

RIGHTS OF WAY IMPROVEMENT PLAN – DRAFT FRAMEWORK

1. Introduction

- 1.1 From November 2002 the Countryside and Rights of Way Act placed a duty on Highway Authorities to produce an assessment of their Rights of Way network and a Statement of Action on how they intend to improve the network.
- 1.2 Buckinghamshire County Council has always recognised the importance of the Rights of Way network both to residents and visitors to the County, being a significant part of our heritage and a valuable recreational resource. Additionally rights of way are becoming more important for use as 'traffic free' routes, giving walkers, riders and cyclists a means to avoid busy metalled roads.
- 1.3 Until recently the authority received grant aid from the Countryside Agency to meet national targets and initiatives such as Recreation 2000, Parish Paths Partnership and Milestones. On its own initiative, and for a number of years, the County Council has sought to improve the network for those with disabilities, and has always aimed to remove barriers wherever possible. It has created additional access through negotiation and dedication and a high percentage of routes are promoted through leaflet. It is safe to say that most of the tasks set out by the new legislation to improve the network is in part already being undertaken within Buckinghamshire.
- 1.4 However, for the first time, the countryside has new legislation which places a requirement on all highway authorities to critically assess the worth of the rights of way network, considering where paths or local networks can be improved, relocated or even where they might be unnecessary, rather than simply accept where they have evolved over the years. Authorities will be required to look at and consult the public on other issues that affect public access, and take a much broader view of the network and how it serves its use within the local transportation system, its affect on business, tourism, land management, health as well as recreation.

- 1.5 At the earliest possible stage it will be necessary to establish links with partnership groups, users, land managers, and other Local Authorities as these individuals and bodies are our primary consultees and stakeholders in the review and assessment process. In many cases the County Council is already working very closely on such matters with other interested bodies.
- 1.6 The plan will cover all of Buckinghamshire excluding the Milton Keynes Council area. This is a large area and perhaps one of the first considerations will need to be whether it may be split into small zones perhaps by Local Authority area or even land usage.
- 1.7 It may be necessary due to the size of the project area, as well as officer and resource restrictions, to consider appointing consultants to carry out the users' assessment of the network, and possibly other areas of work.

2. Summary of Legislation

- 2.1 The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 Section 60 to 62 came into being on 21 November 2002. Section 60 requires local authorities to prepare and publish a ROWIP within 5 years of that date.
- 2.2 The plan must contain an assessment of specific matters relating to:
 - The extent to which the local network (includes Footpaths, Bridleways, Restricted Byways, Byways and Cycleway) meets the present and likely future needs of the public.
 - The opportunities that the network provides for exercise and other forms of open-air recreation.
 - Accessibility of the network to blind and partially sighted persons and others with mobility problems
 - Any matters that maybe directed by the Secretary of State.

- 2.3 The plan must contain a statement of action to be taken for the management of the network and for improving the network as outlined in any assessment. The authority must publish a Notice in two local papers giving notice of a draft copy of the ROWIP and it will consider representations to the draft report from this consultation. Within 10 years of publication of a ROWIP the authority must make a new assessment of the network and decide whether to amend the plan. It must re-publish the new plan. If no amendments are made then the authority must publish a report as to why it came to this decision.
- 2.4 Before the assessment the authority must consult adjoining highway authorities and District and Parish Councils. It must consult the Local Access Forum for the area and the Countryside Agency, and any others the Secretary of State thinks should be consulted. The authority may also consult whoever it thinks should be consulted.
- 2.5 The authority shall consider any representation/comments made following publication of a draft plan.

3. Basic Aims

- 3.1 To assess the local network for the present and future needs of the public including
- Walkers, riders carriage drivers and cyclists
 - Those with mobility difficulties
- 3.2 To assess the opportunities provided locally for exercise and other forms of outdoor recreation.
- 3.3 To provide a good quality network of routes and transport services that will
- Meet all journey needs
 - Reduce reliance on the car
 - Provide choice for everyone

3.4 This integrated, joined up approach should lead to

- Stronger rural economies – improved access increased visitor spending;
- Healthier population – opportunities for more active lifestyles;
- More vibrant rural communities – improved access to services;
- Cleaner environment – with less dependency on motor cars;
- A better quality of life for everyone.

4.1 Consultation – Areas to Consider

4.1.1 Note: The Countryside Agency intends to set up a good practice Web Site/Database shortly.

4.1.2 At the earliest possible stage it will be necessary to establish links with partnership groups, users, land managers, and other Local Authorities as these individuals and bodies are our consultees and stakeholders in the review and assessment process.

4.1.3 It will be necessary to carry out a wide consultation to assess the needs of users and potential users of the rights of way in the area, in order to identify strengths and weaknesses, who uses the network and what it is used for, who does not use the network and why, and what improvements should be made to the network. Consultation should include both local people and visitors to the area.

4.1.4 It is possible that some of this market research may be better tendered out to a consultant that specialises in such projects.

4.2 Consultation – Surveying the Needs of Users

4.2.1 Consideration must be given to how the County Council will draw comment from different user groups on requirements on the local network for example:-

- Questionnaire in Citizens' Plan
- Survey on Web Site/Intranet Survey
- Questionnaire to Local Councils – Parish/District

- Questionnaire to Recognised focus groups
- Questionnaire to Recognised landowner/manager groups
- Competitions in promoted leaflet packs
- Media contacts to instigate response from public.
- Survey in 'Bucks Times' with a prize
- Questionnaires to the Tourist Boards

4.3 Using Existing Studies

4.3.1 In addition the Council should make use of information from previous surveys and exemplar studies both locally and nationally including: -

- British Waterways user surveys
- British Horse Society – local horse density surveys
- Sustrans user surveys
- National Trust customer studies
- Tourist Board surveys
- National Trail Surveys
- Forestry Enterprises – access studies
- Thames Water/Water Authorities – access studies
- Chilterns AONB Surveys
- Integrated Access Demonstration Projects
- Pilot projects on ROWIP in Bedfordshire, Hampshire etc. (Due to conclude October 2003)

4.4 Consulting - Land Managers

4.4.1 Whilst ROWIP will be looking at improving the network it is still important to take into account the interests of land managers and those engaged in agriculture and forestry as well as heritage and conservation.

4.4.2 Some of these groups are represented on both the Local Access Forum and the Local Rights of Way Liaison Groups, but it will be necessary to consult more widely, certainly at a national level with representative bodies.

4.5 Consultation with partnership groups externally / internally on Partnership Projects – consulting other adjoining authorities etc

4.5.1 Due to the depth of the investigation that will be required to carry out a full and complete assessment of the current and future requirements of the network, it is imperative to make early links and contacts with relevant officers/representatives who are in charge of other study plans that have overlapping agendas. Indeed plans that will have an impact on the ROWIP but conversely may be impacted upon by the ROWIP.

Plans and Strategies with Project Links

Plan/Strategy	Authority Responsible	Comments on plan/links to ROWIP
*Local Transport Plan	County	5 year plan outlines the authority's proposals to reduce car use, road accidents and increase travel options in the county. Numerous links with ROW, Safer Routes to Schools, cycling and road building schemes, Traffic Management, Passenger Transport. From 2005 ROWIP will be incorporated into the LTP.
PPG17	District	Requirement on Districts to carry out an assessment of facilities for access, open-air recreation, sports etc.
PPG13	District / County	Guidance on transport. Former DoE/DOT plan. Gives guidance to local authorities on the integration of land use and transport planning with the aim of reducing the need to travel and reliance on the private car, strong links to LTP.
Local Plan	District / Developers	Outlines the areas plans for future housing and industry. Gives an indication of where there may be pressure on the network, or opportunities for improved access.
Major Development Areas	District	MDA's, large scale housing sites may put pressure on the existing network, but also offer opportunity for additional access.
*Structure Plan	County	Outlines county plans for housing, tourism, economic growth, environment, waste/minerals, recreation and health.
*Buckinghamshire Community Plan	County	Links to health, social exclusion, improvements to the environment.
Cultural Strategy	County	Outlines County's cultural background, links with health, arts sport and the countryside.
Tourism Plans	<u>Tourist Boards</u>	Indicates attractions to the area.
*Waste and minerals plans	County	Outlines present and future requirements for waste disposal and mineral supply – specific sites may provide access opportunities
*Crime and Disorder Reduction Strategy	County	3 year strategy on proposals to reduce crime, maybe links here with areas designated with High Crime levels and path diversions/extinguishments.
Customer First	County	Customer Focus Plan in development
*Education Development Plan	County	Sets out education priorities and actions. Links with curriculum initiatives at national level – sports, culture and personal education.
Outdoor Recreation/Sports Amenities Management plan	District	Links with PPG17/Local plan, provision of sports and recreation amenities in district area including parks and open-space.
*Community Care Plan	County	Adult Social Care. May be links with disability, mobility difficulties.

Primary Care Trust Agenda	NHS	Responsible for implementation of government policies/strategies in Aylesbury Vale's health service
Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee	County / NHS	New committee set up to oversee all areas of the health within Bucks. Looks at improvements to health. Maybe links with health of population and disability.
MOD – Access Plan	Ministry of Defence	Maps MoD land to which public have open access.
ROW Business Plan	County ROW Group	Annual Plan outlines state of network, targets and outcomes.
AONB management plan	Chilterns AONB / County / Districts	Management Plan for the Chilterns project area, outlines public access requirements, links to environment.
Integrated Access Demonstration Project	County / Chilterns AONB / Countryside Agency	Pilot project initiative by Countryside Agency. Looking at integrated access within part of Chilterns area – links with travel choices, quiet routes, safer routes to school, disabled access.
Sustrans Projects	Sustrans / County / Districts	Web Site showing the routes of the National Cycleway Network. New routes often planned along existing paths and gives opportunities for new paths.
Countryside Agency and DEFRA Stewardship	DEFRA	Land management scheme funded by DEFRA gives payments to land managers to restore/recreate targeted landscapes and improve opportunities for access.
Local Conservation Bodies	Various – Woodland Trust BBOWT, RSPB.	Regional Sites Project Plan – will outline management of all site by a specific conservation trust. Also likely to be site-specific plans.
Environment Agency	EA	Regional main rivers and authority water courses. Policy document on public access.
English Nature	EN	Regional Sites and site specific plans – documenting policy on public access.
English Heritage	EH	Regional Sites and site specific plans – documenting policy on public access.
Open Access Land Map	Countryside Agency	Map for the region showing open access land, common-land etc to be issued in draft summer 2003.
Diversity Steering Group	County	New group looking at policy on diversity with the County.

(* CC statutory plan)

5. The Assessment

5.1 The information contained in the strategies/plans – 4.4 above, and information gained from all the consultations and existing studies – should be scrutinised as part of the assessment process.

5.2 Carry out an assessment of the condition of the existing network using existing plans documents and other sources of information including: -

- Analyse Definitive Map for Fragmented/Cul de Sac Routes
- Analyse Data on list of streets
- BVPI 178 assessment of results and trends
- Ordnance Survey Maps
- Analyse other access assets, i.e. canals, reservoirs, parks etc, in Bucks but also adjoining, including District Council Sites.
- Visitor attractions, within and close to Bucks, Theme parks, historic houses.
- Fragmentation of network by busy carriageways/other hazards
- Ease of use, including waymarking and obstructions
- Present structures
- Village Links/strategic routes/Gateways from urban to countryside/solitude areas around urban development
- Recreational/promoted routes, promoted by Bucks but also by other agencies
- Disabled Routes
- Project areas with access provision, including Countryside Stewardship, River Ray etc.
- Possible quiet road routes
- Sustrans Routes
- Incorrectly/unrecorded Unclassified Unmetalled County Roads – Discovering Lost Ways.

5.3 An assessment also needs to be made of information provided by local users regarding problems with missing links and other areas of fragmentation. Included in this assessment will be claims for modifications and creation.

6 Summary

Statement of Action

- 6.1 The assessment should enable the County Council to reach a conclusion about the strengths and weaknesses of the network, and identify where action is required, to draw up a Statement of Action, which is an integral part of the ROWIP. The statement should show proposed action, costs and key partners in the action, and timescales for implementation.

7 Role of the Local Access Forum

- 7.1 It is a function of the Local Access Forum to advise on the improvement of public access to land in its area for the purpose of open-air recreation and the enjoyment of the area.
- 7.2 The Local Access Forum may give a steer and advise on areas of priority to be covered by the plan. It will look at other opportunities that may be missing from the broader consultation, and eventually act as the consortium of users and land managers that will 'ratify' the published document.

8 Publishing the plan.

- 8.1 The Council will be required to publish a draft plan, and it will be necessary to publicise this fact and invite representation. Before publishing the final plan comments must be considered and acknowledged.
- 8.2 Following any amendment the plan will be published and a copy made available for public inspection. Copies may be made available free of charge, or at a reasonable cost. The document should also be published on the Council's Web site.
- 8.3 The Council is required to monitor progress on the Statement of Action, and within 10 years make a new assessment and decide whether to amend the plan. In order to meet this requirement it will be necessary to establish a monitoring system so we may assess how the County Council is meeting its targets within the plan.

9 Securing Funding

- 9.1 Implementation of areas of the plan will undoubtedly have an implication on the Council's Rights of Way budget and may be constrained by finances.
- 9.2 From 2005 the ROWIP will be incorporated in the Local Transport Plan. This will make funds available from central Government to meet some of the aims in the plan.
- 9.3 Additionally, the Countryside Agency is looking at means to fund the work that Highway Authorities will be identifying within their plans.
- 9.4 This may mean raising the profile of certain types of work on a regional basis, i.e. improvements for mobility access or quieter routes in specific geographical areas. It is hoped that this will influence the availability of resources.
- 9.5 Also certain improvements could be funded locally, for example through Local Landfill Tax or possible or other targeted grant-aided sources.

10 Conclusion

- 10.1 Although the Council have 5 years in which to produce a plan it is felt that a start needs to be made as soon as possible – there is a lot of area to cover and the breadth of the task is quite considerable.
- 10.2 Some objectives will need to be clear from the start, in particular consideration of a methodology on how to best assess the strengths and weakness, quality and quantity of the network from a users viewpoint. The County will need to assess its customers, its product and its non-customers and importantly the product cost.
- 10.3 It is hoped that more information will be made available from the Countryside Agency, especially the results of the exemplar studies that are ongoing in different areas of the country. Results on these studies and some guidance on Best Practice should be available towards the end of the year.

10.4 The Rights of Way Improvement Plan should provide the framework for improving quality of Countryside Access and the quality of the life of people who live and visit the Countryside of Buckinghamshire. However it must be fluid and adaptable to circumstances and opportunities as well as to changing resources and finances.