

RIGHTS OF WAY IMPROVEMENT PLANS: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Why are rights of way important?

Rights of way are important because they:

- enable everyone to enjoy the beauty and tranquillity of the countryside;
- provide an excellent resource for learning about the environment;
- enable people to get away from increasingly busy roads;
- boost tourism and contribute to the local economy;
- provide a convenient means of travelling, particularly for short journeys;
- encourage people to improve their health and fitness by taking exercise.

Improved management, combined with better information and the creation of new routes in carefully chosen locations would make a significant difference to people who use, or would like to use, footpaths, bridleways and byways.

What are Rights of Way Improvement Plans?

Section 60 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW Act) requires local highway authorities to publish a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) covering all of their area. This must be produced in draft form for public consultation, then published by November 2007. The ROWIP must then be reviewed at least every 10 years.

ROWIPs are intended to be the prime means by which local highway authorities will identify the changes that need to be made to meet the Government's aim of better provision for walkers, cyclists, equestrians and people with limited mobility.

ROWIPs will not just focus on rights of way. They will identify improvements to footpaths, bridleways, restricted byways, byways, cycle tracks and permissive paths. And they will also consider linkage with the wider access network that includes open access, quiet lanes and other roads.

ROWIPs will not just seek to improve infrastructure, although this is important. They will also identify any improvements that need to be made in the management of access, and the provision of access information.

What will a Rights of Way Improvement Plan contain?

This draft ROWIP sets out:

- why rights of way are important;
- the policy context and links with other plans;
- the methodology that has been used to identify the priorities for rights of way improvements.
- a set of prioritised actions;
- the key organisations that may need to help with each action;
- the projected timetable for completion.

How are Rights of Way Improvement Plans prepared?

In identifying the improvements to be made, access authorities must take account of the needs of both local people and visitors. They must assess:

- the extent to which local rights of way meet the present and likely future needs of the public;
- the opportunities provided by local rights of way for exercise and other forms of open-air recreation and the enjoyment of the authority's area;
- the accessibility of local rights of way to blind or partially sighted persons and others with mobility problems.

In making these assessments, access authorities should consider, for example, the adequacy of:

- access to attractive areas which might currently have few rights of way;
- attractive routes that might support local tourism;
- opportunities for cycling, harness-horse driving, horse riding and walking that enable people to avoid roads used mainly by motor vehicles;
- routes from centres of population, and routes that can be used in conjunction with public transport;
- circular routes that might encourage healthy exercise;
- routes which may suffer from natural erosion;
- routes that help to ameliorate the effects of major roads or development;
- convenient and safe road, rail, river and canal crossings;
- the rights of way network, in relation to cul de sacs and routes carrying different rights along their lengths;
- routes for local utility journeys;
- routes in heavily developed areas.

These assessments will result in a set of prioritised actions that will go in Part II of the ROWIP. These actions could be generic themes, such as 'develop health walks near to settlements', specific improvements such as 'extend Elterwater Miles without Stiles route to Skelwith Bridge', or a combination of both.

Local highway authorities already have 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 and to ensure that ways are adequately signposted, maintained and free from obstruction. These matters will therefore only appear in the ROWIP Statement of Action if they are identified as a priority for improvement.

What happens once Rights of Way Improvement Plans have been published?

There is no statutory duty to implement Rights of Way Improvement Plan actions. This means that, while extra funding has been allocated to prepare ROWIPs, local highway authorities will need to enter partnerships and seek funding from a wide variety of sources to implement their Statement of Action.

What is the role of Local Access Forums in relation to Rights of Way Improvement Plans?

Before preparing or reviewing a rights of way improvement plan, local highway authorities must consult the local access forums in their area. The role of local access forums may include:

- commenting on opportunities for access to open countryside especially where new linear routes may be desirable;
- assisting in setting priorities for implementing the plans;
- commenting on published draft plans.