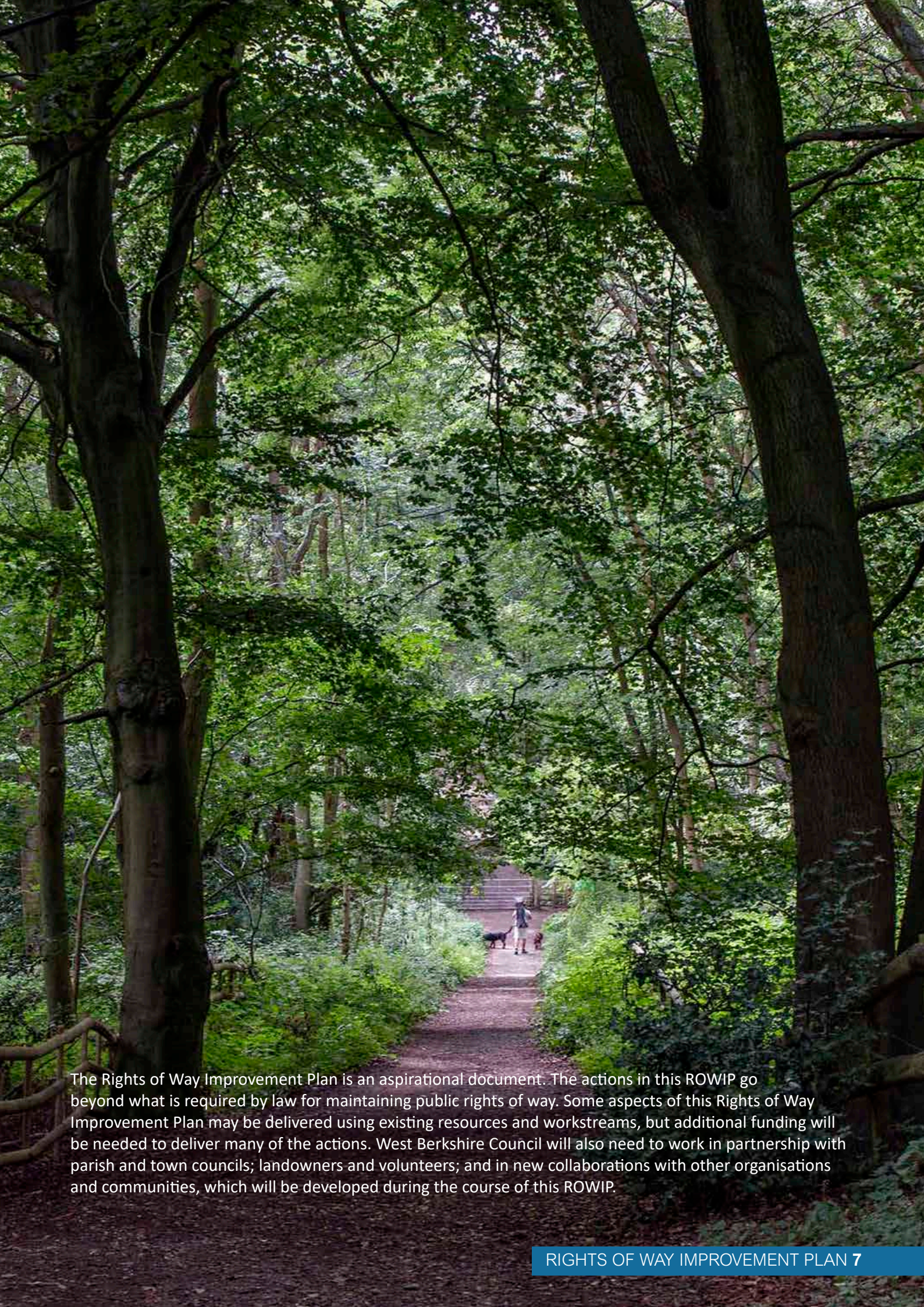
There is a need for more information for all types of users. Rather than producing more promotional material showing routes, which is now available on a range of websites, the council will concentrate on information

which is lacking and which meets needs which are not being fulfilled – e.g. for routes in the urban fringe, for people with physical mobility needs, for types of users which have less information available to them, and for highlighting cultural assets. More use will be made of social media and digital technologies.



Climate change and protecting the environment are central themes which run through the entire Rights of Way Improvement Plan. The Public Rights of Way Service will work to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions and will plan ahead

to adapt to the changes climate change will bring. The Service will also develop ways to increase environmental benefits and lessen harms through modifying management approaches, including developing exemplar green infrastructure routes.



The Rights of Way Improvement Plan is an aspirational document. The actions in this ROWIP go beyond what is required by law for maintaining public rights of way. Some aspects of this Rights of Way Improvement Plan may be delivered using existing resources and workstreams, but additional funding will be needed to deliver many of the actions. West Berkshire Council will also need to work in partnership with parish and town councils; landowners and volunteers; and in new collaborations with other organisations and communities, which will be developed during the course of this ROWIP.

1. Introduction



1.1 About this Rights of Way Improvement Plan

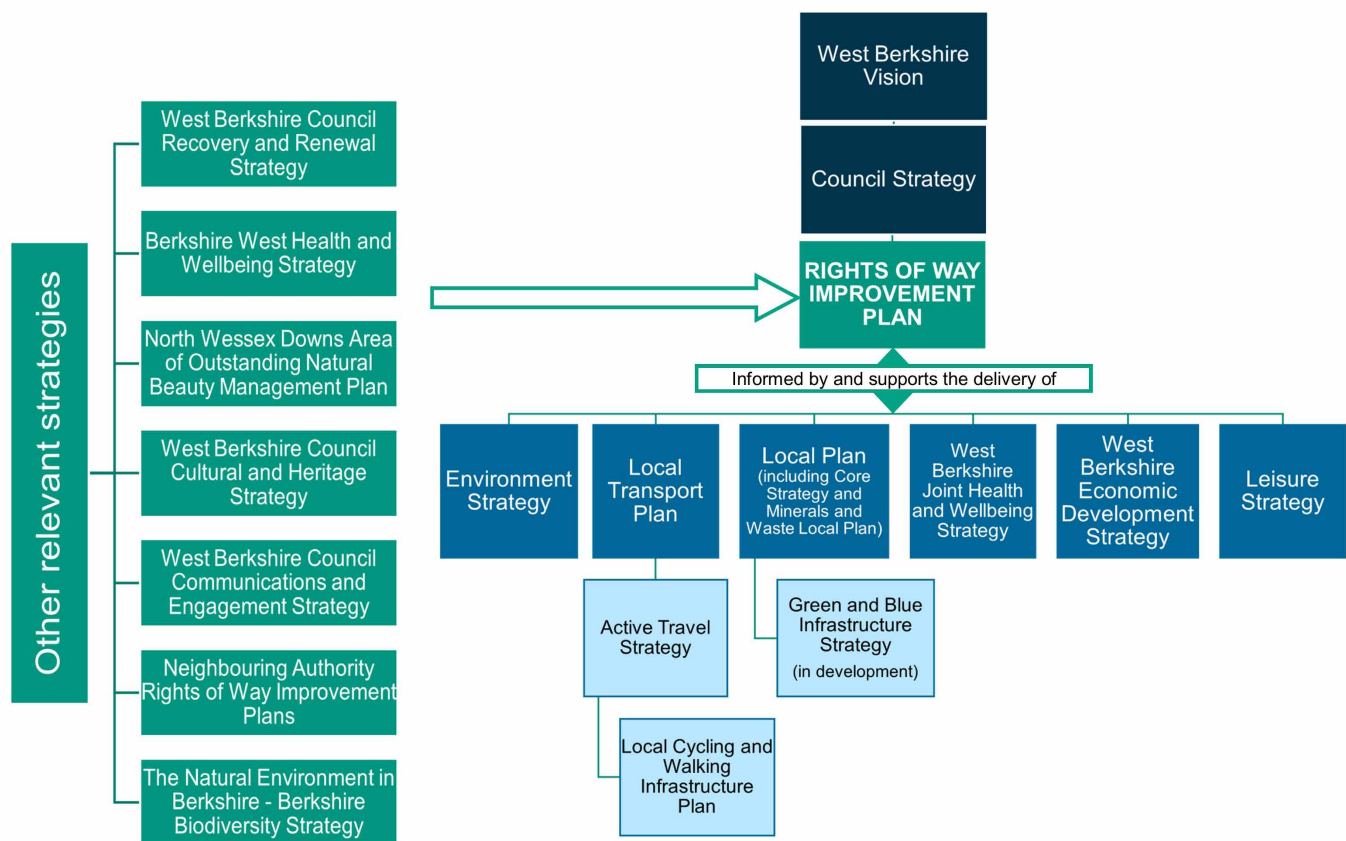
Every local highway authority is required by law to produce a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP)¹. It is the council's strategic document setting out its goals and priorities for public rights of way. Rights of Way Improvement Plans must be reviewed every ten years. This is West Berkshire's second ROWIP.

The law and government set out that the Rights of Way Improvement Plan must go further than meeting basic legal duties. It must fully consider the needs of the wider public and not just those who already use public rights of way. It must assess how public rights of way meet those needs, now and in the future. It must also assess how rights of way can encourage exercise and recreation, and those who are blind or partially sighted, or have mobility problems.

1.2 Delivering the Priorities of West Berkshire

Public rights of way are an important asset. They enable people to access and enjoy the outstanding countryside and natural areas of the district, as well as being important to health, mental wellbeing, travel and the economy. West Berkshire Council wants public rights of way to be available for everyone, regardless of where they live.

The ROWIP informed by and supports the delivery of many of West Berkshire's strategies, see next page.



The Rights of Way Improvement Plan shares several priorities with these strategies, see right.

1.3 About this Report

This is the main report of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan. It contains a summary of the assessment of public rights of way and the statement of action.

It is supported by an extensive evidence base which is contained in two separate documents:

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

Within this report, section 2- 'Evidence Review' sets out a summary of the evidence background which informs the priorities of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan.

Sections 3 – 6 develop the themes in further detail and set out actions under each theme. These themes emerged from reviewing the evidence and from discussion around how to organise the many areas which this ROWIP covers.



These themes are:

3. Looking after the Network
4. An Evolving Network
5. Healthy and Prosperous Communities
6. Effective Delivery

The actions at the end of each of these themes form the statement of action for the Rights of Way Improvement Plan. An additional, more detailed Delivery Plan will be produced at least every 2 years. This will set out the specific and current projects which are contributing to the delivery of the higher level actions.

Themes of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan

Looking after the Network	An Evolving Network	Healthy and Prosperous Communities	Effective Delivery
The council has a duty to ensure that the public rights of way are maintained to a suitable standard for their users. This section sets out how the council will achieve this.	Public rights of way must adapt to change. Development, demographic changes, changes in demand and responding to the climate emergency need to be taken into account in relation to public rights of way.	Public rights of way have an important role in supporting the health and mental wellbeing of West Berkshire's residents. The network should also be available to all, regardless of income or ability.	The Public Rights of Way Service is public-facing, and the successful implementation of this ROWIP will have a direct impact on many people. Delivery of this ROWIP will require effective and efficient delivery, alongside additional resources.

1.4 Engagement with Users and Stakeholders and Evidence Review

This ROWIP is based on extensive engagement with stakeholders and the public.

The views of many people were sought in developing the ROWIP, carried out through:

- **Online Public Survey** - carried out between March and May 2021. The survey received over 1500 responses, giving a high degree of significance to the results. As the survey was 'self-selecting' those responding are more likely to be those interested in the countryside and outdoor activities.
- **Parish and Town Council Survey**- parish and town councils were invited to complete a survey between March and May 2021. 42% of councils completed the survey.
- **Elected Councillors** - All West Berkshire elected Councillors were sent a briefing and invited to complete the online public survey.
- **Landowner Survey**- An online survey for landowners was set up. The National Farmers Union and Country Land and Business Association were approached and asked to encourage their members to complete the survey.
- **Engagement with Stakeholders**- A further 66 stakeholder organisations were contacted. These included neighbouring highway authorities, user and interest groups and community organisations.
- **Local Access Forum** - The Local Access Forum was briefed on progress of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan at all regular meetings. All West Berkshire Forum members were invited to comment, and dedicated meetings to discuss the ROWIP were held in September 2022 and May 2023.

Full details of the consultation results are contained in Evidence Report 2 – Surveys and Stakeholders Report.

A comprehensive review of evidence was also carried out, contained in Evidence Report 1 – Network and Needs Analysis. This report covers:

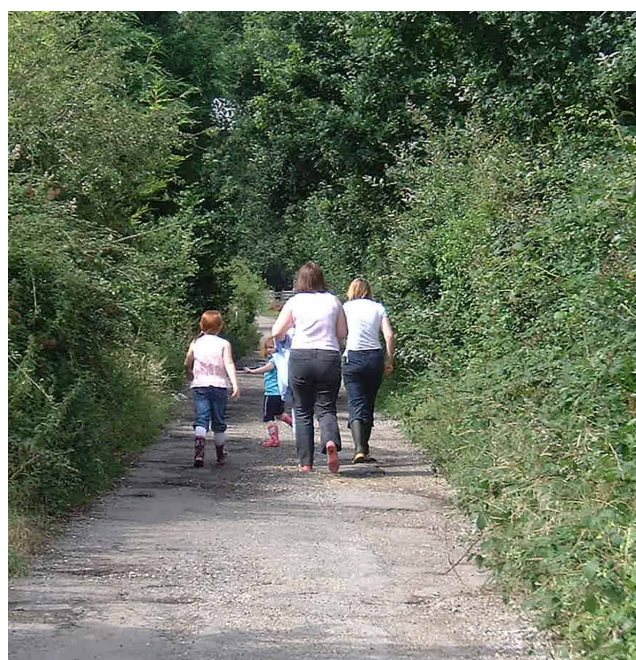
- A review and analysis of West Berkshire's public rights of way network and wider context of access;
- The population and health of West Berkshire residents;
- The economy, growth and future plans of West Berkshire;
- The needs of users – walkers, equestrians, motorised vehicle users, cyclists, and people living with visual, physical, neurological or other impairments and minority ethnic communities.

Together, these documents form the assessment as required for the Rights of Way Improvement Plan.

1.5 Delivery

This Rights of Way Improvement Plan sets out the aspiration of West Berkshire Council for making public rights of way available for everyone and for improving the quality of life of West Berkshire residents.

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.



"This Rights of Way Improvement Plan sets out the aspiration of West Berkshire Council for making public rights of way available for everyone and for improving the quality of life of West Berkshire residents."

2. Evidence Review



2.1 Introduction

Public rights of way are an important asset which help to meet the needs of people living in West Berkshire.

Public rights of way are free for everyone to use. There are paths in both rural and urban areas making them an excellent resource for improving health and mental wellbeing through providing places where people can exercise and gain access to nature. They can also be used for everyday journeys, for example to work or school. Walking or cycling for everyday journeys helps to reduce harmful effects such as air pollution from traffic.

Public rights of way can also support tourism, helping people to enjoy West Berkshire's outstanding countryside and landscape. Businesses and people are attracted to locate in West Berkshire due to its attractive landscape and countryside.

This section sets out a summary of the public rights of way network in West Berkshire and the findings of research into the needs of West Berkshire carried out for the ROWIP. It reveals several cross-cutting themes which are picked up in later sections and in the actions. Further detail is provided in the two evidence reports.

2.2 Public Rights of Way and Access to the Countryside

The Public Rights of Way Network

A public right of way (PROW) is a public highway. In law, a public right of way 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 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 the public rights of way together are called ‘the public rights of way network’. There are also some paths which are allowed by landowners but are not public rights of way. These are known as permissive paths. They can improve the connectivity of the PROW network for example- by joining gaps or paths separated by roads, and improve the access to the countryside.

There are 740 miles (1192 km) of public rights of way in West Berkshire, see Table 1 and Plan 1. Most of these (61%) are public footpaths. Around 18% are bridleways and 21% are restricted byways and BOATs. The length of the public rights of way network is comparable with the road network which was 1280 km in length in 2016².

Plan 1: West Berkshire's Public Rights of Way Network

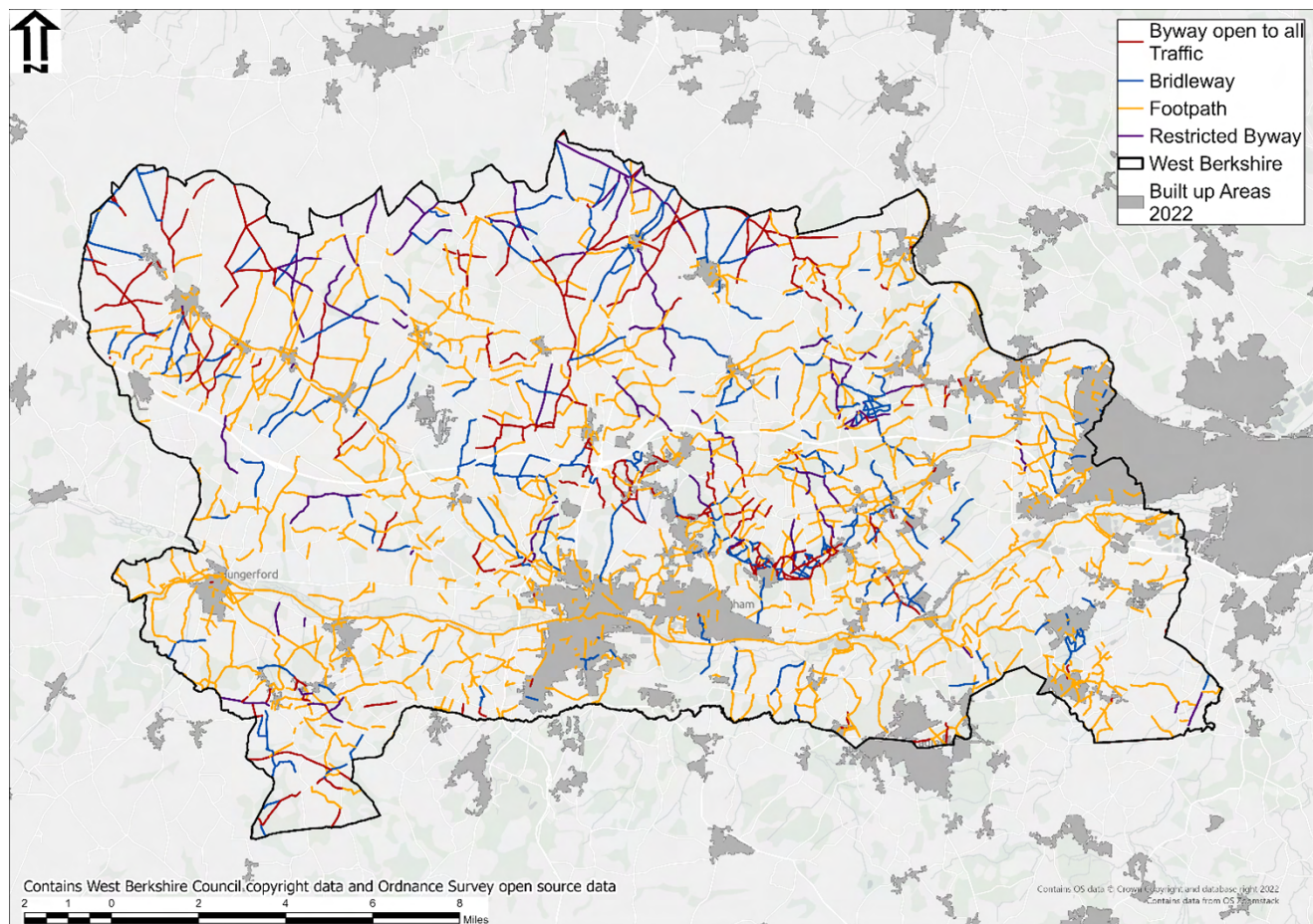


Table 1: Public Rights of Way Network – Summary

	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		

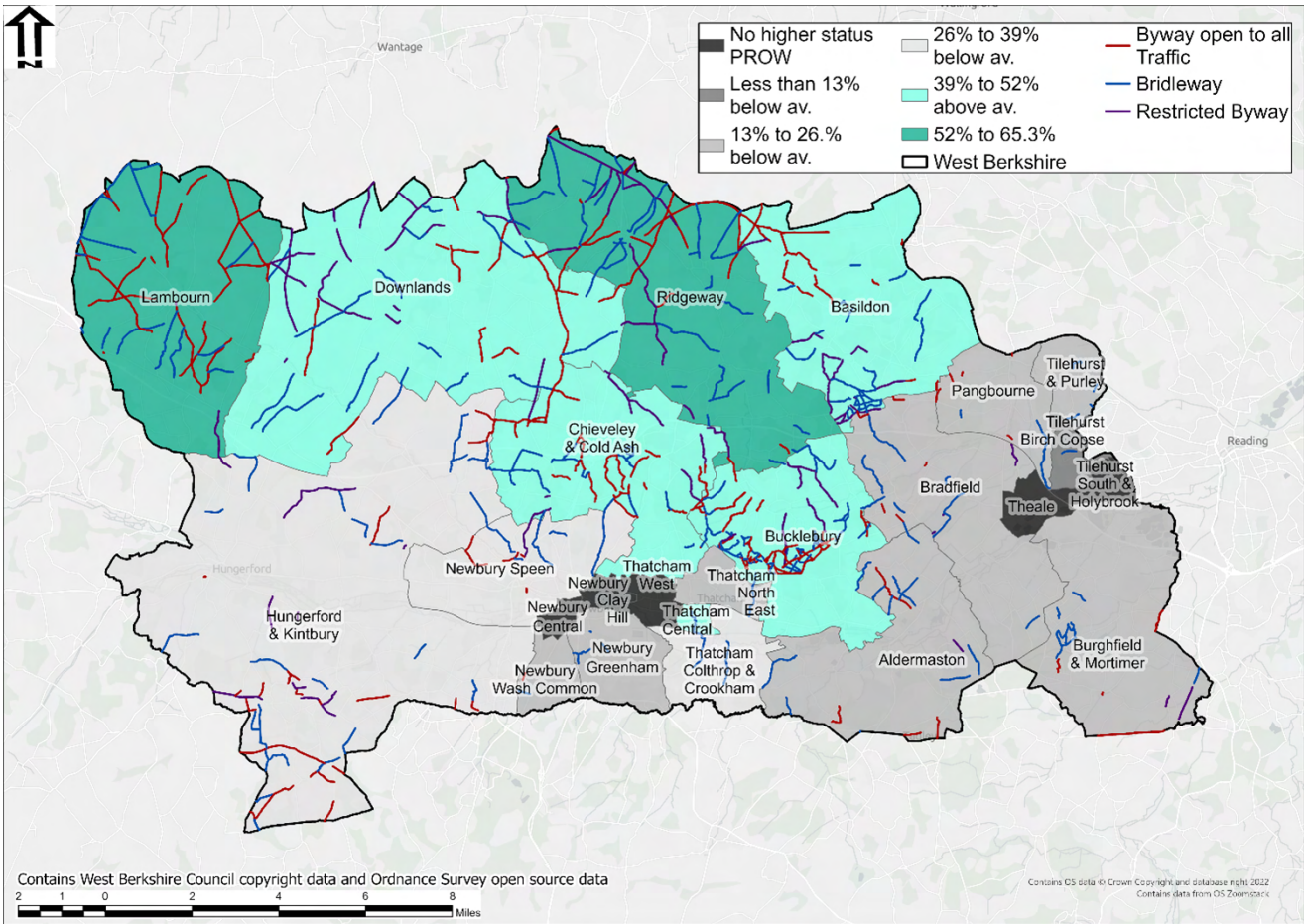
Provision of Public Rights of Way

The public rights of way network has been assessed to understand how it is distributed across the area of West Berkshire.

The density of public rights of way varies across West Berkshire. The highest density of public rights of way, calculated by ward, is in Bucklebury Ward. Downlands Ward has the greatest length of public right of way per person and Hungerford and Kintbury Ward has the greatest total length of public rights of way.

The lowest provision of public rights of way per person lies in the main urban areas in Newbury, the settlements of the Kennet Valley, and the outskirts of Reading.

Plan 2: Percentage of Network which is Bridleway, Restricted Byway or Byway Open to All Traffic, by Ward



The variation in the length of public rights of way per person is likely to have an impact on how intensively the network is used. Those areas with a lower length of public rights of way per person potentially have more people using each public right of way, or more 'traffic' on the routes.

The network of bridleways, restricted byways and byways is also not evenly spread across West Berkshire. Overall, 39% of the network is made up of these types of routes.

There are more in the northern rural area and in Ridgeway and Lambourn Wards, where these types of public rights of way make up over 50% of the network.

There are fewer in the Kennet Valley and urban areas and these often do not connect well. In Newbury Central, Newbury Clay Hill, Thatcham West, Theale and Tilehurst South and Holybrook Wards there are no such public rights of way.

This is important, because equestrians, cyclists, carriage drivers and motorised vehicle users are not permitted to use public footpaths.

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

Publicly Accessible Greenspaces

When assessing whether people have good access to the countryside it is important to also consider the other open spaces that people can visit. The public rights of way network is part of this wider provision. Information on other areas of publicly accessible greenspace is included here to provide a broader context of the countryside access resource of West Berkshire. These spaces do not fall within the scope of the ROWIP. Assessment of this provision will be included in West Berkshire's forthcoming Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy and information on more sites is included in the Network and Needs Analysis Evidence Report 1.

There are several very popular areas where people visit the countryside. West Berkshire's only country park is Snelsmore Common Country Park³, north of Newbury. There are public rights of way across and leading to the country park.

Greenham and Crookham Commons⁴ are also an extensive publicly accessible area. Both of these sites, along with Snelsmore Common, are Sites of Special Scientific Interest, designated for their nature conservation value. Therefore recreation needs to be balanced with the need to protect wildlife.

Other registered commons which are accessible to the public on foot, and sometimes by cycle and with horses, include Hungerford Common, Bucklebury Common, Padworth Common⁵ and Wokefield Common⁶, amongst others.

The Nature Discovery Centre in Thatcham is located next to lakes formed by gravel extraction. It now offers the chance to see a range of wildfowl and other wildlife. It is a family destination with a café, playground and other facilities.



The Kennet and Avon Canal⁸ is a popular recreational route. Entering West Berkshire from the outskirts of Reading in the east, and Hungerford in the west, it follows a route through the Kennet Valley. All of the route is a public footpath and available for walkers and large sections of the route forms part of National Cycle Route NC4 and can be used by cyclists through permitted access. Holybrook and Southcote Linear Parks are important greenspaces close to Reading, within the Kennet Valley.

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 (subject to some restrictions), mapped as 'Access Land'. In West Berkshire, this includes most of the Registered Commons.

Some landowners also permit access on their land, generally only on paths.

National Trails and Recreational Routes

Parts of The Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails pass through West Berkshire, skirting the northern and north-eastern boundary of the district.

West Berkshire Council's Public Rights of Way Service promotes a range of routes on its website, including circular routes and maps of public rights of way in some parishes. All public rights of way can be viewed on West Berkshire Council's online map⁹. The public survey of 2021 found there was low awareness of this promotional material.

There is also a wide range of other information and web sources to support people wanting explore public rights of way.

Neighbouring Populations

There are some settlements close to or crossing local authority boundaries where West Berkshire's public rights of way are also used by people living outside the district. 17% of people responding to the 2021 public survey lived outside West Berkshire.

The most significant settlement is Reading. The 'Eastern Urban Area' of West Berkshire, including Purley and Calcot, lies immediately adjacent to Reading. These parts of Reading have some areas of higher deprivation and there is also a low provision of public rights of way. The countryside to the west of Calcot and Purley on Thames, around Sulham, is an access resource for Reading residents.

Goring-on-Thames (Oxfordshire) and Streatley (West Berkshire) are divided by the River Thames, as are Pangbourne (West Berkshire) and Whitchurch-on-Thames (Oxfordshire). The significant settlement of Tadley in Hampshire lies on the boundary with West Berkshire.

The River Kennet valley links West Berkshire and Reading and is an important recreational area for this population.

2.3 The Contribution of Public Rights of Way to West Berkshire's Priorities

This section outlines how the public rights of way network and access to it supports some of the main priorities of West Berkshire. These priorities have emerged from research and engaging with the public and stakeholders. They are also closely linked with the priorities of West Berkshire Council as set out in the Council Strategy 2023.

Health, Mental Wellbeing and Physical Activity

Being physically active is strongly linked to better health. Public rights of way offer hundreds of miles of off-road routes for people to increase their activity. They also have the added benefit of frequently passing through natural places and the countryside. Physical activity in the natural environment has been shown to increase the positive impact on mental health.

The rights of way network can have a significant role in improving health and wellbeing through:

- Providing access in areas of high health inequality – particularly where other greenspace is lacking;
- Increasing 'active travel' through providing safe walking and cycling routes;
- Helping people access beyond urban areas - where there are often the highest levels of health deprivation- to natural habitats and attractive landscapes;
- Supporting community-based activities, such as walking for health;
- Providing a non-chargeable facility for exercise, removing barriers for less affluent communities.

The health of people in West Berkshire is generally good and, in many cases, better than the England average. The percentage of physically active adults-who exercise regularly¹⁰- is higher and the number of overweight or obese adults is lower¹¹. Within this broader picture, there are some smaller parts of the main urban areas where there is a higher level of poor health. The population of West Berkshire is also ageing, and therefore a greater proportion of people will develop health and mobility issues.

West Berkshire also recorded levels of activity higher than both England and Berkshire as a whole in Sport England's Active Lives Survey¹².

"I have found walking has improved not only my fitness but my mental health."

Respondent to 2021 survey

West Berkshire Council's Leisure Strategy 2022 focusses on 'active leisure' where the activity involves physical effort that will deliver health and wellbeing benefits to the individual¹³.

Public rights of way are included within the Leisure Strategy and are specifically mentioned in Aim 4 of the strategy.

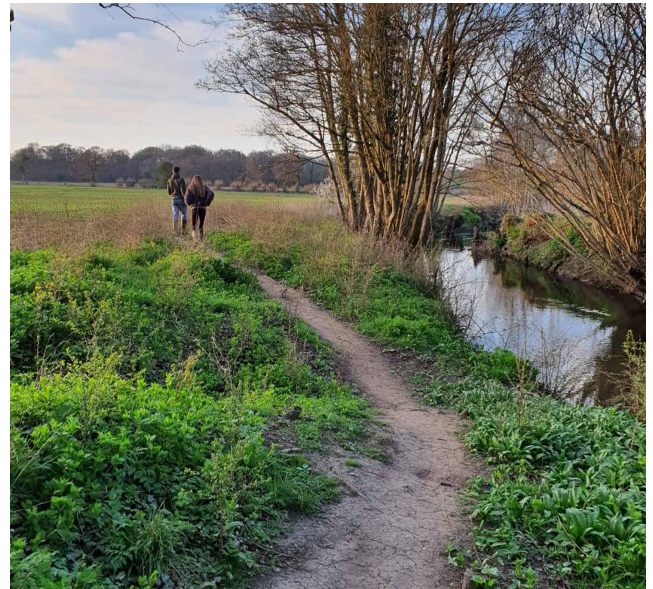
COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic underlined the importance of outdoor space for physical exercise and mental health. During the period when restrictions were placed on society, many more people visited greenspaces and the outdoors. Use of public rights of way increased greatly as other places for leisure and exercise were closed.

During the lockdowns, isolation, along with other factors, contributed to a decline in mental health. However, the natural environment has helped some people to cope with negative feelings such as increased anxiety. In the public survey for this ROWIP, 98% of people said that public rights of way had been important to their health and wellbeing during the pandemic. Most, 60%, said they had used the public rights of way network more and, of these, 96% said they intended to carry on using public rights of way more often than they had prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I nearly died from Covid pneumonia. Being able to walk along footpaths and rights of way has helped me recover quickly as well as being essential to helping me recover mentally and emotionally from such trauma."

Respondent to 2021 survey



The pandemic also highlighted that existing inequalities in provision and differences in levels of visiting greenspace in different socio-economic groups carried on through the pandemic. Those groups who are less likely to visit greenspaces (lower income groups), or those who lived further away visited natural spaces less than other more advantaged groups.

Active Travel

Active travel- walking, cycling and not using a private vehicle for journeys- allows people to be physically active as part of their daily lives and brings a range of benefits including reducing congestion and air pollution.

A well-designed, accessible environment can encourage people to walk or cycle. People cycle more when there is cycle infrastructure and separation from traffic. Conversely, a lack of routes, poor availability of information about routes, concerns over safety and the speed and convenience of motorised transport can all act as barriers to people choosing active travel.

“I would support the creation of new routes, or the upgrade of existing routes, if they could be used for commuting - anything that gets people out of cars helps both health and the environment.”

Respondent to 2021 survey

West Berkshire's Active Travel Strategy 2011-2026 forms part of the suite of documents making up the Local Transport Plan (LTP). The strategy includes walking, cycling and equestrianism.

West Berkshire's Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) 2021 also sets out a strategic and long-term approach to delivering improvements in walking and cycling. The LCWIP has a focus on utility journeys rather than leisure, but it does include some leisure projects identified by the public. These provide dual benefits of routes for active travel and leisure.

The Eling Way north of Newbury is an example of a successful multi-purpose route. It follows part of the former railway line, with feasibility studies underway to extend this route.

The Kennet and Avon Canal towpath is also an important route. Although partly managed by the Canal and River Trust, the majority comprises public rights of way.

Public rights of way are important in forming connecting and circular paths linking into these new routes.

The Environment and Climate Change

Climate Change

Climate change is one of the biggest challenges being faced by society. The impacts of climate change are already evident and will become more severe and widespread as temperatures rise.

West Berkshire Council declared a Climate Emergency on 2nd July 2019 and is committed to becoming carbon neutral by 2030.

The Public Rights of Way Service, alongside other West Berkshire Council services, has a role to play in reducing carbon emissions.

This will be both through its operational activities, for example in staff travel, and the selection and working practices of contractors and materials. The Service can also support active travel and encourage people to use public rights of way which are local to them, rather than travelling across the district to sites or public rights of way using private cars.

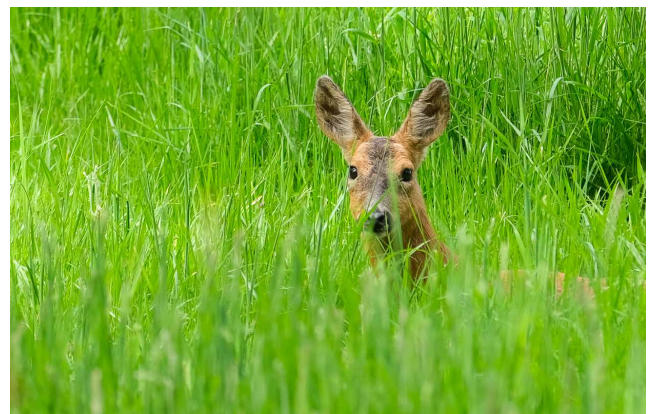
“Rights of way are a key tool to use in solving the climate emergency and should be given that priority.”

Respondent to 2021 survey

Climate change is likely to result in more heatwaves and drought in the summer and warmer and wetter winters with heavier rainfall and more flooding. Flooding in particular could have an impact on public rights of way. This damages surfaces and structures, including bridges. The increased likelihood of flooding will need to be considered in the design and maintenance of paths.

Nature Conservation

West Berkshire has a diverse natural environment and many areas which are important for nature. There are many sites which are protected for their wildlife value.



In West Berkshire, several of the designated nature conservation sites are located in areas of high population and recreation demand. Snelsmore Common Country Park and Greenham and Crookham Commons are both very popular and are also protected for their wildlife. Management of these sites takes into account their nature conservation interest, but increasing populations in close proximity to these sites could increase the number of people visiting and pressure on habitats and species.

The public rights of way network can help to spread the impact of recreation demand through providing other areas for access and to encourage people to use areas away from the ‘honey pot’ sites, helping to disperse visitor pressure.

Some public rights of way also cross sites which are important for nature conservation. This may have an impact on management decisions, which may include consideration of the timing or extent of vegetation cutting or choice of path surfaces.

West Berkshire's Economy

An Attractive Place to Live and do Business

West Berkshire has a strong economy, with low levels of unemployment and a diverse range of businesses across many industries. Public rights of way help to underpin the vibrant economy of West Berkshire, contributing to the unique factors which make the area an attractive place to live, work and do business.

Public rights of way support the priorities of the West Berkshire Economic Development Strategy¹⁴ through:

- Supporting rural businesses – attracting visitors and spend to rural areas;
- Enhancing the leisure offering;
- Supporting delivery of the Environment Strategy's green infrastructure targets;
- Enhancing sustainable transport and active travel.



Visitor Economy

Public rights of way can also support the visitor economy as part of the overall visitor economy ‘offer’. There is potential to more fully utilise the network to support the visitor economy, including rural businesses.

Public rights of way often link to or give visitors the chance to explore the surroundings of the many high-quality tourism attractions in West Berkshire, including historic sites, buildings and country houses, attractive cultural landscapes and nature, market towns and attractive villages.

“They are a key asset for encouraging health, protecting and promoting the environment and wildlife, and boosting tourism and the local economy.”

Respondent to 2021 survey

Development Planning

The West Berkshire Local Plan is a long-term strategic document used by West Berkshire Council to set out its vision and a framework for the future development of the area. The current Local Plan covers the period to 2026. At the time of preparation of this ROWIP, a review of the Local Plan is being carried out and a draft Local Plan for 2022-2039 being prepared, aiming for adoption in 2023 / 2024. The draft Local Plan includes proposals for strategic site allocations and other sites across the district. Many of these have public rights of way crossing or adjacent to them.

The protection and enhancement of public rights of way within and adjacent to development proposals is included in the policies of both the adopted and draft Local Plans. The Minerals and Wastes Local Plan also includes a specific policy on public rights of way.

2.4 Public Rights of Way Users

Users of Public Rights of Way in West Berkshire

The public survey for this ROWIP provided useful insight into why and how people use public rights of way.

When asked why they used public rights of way:

- 58% walked without a dog, and 41% walked with a dog;
- Around 25% of people cycled, either on a cycle path or off-road (mountain-biking);
- 10% of people rode horses and 1% drove horses with carriages;
- 5% used a motorised vehicle.

Quality of life' reasons featured highly in the reasons for using public rights of way:

- 81% of people said they used public rights of way to enjoy the landscape or countryside- the top answer;
- Health improvement was the second highest reason, given by 75% of people;
- 72% said they used them for relaxation and peace and quiet, the third highest;
- 65% used them to enjoy a view, the fourth highest answer.



92% agreed that public rights of way are:

- An important asset for West Berkshire residents;
- Are important to support the health and wellbeing;
- Are important for enjoying and exploring nature.



Walkers

Walking is the most popular outdoor recreational activity. Walkers can use all types of public rights of way as well as many other greenspaces.

People walk for a variety of reasons- to get to work or school, to exercise or for leisure and to enjoy the countryside. Motivators include for pleasure, seeing nature and landscapes, improving health and mental wellbeing, solitude or, conversely, socialising.

The Active Lives Survey carried out by Sport England¹⁵ measures participation in activities. In West Berkshire, those taking part in all forms of walking, including walking for leisure, has increased since 2015, in line with the rest of the South East. The survey indicates that 90% of people in West Berkshire had walked for leisure in the past year. Those living in more deprived areas tend to walk less.

There are six groups affiliated to the national Ramblers' Association operating within West Berkshire or walking within the area and several other independent walking groups.

Increasing walking can be a particularly effective and low-cost way of increasing physical activity. In West Berkshire there is an active programme of health walks in West Berkshire, called Wellbeing Walks, which encourage inactive people to walk as a form of exercise.

Cyclists

Cycling is a popular activity, with participation across a wide range of the population. People cycle for many reasons and in many ways – for leisure, for commuting and utility journeys, for sport, as a family and for holidays.

Public rights of way mainly provide traffic-free routes. A range of studies show that traffic-free routes are preferred by all cyclists. However, while experienced cyclists will cycle on the road, inexperienced riders, women or those with children and in family groups strongly prefer traffic-free routes. Public rights of way are therefore important for these users.



‘Mountain biking’ covers several forms of off-road riding, both for leisure and for competitive activities. There are also many cyclists who use traffic-free routes and public rights of way who would not term themselves mountain bikers, but just enjoy leisure cycling away from roads.

Cycling is only permitted on part of the public rights of way network – on bridleways, restricted byways and byways open to all traffic. These are concentrated in the northern and eastern downland areas of the district and around Bucklebury and Hermitage. There is also a network of cycle routes which are not on public rights of way, which are provided to support active travel.

Cycling provision for leisure and on public rights of way overlaps and compliments cycling for active travel. Active travel cycling can use public rights of way, and cyclists making utility trips are also likely to cycle for recreation. National Cycle Route 4 passes through West Berkshire following the Kennet Valley. Much of this route is traffic-free and some follows the towpath. The towpath in particular is a popular leisure route.

The use of electric cycles (E-bikes), including E-Mountain Bikes is increasing. This is likely to increase the number of people who are able to cycle off road, bringing the pastime within the capabilities of more people.

Equestrians

Recreational equestrianism which uses public rights of way includes horse riding (hacking) and carriage driving.

Horse riding has a higher proportion than other sports of people with disabilities, women and people over the age of 45. Nearly 40% of those taking part in equestrian activity do not participate in other forms of physical activity¹⁶. Riding or driving horses also has physical and mental wellbeing benefits.

West Berkshire is one of the most densely populated areas in terms of horses in the UK¹⁷. However, it is difficult to get an accurate overview of the distribution and level of equestrian activity across the district. In 2021 there were 8,719 equine passports registered in postcodes which cover West Berkshire. However these postcodes extend beyond the district. A minority of these passports will be for racehorses.



The equestrian industry contributes to the economy and supports many jobs. Assuming a conservative estimate of the horses registered in West Berkshire, equestrianism contribute £43m per year to the economy.

Public rights of way which equestrians can use are not evenly distributed across West Berkshire. There are more, and better connected, public rights of way in the north and eastern downland areas. Although there are lower levels of traffic here compared to other areas of the district, some of the roads can be busy, as well as being narrow. There is a high proportion of byways open to all traffic, which are shared with motorised vehicles. There is also a concentrated network available for equestrians around Bucklebury.

This is contrasted with fewer, scattered and disconnected, public rights of way in the south of the district. 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 roads, such as the A4, A34 and M4.



“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

In the public survey equestrians raised the following points and priorities:

- Surfaces which are suitable for equestrians;
- Good quality and maintained 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;
- More traffic free routes to improve connection of public rights of way;
- Circular routes for equestrians;
- Promotional material;
- Maintaining equestrian routes in good condition, including appropriate surfacing and clearing vegetation.

Motorised Vehicles

Mechanically-propelled vehicle users use a range of vehicles, including 4x4’s, trail bikes¹⁸ and quad bikes.

These users can only use byways open to all traffic. These public rights of way are concentrated in the northern downland areas of West Berkshire, particularly around Lambourn and the central downland area.



There is also a group of byways open to all traffic around Hermitage and Bucklebury, and a smaller network around Inkpen. In other areas the network is disconnected with often short lengths of byways.

Driving or riding on byways open to all traffic is also known as 'green laning'. Some users belong to groups including the Green Lane Association¹⁹, LARA (Land Access and Recreation Association)²⁰, the All Wheel Drive Club²¹ and the Trail Riders Fellowship (TRF)²². Some of these organisations have local groups in West Berkshire.

In 2021 survey motorised vehicle users highlighted the physical and mental health wellbeing benefits that they gain from accessing the countryside. As well as benefits gained from social connection, enjoyment, challenge, and getting out into the countryside, motorised vehicle use enables those who have reduced mobility to access the countryside.

"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 cause damage to surfaces. This includes parallel ruts, making it difficult for cyclists, carriage drivers and equestrians, or major or deliberate damage of path surfaces. Driving without due care and attention or damaging the surface of a byway open to all traffic is an offence.

West Berkshire Council's policy paper sets out the approach to managing damage on public rights of way by motorised vehicles²³. 'First priority' measures include information, codes of conduct, liaison with user groups, monitoring and repair of priority routes. 'Second priority' measures, implemented if the first priority measures are not

successful, include seasonal or permanent Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs). There are a few permanent TROs and other TROs closing routes over the winter months to protect them from seasonal damage²⁴. There are TROs on parts of The Ridgeway National Trail.

In the public survey, concerns were raised over conflicts between motorised and other users. Non-motorised vehicle users raised concerns over deterioration of surfaces and mud, intimidating behaviour and presence on paths that motorists were not entitled to use. Conversely, there were comments made from 4 x 4, motorised vehicle / motorbike users about intimidating behaviour towards them from walkers, and challenges made over their right to legitimately use byways open to all traffic.

LARA²⁵, the TRF²⁶ and The Ridgeway National Trail²⁷ have produced good practice guides.



Tensions Between Users

The surveys revealed that there were some tensions around the use of public rights of way.

The most mentioned problem related to 4 x 4 and motorbike users- around intimidating behaviour, damage to surfaces and presence on paths that these users are not entitled to use. The use of public footpaths by horse riders and cyclists was also raised. Conversely, there were comments made from 4 x 4 and motorbike users and equestrians about intimidating behaviour towards them from walkers.

People Living with Visual, Physical, Neurological or Other Impairments

There is great diversity amongst people who live with a disability. Disability takes many different forms and has an impact on people's lives in many ways. The term 'disability' covers a wide range of conditions, including mobility difficulties, blind or partial sightedness, learning difficulties, neurological problems and mental health problems. Some disabilities are permanent whilst others only affect people from time to time. While some people have lived with their disability from birth, most people are those who develop impairments in the course of their life or are simply getting older.

In the 2021 Census, 20% of people identified themselves as being disabled and their daily life being limited a little or a lot. This had not changed significantly from the last Census. However, West Berkshire has a higher proportion of older people, aged over 65 with the over 75 year old age group predicted to increase the most. Older age increases the prevalence of limiting conditions.

Consultation with several groups and individuals living with a range of physical, neurological and visual impairments was carried out as part of developing the ROWIP. There are a range of potential barriers which may deter or prevent disabled people from using public rights of way, which were also raised in the consultation:

- 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 of getting lost;
- Lack of convenient and accessible public transport;
- Lack of places to rest or shelter;
- Cost of transport and parking fees²⁸.

"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 population²⁹. However, many people do spend time in nature at least once a month.

There are several potential barriers which may deter ethnic communities from visiting natural spaces³⁰:

- The views of ethnic minority groups not included in policy and strategy making;
- Lack of foreign language material and excluding ethnic minority groups in promotional material;
- Cultural disposition and behavioural codes - the countryside may not be regarded as a place for recreation, it may carry undesirable associations, strict dress codes (particularly for females) and lack of single gender activities;
- Ethnic minority communities may be less aware of opportunities;
- Lack of confidence and negative perceptions of the environment and fear of racism;
- Negative feelings associated with previous experience of the countryside;
- Financial costs and lack of time.

In the 2021 Census, 3.7% of West Berkshire residents identified their ethnic group within the "Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh" category, up from 2.5% in 2011. This is lower than the South East England average, which is 7%

Most people answering the 2021 public survey were White or White British (97%). This is higher than the West Berkshire population, which the 2021 Census records at 92%. This means that other ethnic groups were less represented in the survey than in the West Berkshire population.

An interview was held with Community United as part of developing the ROWIP and there are opportunities to increase engagement with minority ethnic communities through this and other organisations.

Non-users

A small number of people who do not use public rights of way completed the 2021 survey. The reasons they gave for not using public rights of way were lack of information or not knowing where to go, lack of transport and personal reasons, for example not being fit enough.

2.5 Summary of Public Rights of Way and Countryside Access

The plan and table below summarises the provision of public rights of way, countryside access and demographic features of West Berkshire. This shows there is a difference between the downlands and rural areas in the north of the district when compared with the eastern Kennet Valley.

The boundary shown is approximate, but this analysis helps to inform priorities within this plan and in developing and delivering actions.

Plan 3: Summary of Public Rights of Way and Countryside Access

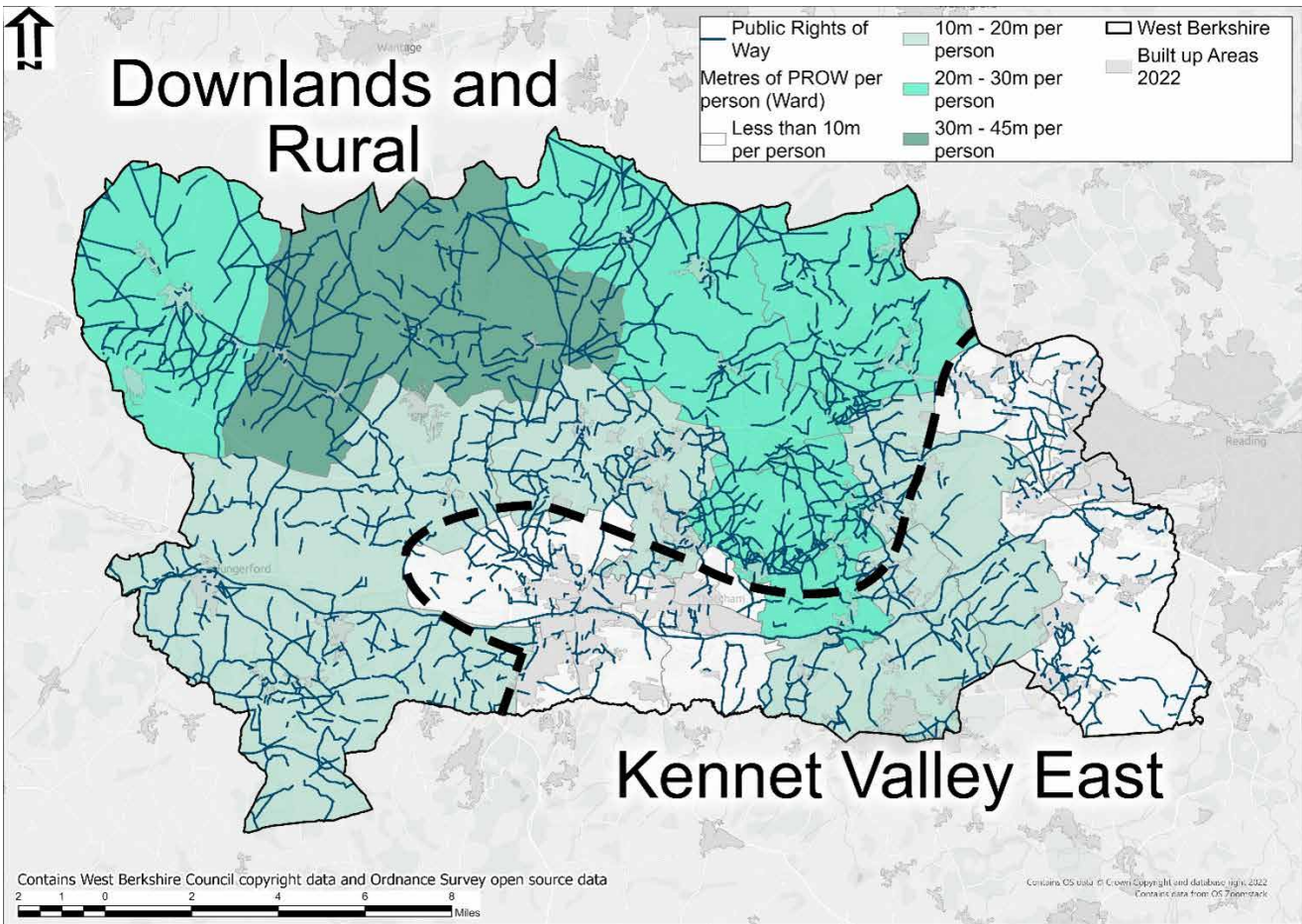


Table 2: Summary of Public Rights of Way and Countryside Access

Downlands and Rural	Kennet Valley East
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher density of all types of public rights of way; • High provision of public rights of way per person; • Low levels of other accessible greenspace; • High provision of byways open to all traffic, bridleways, restricted byways- some disconnection of these routes, but many areas well connected; • Some areas of higher traffic using rural roads; • Barriers created by major roads; • Population in good health; • Population affluent; • Very high proportion of White ethnicity; • Rural businesses are important; • Much of the area in the Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty; • Potential benefit of public rights of way to the rural economy and visitor economy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High population; • Low density of public rights of way; • Lower provision of public rights of way per person; • Low provision of byways open to all traffic, bridleways, restricted byways and disconnected; • Generally good health, but some pockets of poor health in urban areas; • Generally affluent, but pockets of deprivation in urban areas; • Mainly White ethnicity, some areas of more diverse ethnicity; • Economic hub area for West Berkshire; • This area is the focus for housing growth; • Busy roads, rat runs, busy rural roads; • Barriers created by major roads; • Larger greenspace sites within this area; • The eastern end of the Kennet Valley also serves the neighbouring population of Reading. This is a high population, mixed ethnicity, some areas of very poor health, low levels of greenspace and public rights of way in Reading, road barriers. The nearest countryside for these residents in West Berkshire.

3. Theme and Actions: Looking After the Network



3.1 Introduction

West Berkshire's public rights of way network is highly used and in high demand.

The council has a duty to ensure that the public rights of way are maintained to a suitable standard for their users. Most resources are therefore devoted to maintaining the network to as high a standard as possible and to ensure public safety.

Maintenance responsibilities are split between the council and landowners, with whom West Berkshire works in partnership. There are many thousands of structures on the network, as well as surfaces which need to be maintained and vegetation which needs to be cleared.

The condition of the public rights of way network has a direct impact on the enjoyment of its many users. This makes the Public Rights of Way Service an important frontline service. The work of maintenance is therefore at the core of the Public Rights of Way Service.

3.2 The Public Rights of Way Network

There are 740 miles of public rights of way in West Berkshire. On this network there are thousands of structures, including bridges, stiles, steps, gates and many others, as well as the hundreds of miles of surface.

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

Some of the structures and furniture are the responsibility of West Berkshire Council to install and maintain, others are the responsibility of the landowners or have been installed by others, for example a parish council.

Condition Survey

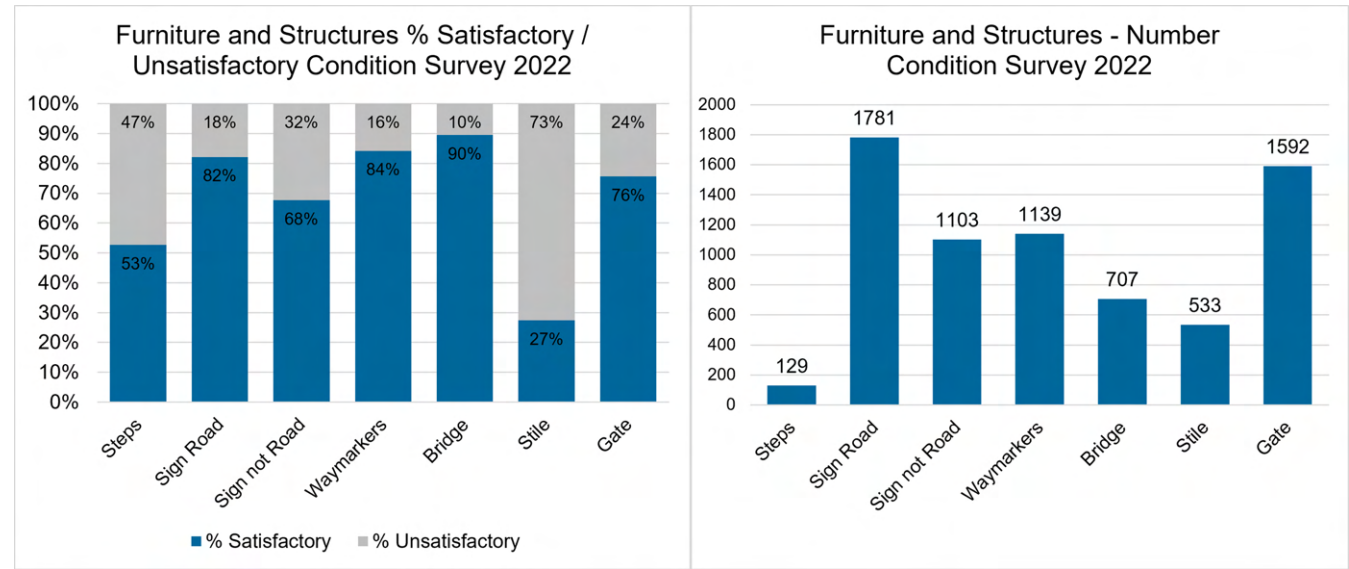
A condition survey of the entire public rights of way network was carried out in 2022. The previous survey was carried out in 2009. However, the criteria for assessment were not identical and therefore full comparisons cannot be made between the two surveys to determine how the network has changed over time. The 2022 survey was more detailed and comprehensive than the 2009 survey

A summary of the main types of furniture and structures on the public rights of way network is shown in Table 3, along with its condition, as recorded in the 2022 survey.

Table 3: Summary of Infrastructure and Condition - 2022 Survey

	Total	% Satisfactory	% Unsatisfactory
Steps	129	53%	47%
Sign 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%

Chart 1: Summary of Condition Survey 2022



Management Priorities

There may be a need to prioritise maintenance, projects and responses to problems based on the severity of the issue and the needs identified in this Rights of Way Improvement Plan. For example, improvements to accessibility could be prioritised around urban areas where there is a higher population and need.

The approach to prioritisation will be developed further during the implementation of this Rights of Way Improvement Plan to guide responses to problems and the development of projects.

West Berkshire Council is working towards a more strategic approach to maintenance and improvements. This also incorporates working with parish and town councils and others to identify priorities which are also consistent with West Berkshire Council’s priorities and this ROWIP.

3.3 Maintaining the Public Rights of Way Network

Maintenance Responsibilities

Some maintenance is the responsibility of West Berkshire Council and some is the responsibility of landowners. A summary is shown below in Table 4, but this is not exhaustive. There is more information on public rights of way maintenance on West Berkshire Council’s website³².



Table 4: Some Public Rights of Way Maintenance Responsibilities³³

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.

Vegetation

Overgrown paths reduce the pleasure and ease of use of public rights of way. The problem most frequently encountered by the public was overgrown paths (54% of people experiencing this). This was also the highest issue of concern for parish and town councils.

Keeping paths clear is a challenge faced every growing season. Not all vegetation clearance is the responsibility of the council. Vegetation overhanging the public right of way, and crops, are the responsibility of the landowner.

Surface vegetation is the responsibility of the council.

The council implements an annual vegetation clearance schedule covering routes to school and its promoted recreational routes, as well as responding to reports of issues. The council will review this maintenance schedule to ensure that the highest priority routes are included in the annual vegetation clearance schedule. Cost-effective ways of managing vegetation will be explored, including working with landowners and parish councils.

Signs and Waymarking

West Berkshire Council is responsible for ensuring that there is a signpost at the point where a public right of way leaves a hard surfaced road. The council may also place waymarker signs along the path where these will help people to follow the route. West Berkshire Council also has specific waymarkers for some promoted recreational routes.

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 months, when there is a reduced need for vegetation clearance. When signs from the road are replaced, the council will consider adding the destination of the path on the fingerpost.

Bridges

There is a wide range of bridges on the public rights of way network. These range 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 on the network, with 90% of these 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, however 25% of the cost of maintenance can be claimed from West Berkshire Council.

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

Overall, there has been a reduction of stiles on the public rights of way network between 2009 and 2022. The volunteer maintenance group has replaced at least 200 stiles with gates since the 2009 survey. However, more needs to be done to increase accessibility through removing stiles. There was also an increase of gates on the network, which are more accessible to a wider range of people. Gaps, with no structure in place at all, are the most accessible.



West Berkshire Council will continue to prioritise the removal of stiles and replacement of these with gates or gaps, and offer incentives, usually in the form of supplying the structure, or installation by volunteers. A priority will be around urban areas and villages.

Gates can also create difficulties and hazards for both horse and rider, such as those in poor repair or not meeting recommended standards. The condition survey of 2022 showed that only 7% of gates were unusable or unsatisfactory. 53% of gates were in satisfactory condition, but a further 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).

The 2022 condition survey showed that, of the public rights of way which these users were permitted to use, 68% of public right of way links were suitable for carriage drivers.

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 councils in the surveys. 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 of the public rights of way network. Most public rights of way are unsurfaced and, usually, this is suitable for users. Surfacing may not be necessary or appropriate in many countryside settings. Other measures, such as drainage improvements, can often 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. The choice of surface, if used, requires careful consideration, especially on multi-user routes. This is particularly important when considering use by horses and cyclists. Horse riders prefer more forgiving surfaces than hard bitumen, which can be slippery for hooves.

Surface condition can also be adversely affected by the use of the public right of way. This is particularly the case in West Berkshire with a higher than average proportion of byways open to all traffic, which can be used by motor vehicles. Maintaining the surface of these public rights of way can be very costly, because a new augmented surface structure is often the best long-term remedy. In some cases it is necessary to close the byway, usually over the winter months, to prevent unacceptable damage to the surface. A list of permanently or seasonally closed byways is listed on West Berkshire Council's website³⁴.

Ploughing and Cropping

Some public rights of way cross arable land. Paths crossing fields should not be ploughed but, if this cannot be avoided, the landowner must make sure the path is levelled and clearly marked within two weeks. The 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 written to twice a year to remind them of their legal duties regarding paths over cropped land. Improved recording of information has helped to target potential problems in advance.

3.4 Working with Landowners

Landowners and managers are vital partners in the maintenance of the public rights of way network. In the survey for this Rights of Way Improvement Plan, all landowners who took part 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 a range of advice on their rights and responsibilities, including around cropped paths, vegetation, stiles, fences and obstructions. Most landowners in the survey for this Rights of Way Improvement Plan said they did not need further information, but additional comments highlighted the need for continued partnership working and clear communication with the Public Rights of Way Team.

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

The main area of concern for landowners was the irresponsible use of the countryside. All of the landowners surveyed had experienced an issue with dogs off of leads bothering stock and 89% had experienced issues with trespassing, littering, disturbance or damage to the nature conservation interest of their land and illegal use. The need for the public to exercise responsibility alongside access rights is an important area to address in this Rights of Way Improvement Plan, see section 5.4.

3.5 Dealing with Problems

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

West Berkshire Council currently prioritises these problems based on factors such as usage level, inconvenience to the public, level of complaint, public benefit, cost effectiveness and potential for deterioration. Those which need urgent attention for health and safety reasons are dealt with as a priority.

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 option 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, as described above.

Occasionally the police will be alerted to illegal activities where necessary or asked to attend site to protect officers when carrying out enforcement action. West Berkshire Council also work with the police and local stakeholders to tackle illegal vehicular activity at The Ridgeway and Bucklebury Common.

3.6 Our Environmental Responsibilities

The environment and climate change needs to be considered in the management of the public rights of way network. The following are areas which will be considered in managing the public rights of way network:

- The surfacing of paths within and close to wetland and riparian designated nature conservation sites to account for the potential of runoff, especially close to 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.;
- Manage public rights of way in a more environmentally sustainable way as functioning links in West Berkshire's green and blue infrastructure network;
- The climate change and environmental impacts in procurement of materials. Sustainable materials with a longer lifespan will be sourced where possible;
- The climate change impact of operational activities – for example the use of private cars and travel, use of machinery and tools;
- The maintenance of paths within and around 'honeypot' sites which are also designated for nature conservation, to minimise impact and, where possible, to disperse visitor pressure;
- The environmental impact of contractors working on the council's behalf, who will also be expected to minimise environmental impacts;
- The risk to structures from climate change impacts, particularly damage to structures and surfaces from increased flooding.

3.7 Actions: Looking after the Network

Priority	Actions
To protect the network and maintain it in the best condition possible, prioritising safety and areas of greatest need and seeking improvements where possible.	Action 1 Develop a new policy approach for prioritising public rights of way maintenance and improvement projects, based on the needs identified in this ROWIP. Include 1 to 3 year specific targets for dealing with structures identified as unsatisfactory in the 2022 survey.
	Action 2 Support landowners through liaison and providing advice and information, waymarking materials and assistance for materials for removing structures.
	Action 3 Carry out a condition survey of the public rights of way network every ten years (due next in 2032) and prior to the next ROWIP review. Keep the survey data as up to date as possible through the use of volunteers.
	Action 4 Continue to provide and expand information for landowners on appropriate maintenance of public rights of way.
	Action 5 Develop partnerships with parish and town councils and other stakeholders to implement and improve maintenance and identify local priorities.
	Action 6 Review and keep updated annual vegetation clearance schedules to ensure that priority paths are kept clear and all public requests are dealt with promptly.
	Action 7 Resolve all outstanding signing issues by April each year. Add destinations to new roadside signposts at strategic locations.
	Action 8 Review maintenance and enforcement policies to ensure they are in line with this Rights of Way Improvement Plan.
	Action 9 Monitor the need and effectiveness of Traffic Regulation Orders and put in place when needed for protecting public rights of way.
	Action 10 Work with West Berkshire Highways to develop guidance for design and surfacing of multi-user paths.

Priority	Actions
<p>To improve environmental sustainability of public rights of way maintenance and contribute to environmental and climate stewardship.</p>	<p>Action 11 Consider the environmental impact of network management including vegetation clearance and surfacing, and actively manage public rights of way with environmental sustainability in mind, as part of West Berkshire’s green and blue infrastructure network.</p>
	<p>Action 12 Make an inventory of public rights of way which cross SSSI’s, heritage sites or other sensitive nature conservation areas and consider appropriate maintenance of these, including vegetation clearance regimes.</p>
	<p>Action 13 Work with partners to manage and promote public rights of way around and away from honeypot locations to help to disperse recreational pressure.</p>
	<p>Action 14 Consider the impact of climate change on structures and surfaces, identify those which are at greater risk, and take appropriate action such as scheduling more frequent inspection and specification of new structures e.g. in flood zone.</p>



4. Theme and Actions: An Evolving Network

4.1 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 in coming years, moving the boundary of where the countryside meets the town and resulting in more people wanting to access the countryside. There will be an ageing population, leading to more people with a range of health, mobility issues and disabilities.

The public rights of way network also needs to take account of these changes. This includes improving the network for certain types of users and responding to development to secure the most possible access.

New access routes should be of high quality and designed to accommodate multiple user types. The maintenance of any new routes also needs to be considered and secured, including additional resources in some cases.

4.2 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 in the consultation carried out for this ROWIP. The comments made were around the need to protect public rights of way, the need to plan access strategically, new access routes, improving routes for cyclists, horse riders and those with mobility impairments, disruption and closures at the time of building and increased recreational use of the network around the development 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 a framework for future development in the area. It is made up of several documents which together form planning policy for the district. The larger housing sites in the current Local Plan are located in south and east Newbury, with smaller sites elsewhere in the district.

At the time of this ROWIP, the Local Plan is being reviewed. The new Local Plan is likely to be adopted within the timeframe of the ROWIP. The emerging Local Plan proposes larger housing allocations around Newbury and Thatcham, with smaller development throughout the district. The Local Plan is likely to be subject to amendment during the process of its development of adoption and therefore the proposals may change.

Public rights of way are included in the green infrastructure policies of the adopted and emerging Local Plans. 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 the forthcoming West Berkshire Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy, recreational access will be considered strategically, including the contribution of the public rights of way network links in wider access provision.

Development will affect the 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 access networks are protected and enhanced. A strategic assessment of access within and around the site should be made.

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 those with mobility or other impairments;
- 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.

4.3 Active Travel

The primary 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 in West Berkshire is taken forward by the council's Highways Service and links to the ambitions of the Local Transport Plan, as part of the overall strategy for travel and transport in the district.

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 for recreational activity.

When developing strategic active travel and multi-user routes, public rights of way often form part of the route. Public rights of way can also link into and provide circular routes from the strategic active travel routes, providing added benefits to the investment, highlighted in the Local Transport Plan and the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan.

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.



“The Eling Way is a great asset to the community.”

Respondent to 2021 survey

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

“In order to reduce our carbon foot print 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

Public rights of way may also be useful as part of the active travel network, particularly in urban areas. Some public rights of way may also be upgraded to multi-user routes as part of development. Conflicts can occur on multi-user routes and therefore design needs to be carefully considered. Equestrian use needs to be accommodated wherever possible, especially where there is a lower level of provision for these users and busy roads.

4.4 Evolution of the Network to Meet the Needs of Users

Equestrians and Cyclists

The public rights of way network for equestrians and cyclists is, in some parts of West Berkshire, disconnected and with a limited length or 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 the public rights of way network.

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 and the number of projects which can be delivered within the timeframe of this ROWIP will be small. Therefore every opportunity to increase this network should be sought. This includes through development and active travel investment.

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 considerations, to ensure that the route is suitable for many user types. It should also be assumed that utility routes taken forward for active travel will also be used for recreation. There are also many different types of cycle and schemes should take this into consideration³⁷.

Additional funding will be needed for new routes. The council will secure funding through working with partners and seeking contributions from developers. Projects will need to be prioritised. The evidence of this Rights of Way Improvement Plan and further research will be taken into account when determining priority projects and areas for improvements.

Some public rights of way are also dead ends, and some bridleways, restricted byways and byways open to all traffic 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 network available to these users. Other routes with public access and unmetalled, unclassified country roads could also help to connect the public rights of way network.

Some routes for these users end at busy roads. This should be considered in the design of projects to facilitate a safe onward journey. Equestrian crossings may be beneficial in some cases.

Road verges are often part of the highway and could be used by these users, although they are not permitted to use any footway which has been installed. Whilst this may increase the areas available there may be undergrowth and concealed holes which will make them unsuitable.



More research is needed to find out the locations of equestrians, where they ride and the specific issues faced in these locations. This will help to prioritise projects and can inform other areas such as active travel and access linked to housing development. Suggestions for new or upgraded routes were made by stakeholders for the previous Rights of Way Improvement Plan 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. Increases in levels of cycling, including the increased use of e-bikes, are likely to increase and change the levels of demand, and will need to be assessed during the course of this ROWIP.

People with Reduced Mobility

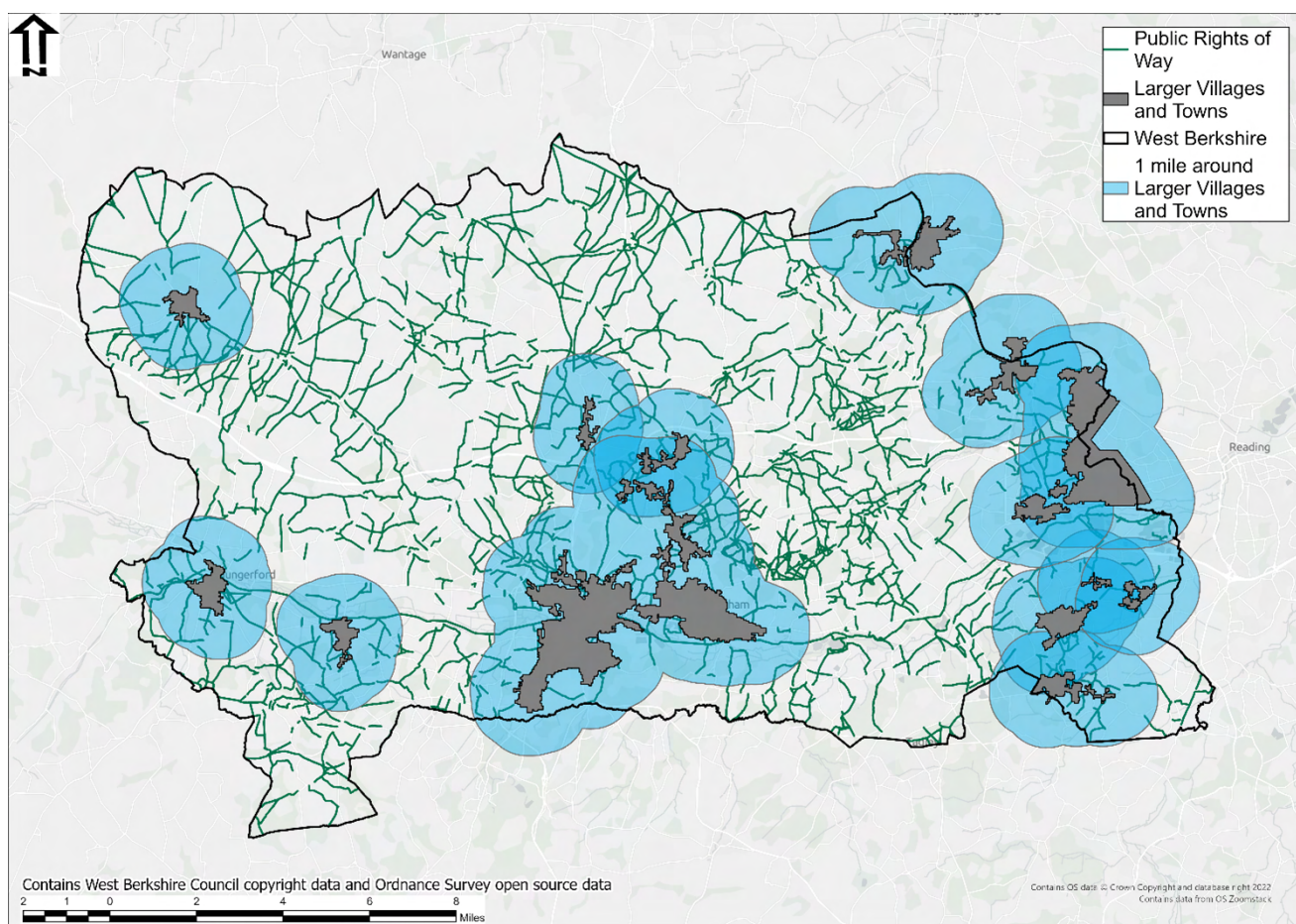
The condition survey completed in 2022 has enabled further analysis to be carried out to determine where accessibility is reduced for those with reduced mobility.

In line with the priorities of this Rights of Way Improvement Plan, further analysis was carried out for public rights of way in and within one mile of the main towns and larger villages (Plan 4).

The towns and villages included were:

- Lambourn;
- Hungerford;
- Kintbury;
- Newbury, Thatcham and areas north of Newbury including Chieveley and Hermitage;
- Streatley;
- Pangbourne;
- Reading outskirts and Theale;
- Burghfield, Burghfield Common and Mortimer.

Plan 4: Areas of Further Analysis - Issues Reducing Accessibility Close to Towns and Villages



This analysis provides detailed information on structures or other issues which may reduce access for those with reduced mobility. It also shows the number of issues on each public right of way. This analysis will enable targeted improvements to be made in areas of higher demand close to where people live. The broader results of the condition survey also show issues across the wider network.

Most of the issues relating to public rights of way structures highlighted in the analysis were in satisfactory condition. They are highlighted because they will cause difficulties for those with reduced mobility, not because the structure itself is in an unsatisfactory condition. Most of the issues should not present an access issue to more mobile users.

This analysis will be used to prioritise work to increase accessibility of the network, in areas where there is the highest demand. It will also help to identify accessible routes to be promoted, see also sections 5.3 and 5.4.

4.5 Mapping the Network

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 around making changes to public rights of way.

The definitive map and statement is the legal record of public rights of way³⁸. 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 and statement must be available for the public to view. 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 to the Network

Changes can be made to the map and statement but each case needs to be evaluated and the procedures set out in law must be followed. The method to alter the map and statement is via a Definitive Map Modification Order (DMMO). A DMMO can be made when there are anomalies on the definitive map. Sometimes public rights have not been recorded or additional rights on a public right of way have not been recorded. The evidence for these is evaluated⁴⁰. If this shows that rights exist, a DMMO can be made which 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 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 consults with organisations and the public.

Each new path or diversion needs to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, but for the new route, as a principle the council will seek the highest standard of accessibility and of infrastructure appropriate to the location and, where possible, conformity to British Standard BS5709: 2018⁴¹. 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.

Landowners can also apply for a statement or declaration to prevent the creation of a public right of way⁴².

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 website⁴³.

The Deregulation Act 2015, once enacted in full, will affect the delivery of services in these areas. Changes include more streamlined procedures for unrecorded rights and simplified procedures for the order-making process. It may also lead to more applications from landowners to make changes to public rights of way, which may have a resource implication as there will be timescales for response set in law.

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.

4.6 Actions: An Evolving Network

Priority	Actions
Ensure that access is strategically planned and delivered to meet the needs of West Berkshire's residents.	<p>Action 15 Plan access strategically, alongside West Berkshire highways, leisure and planning services, as part of the green and blue infrastructure network for West Berkshire.</p> <p>Action 16 Ensure that the Council's green and blue infrastructure strategies include a comprehensive assessment of access needs and contain robust policies to improve access for all users, ensuring that development has no detrimental impact and that access provision is improved. Encourage parish councils to do likewise in Neighbourhood Development Plans.</p> <p>Action 17 Progress strategic projects with partners where these address West Berkshire's needs and the priorities of this Rights of Way Improvement Plan.</p> <p>Action 18 Support projects to increase walking and cycling for short journeys to reduce congestion, support health and wellbeing and reduce air pollution.</p>
Ensure that the network evolves to meet current and future needs of users and that connectivity is improved.	<p>Action 19 Ensure that high-quality, multi-user access improvements are sought and included in and around new developments, seeking provision for the broadest range of users, including walkers, cyclists and equestrians, and addressing the identified needs of the areas. Ensure that maintenance is considered and secured in any new or upgraded routes and resources are made available where necessary.</p> <p>Action 20 Seek opportunities for increasing traffic-free routes and connectivity for pedestrians, equestrians and cyclists, considering the use of road verges and unclassified country roads and resolving dead end routes. Ensure that maintenance is considered and secured in any new or upgraded routes and resources are made available where necessary.</p> <p>Action 21 Be open to the use of permissive access as a means of achieving network improvements.</p> <p>Action 22 Continue to improve understanding of the need and demand of all users, including improving data on levels of use, to identify high use areas of the network and to aid prioritisation.</p> <p>Action 23 Improve understanding of the needs and demands of the wide range of cyclists using the public rights of way network, including changes resulting from e-bikes and increases in leisure cycling.</p> <p>Action 24 Work with equestrians to gain further understanding of the locations of equestrians, areas of demand and areas of potential improvement, including review of the routes proposed by stakeholders in the 2010 Rights of Way Improvement Plan.</p>

4.6 Actions: An Evolving Network

Priority	Actions
(continued) Ensure that the network evolves to meet current and future needs of users and that connectivity is improved.	<p>Action 25 Improve infrastructure for equestrians, improving equestrian gates and carriage gaps, and removing obstructions to use, including unnecessary gates.</p> <p>Action 26 Use rights of way condition surveys to identify public rights of way with no restrictions for those with mobility impairments or with buggies and to prioritise areas for improving the network and reducing restrictions to access for these users, maximising cost-benefit. Aim to create / publicise 10 new accessible routes in the course of this Rights of Way Improvement Plan.</p>
To uphold the council's legal duties to provide an up-to-date definitive map and statement.	<p>Action 27 Consolidate the definitive map and statement by 2030 and ensure adequate resources to deal with the increased demands of new legislation.</p> <p>Action 28 Categorise anomalies into types and draw up a plan for incorporation into the annual Public Rights of Way Legal Order / Agreement Case Programme.</p> <p>Action 29 Consider all applications for definitive map modification orders, including for historic paths ('Lost Ways') and determine these in line with internal annual Case Programmes and statutory timescales.</p> <p>Action 30 Regularly review charging to ensure that this reflects the costs of undertaking path / modification orders.</p>

5. Theme and Actions: Healthy and Prosperous Communities



5.1 Introduction

The public rights of way network is the most extensive, free and available resource to enable people to access the natural environment.

The research for this ROWIP revealed how highly people who use public rights of way value them. It is important that everyone has the opportunity to use and benefit from public rights of way, irrespective of ability.

This section considers the role of public rights of way in helping everyone, wherever they live, to improve their health. It also details the actions which will be taken to improve access for people living with visual, physical, neurological or other impairments.

Access to information is also considered. This is important to enable people to know where to go and to understand both their rights and responsibilities when accessing the countryside.

The quality of the natural environment underpins quality of life in West Berkshire. It is part of the reason people use public rights of way. Climate change will have an increasing impact in years to come. Public rights of way have a role to play in both of these areas.

5.2 Public Rights of Way for Health and Mental Wellbeing

Health improvement was the second highest reason that people gave for using public rights of way in West Berkshire, given by 75% of people. It was clear from the survey how valuable public rights of way are to the wellbeing and mental health of all types of users.

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 the prevalence of mobility issues and health problems.

Making public rights of way easily accessible and making sure people know where they are will enable more people to benefit from them. The priorities for this will be close to where people live, especially where there are areas of poorer health, to support people in using public rights of way part of their daily exercise routine. This overlaps with actions later in this section around access for people with disabilities and the provision of information.

There is an active programme of walking-for-health in West Berkshire, called Wellbeing Walks, for people of all abilities in many locations across the district. There are opportunities to work with the Wellbeing Walks programme to improve routes used on the walks and document routes so that people can use them at any time.

There are opportunities to work with partners in public health and other organisations to maximise the opportunities for people to use public rights of way to improve their health, for example 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

5.3 Access for People Living with Visual, Physical, Neurological or Other Impairments

There is great diversity amongst people with a disability, taking different forms and having an impact on people's lives in many ways. This also leads to a variation in the specific needs of people across the range of disabilities.

Accessible infrastructure is important. Gates and gaps are more accessible than stiles and since the first Rights of Way Improvement Plan, 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



It is clearly not possible to ensure all routes and paths, even at the most visited sites, are fully accessible to all people. However, adopting the principle of 'least restrictive access' is important. This means making sure this is considered in every decision around management of paths and infrastructure.

Other simple improvements such as handrails on steps, bridge and slopes or evenly spaced steps can help users. There is a British Standard for gaps, gates and stiles⁴⁵ and working towards this standard will improve the accessibility of the network over time.

The condition survey will help to prioritise where these actions will potentially benefit the most people. The survey assessed infrastructure within 1 miles of urban areas and larger villages, see also section 4.4.

Maintenance is important, as damaged structures or overgrown paths present difficulties to users, especially to visually impaired people.

There are currently no routes using public rights of way which are promoted as being accessible, although there are paths, such as the Kennet and Avon Canal towpath, and sites, including Snelsmore Common Country Park, where there are paths with higher accessibility.

Through consulting with stakeholders it is clear there is demand for accessible routes in West Berkshire. Routes which are accessible, or which could be made more accessible through improvement work or removal of infrastructure, will be investigated. The condition survey will help in this process. 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 across the public rights of way network. Providing information on surfaces, infrastructure, gradients, parking, toilets and seating can help a person living with a disability to make their own decision on whether the route is suitable for them before they visit. Some of this information is recorded on the council's public online map.

“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 help to improve understanding of needs, identify routes and help access projects to be developed.

5.4 Information

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

West Berkshire Council has, in the past, produced information on recreational routes. Some of this information is now old and out of date. It also does not adequately fulfil the need to provide information for users who are less mobile, have other disabilities or are in poorer health. The public surveys also showed very low awareness and use of this promotional material, with 75% of people not aware that it was on the West Berkshire website.

The resources to improve, update or provide additional promotional material are severely limited. These resources must therefore be directed to where actions will make the greatest impact and directly meet identified needs. The research for this ROWIP also showed that there are many websites and sources of information to support use of public rights of way by a range of users, and it is not a good use of resources for West Berkshire Council to duplicate these.

The priorities for information provision by West Berkshire Council will therefore concentrate on priority areas as identified in this ROWIP. Additional benefits, to rural businesses and tourism, will be maximised where possible. The existing routes will also be reviewed in line with the priorities identified in the ROWIP.

Priorities for Information Provision

Routes on your doorstep

Linking where people live to the routes close to them, linking town with countryside and linking villages together.

Accessible routes

See previous sections on access for People Living with Visual, Physical, Neurological or Other Impairments and health and mental wellbeing.

Equestrians

There are some promotional routes for equestrians. West Berkshire Council will direct users to these. It will make it easier for equestrians to find information on suitable public rights of way, investigating how to provide better information on the online mapping function.

Motorised vehicle users and trail bikes

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, investigating how to provide better information on the online mapping function. There will also be further information on responsible use.

Pop-up Promotion

Short-period promotion, highlighting particular routes, areas or public rights of way improvements, seasonal interest or other areas of interest.

West Berkshire Council produces several residents' newsletters. These will be used more fully for 'Pop-up Promotion' (see above) 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.

There is an existing online mapping system available which shows public rights of way and infrastructure on the network. At present this is in the online map for a range of West Berkshire Council services and is not easy to use.

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 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 are available. It is possible that funding may be available through projects taken forward by partners, for example related to health, through the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Beauty or heritage projects. These opportunities will be sought when they arise.

The two national trails, The Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails, produce their own promotional materials. West Berkshire Council will continue to work with the National Trail Partnerships⁴⁶.

Rights and Responsibilities in Accessing the Countryside

Encouraging the responsible enjoyment of the countryside was a theme which also recurred throughout the survey responses. All of the landowners wanted improved education of the public around the Countryside Code and their responsibilities while in the countryside, and this was 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.

It should be noted that the consultation took place during the COVID 19 pandemic when there was a substantial increase in users, some of which were new to visiting the countryside. In response to this increase visitor pressure, West Berkshire Council launched a 'Respect our Parks and Open Spaces' campaign in 2021. The national Countryside Code was also updated.

Whilst this may have resulted in a higher level of concern over this issue at that time, encouraging responsible and considerate access to the countryside is important, as more people are now visiting.

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 the public rights of way pages on West Berkshire Council's website. 'Pop-up promotion' will be used, through social media and residents' newsletters, to remind users of responsibilities. This could be useful to highlight seasonal issues, such as lambing, or nesting birds.

The surveys revealed that there were some tensions between the different users of public rights of way. One area was 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. Some user representative bodies have produced good practice guides for their members⁴⁸. The Ridgeway National Trail has also produced a leaflet and code of conduct for vehicles on The Ridgeway⁴⁹. There is scope for West Berkshire Council to produce similar resources to support responsible use and to highlight to other users where motorised vehicle users do have the right to use public rights of way alongside other users.

"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

5.5 Climate and the Environment

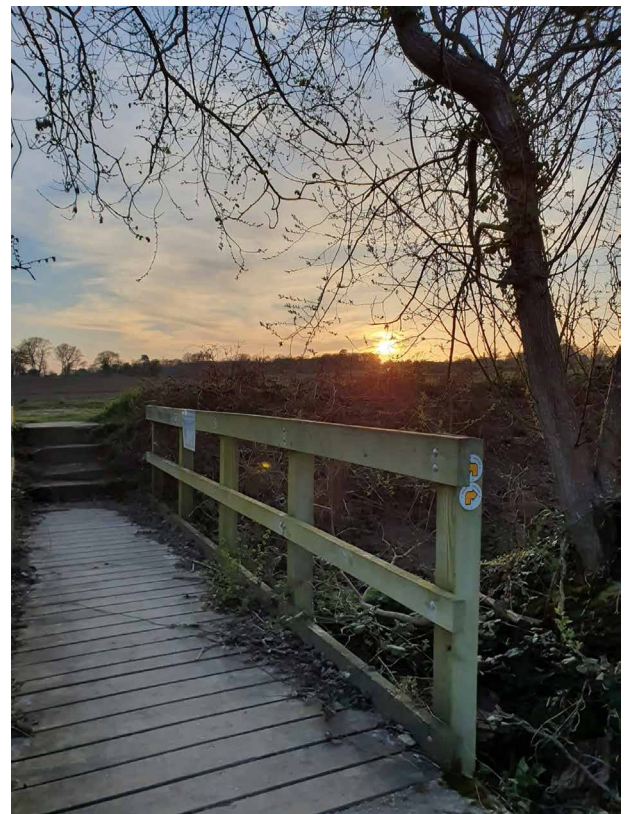
Some of the most highly visited countryside sites are also protected for their nature conservation interest. Public rights of way have a role in spreading recreational activity and encouraging people to use other areas for some of their visits. The provision of information on routes close to home will support people in using other 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 to help people when making route choices. In the 'Pop-up Promotion' campaigns, public transport options will be considered.

The public rights of way service will also continue to work with West Berkshire Council Highways teams to increase active travel.



5.6 Actions: Healthy and Prosperous Communities

Priority	Actions
Improve the accessibility of public rights of way so that more people can use them for enjoyment, health and mental wellbeing	<p>Action 31 Adhere where possible to British Standards for new infrastructure (BS5709:2018). Apply British Standards to new or diverted routes.</p> <p>Action 32 Use the results of condition surveys to prioritise the removal of infrastructure around urban areas.</p> <p>Action 33 Continue to remove stiles, barriers and restrictive infrastructure and replace with gaps, gates or kissing gates. Support communities and user groups to achieve this aim. Aim for at least 10 per year.</p> <p>Action 34 Upgrade existing structures, such as bridges and steps, to ensure maximum accessibility, for example providing handrails. Prioritise these improvements along busy routes and those close to urban areas, as identified in Action 32. Target of 5 per year.</p> <p>Action 35 Develop a system for recording routes with higher levels of accessibility to guide maintenance to ensure the routes continue to have higher accessibility.</p> <p>Action 36 Work with partners to increase understanding of the needs of users with health needs and physical, visual, neurological and other disabilities and to develop access improvement projects and information provision.</p>
Improve information provision to enable more people to use public rights of way, support the economy and reduce conflicts	<p>Action 37 Ensure that in all new information, accessibility information is included as a matter of course to enable informed decisions by users.</p> <p>Action 38 Establish, and over time evolve, an improved mapping interface with improved usability, showing infrastructure, routes, public transport and other information to support all users to make route choices.</p> <p>Action 39 Review existing promotional material and rationalise in line with the priorities of this Rights of Way Improvement Plan.</p> <p>Action 40 Produce 'Pop-up Promotion' and updates in West Berkshire Council residents' newsletters, at least once per year, in line with the priorities of this Rights of Way Improvement Plan.</p> <p>Action 41 Develop new promoted routes with partners, where these clearly provide benefits for residents, visitors and the rural economy, seeking funding where appropriate to implement these.</p> <p>Action 42 Encourage responsible use of the countryside through 'Pop-up Promotion' campaigns, online guides, inclusion of the Countryside Code on website and materials and on-site.</p>

6. Theme and Actions: Effective Delivery



6.1 Introduction

Public rights of way are an asset for West Berkshire. It is clear from the preceding sections how they make an important contribution to the aspirations and needs of the residents of the district.

The actions in this Rights of Way Improvement Plan cannot be fully delivered without additional funding. There will be a need to work effectively and efficiently, with focus on priorities, in order to maximise the impact of the resources which are available. Additional funding will also need to be secured, with an emphasis on working with partners to achieve complementary aspirations.

6.2 Working with Communities

There is some support provided by volunteers, for example through the local Ramblers' Association, but there is potential for volunteers and communities to become far more involved in many aspects of the public rights of way service. This could include carrying out maintenance work, surveying, research or many other roles. Volunteering also benefits communities and volunteers themselves, being a way to meet people, exercise and give back to the community. However, supporting volunteers and expanding their roles requires staff time and resources. Ways in which volunteer involvement could be increased will be explored during the lifetime of this Rights of Way Improvement Plan.

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

6.3 Customer Focus

The Public Rights of Way Service is a frontline service. From the engagement carried out for this ROWIP, there appeared to be 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 who had reported a problem had used 'Report a Problem', with the second most popular way being direct to the public rights of way team. People stated that 'Report a Problem' met their needs.

There were high levels of satisfaction with how West Berkshire Council Public Rights of Way Team responded to reported problems. All aspects of service provision in dealing with problems were rated as 'good'. The highest scoring aspect was the council officer's manner when dealing with the problem.

Although all aspects of how the council deals with problem reporting and resolution were rated as good, the lowest area of satisfaction was information on the progress of the problem and feedback. Ways in which this aspect can be improved will be investigated. A new problem reporting system is being developed at the time of this ROWIP, which will improve both the reporting process, and feedback.

6.4 Partnerships

Building Partnerships

The process of developing this Rights of Way Improvement Plan has raised awareness of the Rights of Way Service amongst existing and new stakeholders. This needs to continue as there are significant mutual benefits to increased partnership working. Several stakeholders expressed that they would welcome 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, policies, including in development planning, as well as projects taken forward by a range of partners.

Health and Wellbeing – A better understanding is needed of those with mobility, visual and other impairments. Projects need to be developed to improve access provision. Work is also needed with new and existing health partners to understand further how public rights of way can contribute to health and wellbeing targets, for example in Wellbeing Walk programmes 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 work to do 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 (as well as Reading and Wokingham councils). Its duties are set out in law. Members are volunteers and represent user groups, parish councils, elected councillors and land managers. This wide membership helps to improve public access while making sure the needs and interests of land managers and nature conservation are met. They provide advice, and both challenge and support the council's Rights of Way Service.

The LAF has been involved at every stage of developing this Rights of Way Improvement Plan 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 and policy.

West Berkshire Council will continue to encourage inclusivity in the LAF membership from all users, including those with a range of disabilities and impairments.

6.5 Income and Resources

Whilst some aspects of this Rights of Way Improvement Plan may be delivered using existing resources and workstreams, additional funding will be needed to deliver many of the actions in this Rights of Way Improvement Plan.

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

Some services are chargeable. The council will be periodically reviewed to ensure the council recovers the costs of delivering chargeable services.

6.6 Delivery, Monitoring and Review

More detailed actions, based on the high-level actions in this ROWIP, will be produced in a Delivery Plan at least every 2 years. This will be formed by reviewing current delivery of actions in the ROWIP, available resources and priorities. The Local Access Forum will be involved in the process of formulating the Delivery Plans.

This Rights of Way Improvement Plan is based on an extensive needs analysis and review of evidence- and looks to the future. It also links to several other West Berkshire Council strategy documents. 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 and will be adjusted as necessary. A full review will take place after ten years to assess whether the Plan still fulfils the purpose required, and amended as necessary, in line with the legislation and guidance governing Rights of Way Improvement Plans.

6.7 Effective Delivery

Priority	Actions
Ensure that this ROWIP is resourced and delivered, and that progress is monitored and the plan reviewed.	<p>Action 43 Seek the appointment of a Partnerships, Funding and Rights of Way Improvement Plan Delivery Officer.</p> <p>Action 44 Work with partners to ensure the priorities of this Rights of Way Improvement Plan are included in strategies, policies and funding bids.</p> <p>Action 45 Seek synergies in common aims and in delivery between the ROWIP and other related West Berkshire Council policies and strategies - in particular, the LCWIP, Transport Plan, Leisure Strategy, Local Plan and Infrastructure Delivery Plan - to deliver the greatest overall benefit from available resources.</p> <p>Action 46 Progress projects and bids for funding, working with partners where appropriate, to deliver actions in this Rights of Way Improvement Plan.</p> <p>Action 47 Produce a Delivery Plan with more detailed actions, based on the high-level actions in this Plan, and update this at least every two years.</p> <p>Action 48 Assess this ROWIP after 5 years to ensure it continues to align with West Berkshire's priorities and takes into account any new information and adjust as necessary (2028).</p> <p>Action 49 Start the development of the ROWIP for the following ten-year period in year 9 (2032) and carry out a full review of this ROWIP at year 10 (2033).</p>
Increase involvement and working with partners, communities and volunteers	<p>Action 50 Engage with relevant stakeholders and develop and strengthen working partnerships to deliver priorities and projects, including for active travel, health and wellbeing, people with disabilities and other impairments and other priority areas included in this Rights of Way Improvement Plan.</p> <p>Action 51 Seek a Volunteer Support Officer to expand volunteering and community action.</p> <p>Action 52 Explore and expand the range of volunteer opportunities including practical maintenance, surveying and other roles.</p> <p>Action 53 Develop partnerships with parish and town councils to resolve public rights of way issues, improve standards, implement maintenance, seek improvements, develop joint priorities and communicate with the community.</p>
To continue to maintain high levels of customer satisfaction and seek ways to improve.	<p>Action 54 Improve provision of feedback on progress of the problem to those reporting problems.</p>

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