

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC GROWTH AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

TO:	STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE		
DATE:	16 NOVEMBER 2022	AGENDA ITEM:	
TITLE:	RIGHTS OF WAY IMPROVEMENT PLAN - DRAFT FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION		
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SERVICE:	PLANNING, TRANSPORT AND PUBLIC PROTECTION	WARDS:	BOROUGHWIDE
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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides an update on progress with developing the new Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan for Reading, following feedback received from the initial public consultation undertaken last summer which has been incorporated in the updated draft plan.
- 1.2 **Appendix A** - Reading Rights of Way Improvement Plan - Draft for Public Consultation

2. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- 2.1 To note the progress made on developing a new Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan for Reading, as outlined in this report.
- 2.2 To provide approval to undertake a 12 week statutory public consultation on the draft Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan, in line with guidance produced by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

3. POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1 The Council has a statutory duty to prepare and keep updated a Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP), under Section 60 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. In addition, the Council has duties under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Highways Act 1980 to maintain and keep the

Definitive Map and Statement of Public Rights of Way updated, and to ensure that rights of way in the borough are adequately signposted, maintained and free from obstruction.

- 3.2 The draft RoWIP has been prepared in accordance with the Statutory Guidance for Local Highway Authorities prepared by DEFRA (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs). The key objective of the plan is to encourage more people to choose to walk or cycle for local journeys, which is aligned with the objectives contained in a range of Council strategies and policies including the current Corporate Plan, Local Transport Plan, Air Quality Action Plan, Climate Emergency Strategy and Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
- 3.3 Whilst the RoWIP is an important and standalone document within its own right, it will also become a sub-strategy to the Council's new Local Transport Plan (LTP), the Reading Transport Strategy 2036. Whilst the LTP sets the context and overarching vision for future transport provision in Reading, sub-strategies provide more detailed implementation plans for specific topics. It will therefore become part of the suite of LTP sub-strategies which includes the Bus Service Improvement Plan, the Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan and the Sustainable Modes of Travel to School Plan.

4. THE PROPOSAL

- 4.1 The purpose of the RoWIP is to identify improvements for the rights of way network in the borough, to ensure it is kept up-to-date and well maintained, to better integrate it into the overall transport network, to provide a better experience for its users, and to encourage more people to choose to walk or cycle for local journeys.
- 4.2 Public rights of way provide rights to enable land to be accessible by the public, allowing people to pass along them at any time. In addition to walking, some rights of way are also open to cyclists, horse riders and in rare cases motorists (although there are none open to motorists in Reading). The different types of right of way are set out below:
- Footpaths - for walking, running, mobility scooters or powered wheelchairs.
 - Bridleways - for walking, horse riding, bicycles, mobility scooters or powered wheelchairs.
 - Restricted byways - for any transport without a motor and mobility scooters or powered wheelchairs.
 - Byways open to all traffic - for any kind of transport, including cars (but they're mainly used by walkers, cyclists and horse riders).
- 4.3 The public rights of way network is set out in the Definitive Map and Statement which are held by all local transport authorities. The network in Reading constitutes 41 footpaths, three bridleways and one restricted byway. Some of these are routes connecting people to key destinations, such as the town centre, Reading Station, Green Park and Thames Valley Business Park. They are used by people traveling to work and school, as well as rural-type routes that are used for leisure purposes. Public rights of way are marked with signs or coloured arrows, for example yellow for footpaths, and blue for bridleways.

- 4.4 As part of preparing the draft RoWIP an initial consultation was carried out from Monday 7th June to 24th July 2021. This enabled local organisations and residents to have their say on the public rights of way network in Reading, to explain how they use the network, identify any barriers and suggest enhancements to the network. We also asked for feedback on using shared paths for walking and cycling, the rating of the RoWIP priorities and for evidence of any historic rights of way that were not recorded as part of the current network.
- 4.5 The Council received over 200 responses as part of this consultation, with key headline feedback as set out below:
- People's method of travel on the network was predominantly by walking but a high proportion cycled - 90% walking, 48% cycling and 4.4% horse riding.
 - The paths were used by 98% of the people for leisure, 30% to travel to work and 6% to travel to education.
 - The most used public rights of way in Reading are those along the River Thames (FP1, FP24 and, FP25) and the Kennet & Avon Canal enter (FP2).
 - The network has been used more since the pandemic - 29 % of the people said much more, 39% said more and 27% about the same.
 - 80% of the people believe they will continue using the network also more in the future.
 - 53% of the people had some reasons to be deterred from using the network and 47% had no such reason. The barriers described by those deterred were: the condition and maintenance of the foot-paths (53%), inconsiderate behaviour of the public on the paths (23%), lack of information about the routes (10%), better access required (8%) and the network being disjointed (6%).
 - 78% of respondents felt that better maintenance of the routes would encourage people to use the network.
 - 7% of people had some difficulty accessing the network due to mobility issues such as path width, path surface, gates and physical barriers and 93% had no such difficulty.
 - There was strong support for our 5 proposed RoWIP priorities - with between 80-93% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed with all our priorities.
 - There was a lot of support for shared paths - 73% supported shared paths, 10% did not know and 17% did not support.
 - A number of suggestions were received regarding potential new links which could be added to the network in the future.
- 4.6 The feedback received from the initial consultation has been used to update the draft RoWIP. In addition, audits of all of the rights of way in the borough have been undertaken to help with the development of the plan.

4.7 The draft strategy for public consultation is provided at **Appendix A**. This is a wide-ranging plan, covering all aspects of the management, maintenance and improvement of the Public Rights of Way network which aims to meet the current and future needs of the public. It is proposed to undertake 12 week statutory consultation over the winter, which will include a public survey and engagement with the following statutory consultees:

- Mid & West Berks Local Access Forum (LAF)
- The Ramblers
- Canal & River Trust
- British Horse Society

4.8 In addition to the main strategy document, there are a number of appendices which are currently being finalised. Following the conclusion of the consultation, all feedback provided will be reviewed and the plan will be updated prior to seeking approval from a future Committee meeting for the Council to formally adopt the new RoWIP next year.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

5.1 The future delivery of schemes contained within the RoWIP will help to deliver the following priorities in the Council's Corporate Plan:

- Healthy Environment
- Thriving Communities
- Inclusive Economy

6. ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

6.1 Transport is the biggest greenhouse gas emitting sector in the UK accounting for around 27% of total carbon emissions. As set out in the Reading Climate Emergency Strategy 2020-25, this figure is lower in Reading with transport accounting for around 20% of carbon emissions. However, significant investment in sustainable transport solutions is vital in order to respond to the Climate Emergency declared by the Council in February 2019 and to help achieve our target of a carbon neutral Reading by 2030.

6.2 The Climate Impact Assessment tool has been used to assess the proposal as set out within this report, resulting in an overall Net Medium Positive impact. This is due to the RoWIP being focused on encouraging the use of sustainable transport, walking and cycling as attractive alternatives to the private car. The object of the plan is for the network to be open to the public, safe, clean, well maintained and in good condition. This will encourage people to use it alongside the rest of the walking and cycling network in Reading, with resultant health benefits for the public.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

7.1 As set out within the report, as part of preparing the draft RoWIP an initial consultation was undertaken from Monday 7th June to 24th July 2021, and the report is seeking authority to undertake a 12 week statutory consultation on the draft plan.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 8.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, a public authority must have due regard to the need to:
- Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act,
 - Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it, and
 - Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- 8.2 The Council, and where appropriate partner delivery organisations, will undertake an equality impact assessment scoping exercise on the projects included within the draft RoWIP at the appropriate stage of development.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 By preparing the RoWIP the Council is fulfilling its statutory duty to prepare and keep updated a Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan, under Section 60 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.
- 9.2 In addition, the Council has duties under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the Highways Act 1980 to maintain and keep the Definitive Map and Statement of Public Rights of Way updated, and to ensure that rights of way in the borough are adequately signposted, maintained and free from obstruction.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 Preparation of the RoWIP is being undertaken through the use of existing Council budgets. Delivery of the schemes and initiatives as set out within the plan are all subject to securing suitable levels of future funding.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 11.1 The draft Rights of Way Improvement Plan is available here - <https://www.reading.gov.uk/vehicles-roads-and-transport/transport-strategy/rights-of-way-improvement-plan/>
- 11.2 Further information on the public rights of way network in Reading is available here - <https://www.reading.gov.uk/vehicles-roads-and-transport/public-rights-of-way/>