

Briefing Note – Rights of Way Operations

Introduction

There are over 2125 miles (3400km) of public footpaths, bridleways, restricted byways and byways in Buckinghamshire, making up the network which is managed in partnership with land managers, farmers, user groups, volunteers and Parish Councils. This network not only provides an important asset for residents, but with both the Thames Path and Ridgeway National Trails passing through the County and the heavily utilised network of paths around the Chilterns AONB, which attracts over 55 million leisure visits per annum (*Chilterns Leisure Visitor Survey*), it contributes both to the national and local tourism industries.

It has become increasingly clear that the rights of way network also serves and can serve a wider range of needs, becoming a multi-purpose network of routes and access opportunities. The network links communities together and is as important for those making trips on foot/h hoof or bicycle for pleasure as it is for those making journeys to school, work, shops and other local amenities.

Aims and objectives of the Rights of Way Service

Along the network there are some 2400 bridges, 6800 signposts and arms, and over 3300 waymark posts that are maintained by the County Council.

The primary aim of the Rights of Way Operations Team is to ensure that paths remain open and available for the public to use; wherever possible it will

- Ensure paths remain open and available by removing excessive natural vegetation growing on them
- Signpost paths where they leave a metalled road and waymark along them where required
- Provide and maintain bridges over natural watercourses and ditches
- Provide, where possible, support for the maintenance of stiles and gates
- Work with path volunteers and parishes wishing to carry out maintenance
- Advise Parishes with Devolvement Agreements with the Rights of Way Summer Surface Clearance schedule.
- Survey 5% of our network per year to monitor our performance using a national methodology
- Offer a free advice service and materials to encourage land managers and occupiers to make access easier on Public Rights of Way by removing stiles completely where they are no longer needed, replacing stiles with gates wherever possible and making existing gates easier to use
- Provide information to assist users, landowners and others who are involved with public rights of way
- Investigate complaints and take appropriate enforcement action as necessary to ensure paths remain open and available.

Reactive to reports

There is no formal inspection regime carried out on the Rights of Way network, apart from bridge structures which are inspected in a 6 – 7 year rotation. The Rights of Way Team reacts to defect reports reported by members of the public and user groups such as the Ramblers, Chiltern Society, the British Horse Society and Parish and Town Councils.

Reporting a rights of way problem -

<https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/environment/countryside-and-public-rights-of-way/public-rights-of-way/>

The Council uses a bespoke RoW online reporting system (this is different to Fix My Street) which allows our customers to log an issue (with their own login) using an interactive version of the Rights of Way map, and can track an issue to resolution. They can choose to receive regular updates through the system, but can also view the progress of an issue they have reported. This system also allows Officers to transmit work sheets to path volunteers and path checkers who wish to carry out volunteer works on the local path network. The online system can be used to communicate progress directly back to the customer. As it is map based, users can print off small maps showing rights of way, but it can also be used on a mobile device to follow a route while you are walking. The map will also show where other issues are logged and what infrastructure can be found on the network, e.g., stiles/gates/bridges. Anyone unable to use the online system can also call (01296 382416) the Contact Centre which will log reports from customers directly on to this system.

Issue Target times – management matrix

<https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/environment/countryside-and-public-rights-of-way/public-rights-of-way/rights-of-way-improvement-plan-2020-to-2030/rights-of-way-network-condition-and-asset-management/#management-matrix>

The Management Matrix was developed to provide a method of assigning a target date to each report received, which is anything from 5 days to 12 months. The target time is based on a scale of severity of an issue against the likely frequency of use of a path, e.g., a dangerous structure on the Thames Path which has high footfall would have a target time of 5 days, but a missing waymark on a remote path would have a target time of a year. The Council publishes the matrix and expected timescales online and also in the Rights of Way Improvement Plan for Bucks, with an explanation on the target times.

Landowner Responsibilities

- Landowners are responsible for:
- reinstating and clearing paths crossing arable land
- cutting back trees or hedges overhanging the path
- keeping the route clear of obstructions
- not ploughing or cropping field edge paths
- installing and maintaining gates and stiles for controlling livestock
- providing bridges if the need arises from the action of a landowner, e.g., widening a ditch.

Volunteers

Community groups, volunteers and parish and town councils provide maintenance support worth thousands of pounds every year.

There are active volunteers surveying and maintaining the network every week of the year. The council recognises and values highly the work these groups and individuals carry out. This work is carried out in partnership, and the council provides assistance and support so that this work can continue.

Parish and Town councils take an active interest in their public rights of way. Around half are committed to devolved responsibilities in 2023. This means some are responsible for cutting vegetation on public rights of way, but a parish or town council carries no responsibility for protecting public rights to use the network.

Summary of Number of Issues annually across whole RoW Network

Issues resolved 2200 av. (425 issues av by volunteer work parties)

Issues reported 2350 av.

Clearance carried out 130km /ann.

Bridges repaired 70-80 /ann.

Sign and waymark jobs completed 400 /ann.

Stiles repaired installed 190 /ann.

Gates repaired installed 130 /ann.

Surface defect and drainage problems resolved 80-90/ann.

Improvements to the network to aid mobility 220 structure improvements per annum.

Enforcement issues resolved 700 /ann. av.

High Wycombe UP – Summary of Issues 1st April – 12th Jan 2024

139 paths with a total network of 48574 metres (30 miles)

Issues resolved 36 tasks completed

Issues reported 75 logged reports

Scheduled Summer Clearance carried out 1847 metres on 7 paths

Overgrowth and undergrowth 1670 metres on 12 paths

Sign and waymark jobs completed 3 jobs

Surface defect and drainage problems resolved 5

Enforcement issues resolved 16

The Future - Aims and objectives of the Rights of Way Service

- Work towards the aims and objectives outlined in the Rights of Way Improvement Plan for Buckinghamshire - <https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/environment/countryside-and-public-rights-of-way/public-rights-of-way/rights-of-way-improvement-plan-2020-to-2030/looking-after-the-rights-of-way-network/>
- Work towards improving and developing relationships and processes with volunteer groups to allow better resilience in maintaining the rights of way asset
- Wherever possible work with landowners and residents to improve their local path network to provide a network accessible to residents and visitors to the County.

Rights of Way Operations

Communities - Highways and Technical Services