

**Oxfordshire
Rights of Way Improvement Plan
2006-2014**

Foreword

The County Council's vision for Oxfordshire is “***We want Oxfordshire to be a thriving County which adapts to a changing world and remains a special place in which to work, live and visit***”

Our Rights of Way Improvement Plan fits closely with this and sets out our vision for managing and improving, access to the countryside and public rights of way for our residents and visitors from 2006-2014¹.

Public rights of way give users the opportunity to enjoy Oxfordshire's countryside, and often provide a more sustainable means of travelling to school, work and local facilities without relying on motor vehicles. Getting out into the countryside can provide significant health and social benefits, and money spent during recreational visits contributes directly to the local economy. In addition to being a major recreational and transport asset, the rights of way are also a significant and unique cultural resource that has evolved over hundreds of years. We know that many of Oxfordshire's residents and visitors actively use and enjoy the public rights of way network, and we appreciate the vital role that farmers and land managers play in the quality of that experience.

We need to seek improvements to the management and provision of the public rights of way network for all users and would-be users, and improve the connections, use and understanding of the network. In this way public rights of way can adapt to the changing needs and demands of users, non-users and land managers, and fulfil their potential as a vital part of life in Oxfordshire.



Rodney Rose
Oxfordshire County Council
Cabinet Member for Transport

¹ On 22 March 2012, the Cabinet Member for Transport gave authority to extend the validity date of the current RoWIP to March 2014, and review for the longer term aiming for a new submission by March 2014. Extending the validity date includes altering the electronic version of the plan's date on its front cover and at points throughout the document, plus making some upgrading changes to the text without amending the overall structure, meaning or aims of the plan.

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Introduction

1. This document is the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP) for Oxfordshire. The County Council (“We”) is required to produce the RoWIP under s60 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. The RoWIP forms a distinct strand of the Local Transport Plan (LTP), which sets out the County Council’s vision for transport. The third Local Transport Plan is valid until 2026 and RoWIP1 now runs until March 2014. On 22 March 2012, the Cabinet Member for Transport gave authority to extend the validity date of the current RoWIP to March 2014, and review for the longer term aiming for a new submission by March 2014. Extending the validity date includes altering the electronic version of the plan’s date on its front cover and at points throughout the document, plus making some upgrading changes to the text without amending the overall structure, meaning or aims of the plan.
2. The *Context and Background* section outlines the statutory processes and guidance that have led to the development of the plan. We also explain how we have worked with many others in order to get to this stage.
3. Part A, our *Statement of Action*, sets out our vision and aims for the improvement of public rights of way. Each of these aims has been developed directly from our assessment of need. We have identified nine outcomes and twenty-eight actions that we consider necessary to achieve the overall vision, and these are set out in the statement of action tables. The links to the key issues in the Assessment of Need and the Local Transport Plan objectives are shown. The *Achieving the Plan* section then outlines the process we intend to take over the next year in order to secure longer term improvements, and how we will measure and report on progress each year.
4. Part B, a condensed version of our *Assessment of Need*, provides a background and analysis of the countryside access and public rights of way network in Oxfordshire; its use, demand, management and potential. For reasons of readability within this version, some of the sections’ numbering has been altered. The complete version, including charts, is available online at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/rowip. For each of the key issues a link to the appropriate aim is provided.

Context and Background to the Rights of Way Improvement Plan

5. Through the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, the then government set out its aim of better provision for walkers, cyclists, equestrians and people with mobility problems, especially in light of the contribution that better rights of way can make to sustainable transport, tourism, recreation and health. Under s60 of this Act, all highway authorities are required to set out their plans for improvement of this rights of way network through the production of a Rights of Way Improvement Plan.
6. The plan is required to conform to government guidelines on timing, format and content, and contain an authority's assessment of:
 - the opportunities provided by local rights of way for exercise and other forms of open-air recreation and enjoyment
 - the extent to which local rights of way meet the present and likely future needs of the public
 - the accessibility of local rights of way to blind or partially sighted persons and others with mobility problems

and a statement of:

 - the action the authority proposes to take for the management of local rights of way, and for securing an improved network of local rights of way
7. The government deadline for the plan's production was November 2007 with a review of the plan to be made within ten years. Following advice from the Oxfordshire Countryside Access Forum, the County Council's Executive gave their full support and approval to the production of Oxfordshire's Plan in line with the production of the second Local Transport Plan (LTP)..

How the Plan has evolved

8. The County Council produced RoWIP1 after full research and consultation was undertaken.
9. We adhered to the requirements of section 61(1) of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 in that, before preparing our plan and making our assessments; we liaised with, and consulted with the bodies set out under that section of the Act. Key organisations included neighbouring highway authorities, district, town and parish councils, the Countryside Agency, AONB offices, user and land manager groups and organisations, and individuals with an interest in the issues, opportunities and management of the local rights of way network. We used Oxfordshire's Citizens Panel to ascertain satisfaction with the network and then ran focus groups using panel members to gain deeper understanding of the views of Oxfordshire residents. County Council officers have used their knowledge to contribute to the process, and we have been able to make use of our extensive database of reports on the 2,500 mile rights of way network.
10. The draft RoWIP was issued for public consultation at the end of January 2005. The consultation period ran for the statutory period and the resulting representations were incorporated into the final plan.
11. Our main partner throughout this process has been the Oxfordshire Countryside Access Forum - the local access forum established under the Countryside And Rights of Way Act 2000. This group provides advice and guidance on improving countryside access and provide a well-balanced contribution to improving countryside access due to their mix of countryside users, land managers and other related interests. Members have helped define and refine the RoWIP at every stage, and will play an important advisory role in identifying sources of potential funding and the prioritisation and delivery of the plan's ambitions.

Part A - Statement of Action

Vision Statement

- 12 Oxfordshire County Council's Corporate Plan sets out the key objectives and priorities for action for the council until 2016/17. It outlines our overall goal of achieving a 'thriving Oxfordshire' and the four overarching aims of the work we do, as established last year, which are:

- A World Class Economy
- Healthy and Thriving Communities
- Enhancing the Environment and
- Efficient Public Services

We know that Oxfordshire is already a great place to live and work, but a thriving Oxfordshire means fulfilled people, vibrant and active communities, and Oxfordshire reaching its full potential.

The plan is important as it sets out the broad strategic direction, as well as the values and principles, that guides the council's work.

13. The Rights of Way Improvement Plan's vision statement ties into this overarching vision and priorities and sets out our ambitions for the improvement of public rights of way.

The **vision** for this Rights of Way Improvement Plan is:

To improve the existing public rights of way network for all users and would-be users, and improve the extent, use and understanding of the network, so that public rights of way fulfil their role as a vital part of life in the County.

To realise this vision we need to see the following **aims** achieved:

- 1. Public rights of way are protected and well maintained**
- 2. A better joined-up network that meets the needs and demands of users whilst accommodating the interests of land managers, the natural environment and our cultural heritage**
- 3. A public rights of way network which enables access for all**
- 4. A thriving countryside where residents and visitors are able to understand and enjoy their rights, in a responsible way**

14. We have identified nine outcomes that we consider necessary to achieve the overall vision and aims, and these are expanded on with twenty eight strategic actions in the *statement of action tables*. The key links to the Assessment of Need and the Local Transport Plan are shown. Annex 1 contains the Countryside Access Mission Statement, developed in 2012 after liaison with Oxfordshire Countryside Access Forum and the Monitoring Group. This document is meant to present the work and ambitions of the authority regarding countryside access in a concise form.

Aims and Outcomes

1. Public rights of way are protected and well maintained

Outcome 1: All public rights of way to be recorded, available and unobstructed

Outcome 2: All public rights of way to be well maintained and well marked

2. A better joined-up network that meets the needs and demands of users whilst accommodating the interests of land managers, the natural environment and our cultural heritage

Outcome 3: Detailed knowledge of the extent and adequacy of the public rights of way network for each type of user in relation to settlements, facilities and attractions

Outcome 4: Increased understanding of the needs, demands and satisfaction with the current and future public rights of way network

Outcome 5: Additions that complete disjointed networks, provide access to and from settlements and attractions, and provide alternatives to road use

3. A public rights of way network which enables access for all

Outcome 6: Local rights of way are made as accessible as possible whilst balancing the needs of current and future land and livestock management.

Outcome 7: Farmers and land managers support making the countryside more accessible

4. A thriving countryside where residents and visitors are able to understand and enjoy their rights, in a responsible way

Outcome 8: Promoted routes, on and off-site information, websites and activities provide comprehensive information and guidance for increased and sustainable access to the countryside

Outcome 9: Public rights of way and countryside access contribute directly to a thriving local community

STATEMENT OF ACTION TABLES

AIM 1: PUBLIC RIGHTS OF WAY ARE PROTECTED AND WELL MAINTAINED

Outcome 1: All public rights of way to be recorded, available and unobstructed

Action	Key issues and page in <i>Assessment of Need</i>	LTP objective	RESOURCES	Key partners & stakeholders	Original Timescale (year from 2006)			
						1-2	3-4	5+
1.1 Continue duty to process applications for modifications to the Definitive Map and Statement (DMS)	4,p22 5, p27 6, p28 18, p38		ES	User groups, interest organisations		✓	✓	✓
1.2 Process additional 12 modification applications per year, per additional rights of way officer	18, p38		AS, P	User groups, interest organisations		✓	✓	✓
1.3 Continue duty to remove and prevent unlawful obstructions of rights of way	1, p15 2, p16 4, p22 7-18 p31-38	Accessibility, Quality of Life	ES, P	Land managers, NFU, CLA, local councils, users		✓	✓	✓
1.4 Remove 200 unlawful obstructions per year, per additional field officer	As above	Accessibility Quality of life	AS, P	Land managers, NFU, CLA, local councils, users		✓	✓	✓
1.5 Develop and manage DMS and Rights of Way information management system	4, p22 5, p27 16-18 p34-38		ES			✓	✓	✓

ACTION TABLE KEY	Q ✓ <i>Quick Wins</i> – can be done in first year	ES <i>Existing Staff</i> - can achieve this	AS <i>Additional Staff</i> are needed	P <i>Partnerships</i> can help achieve this
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Outcome 2: All public rights of way to be well maintained and well marked

Action	Key issues and page in <i>Assessment of Need</i>	LTP objective	RESOURCES	Key partners & stakeholders	Original Timescale (year from 2006)			
						1-2	3-4	5+
2.1 Continue duty to maintain rights of way making best use of resources and seeking efficiencies where possible	1, p15 2, p16 4, p22 6-18 p28-38	Accessibility Quality of Life	ES, P)))		✓	✓	✓
2.2 Increase frequency of summer vegetation removal (mowing) on linking and local routes to three cuts per year))))))))))))))))		✓	✓	✓
2.3 Increase winter vegetation clearance and maintenance of surface and drainage works	1, p15 2, p16 5, p28 6-18, p28-38	)Accessibility)Quality of Life ) )	) AS £80,000 per) 2-person team))	Land managers, local councils, user groups		✓	✓	✓
2.4 Increase the number of signs installed and replaced))))))))))))		✓	✓	✓
2.5 Increase the number of bridges and gates installed and replaced))))))))))))		✓	✓	✓

ACTION TABLE KEY	Q ✓ <i>Quick Wins</i> – can be done in first year	ES <i>Existing Staff</i> - can achieve this	AS <i>Additional Staff</i> are needed	P <i>Partnerships</i> can help achieve this
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AIM 2: A BETTER JOINED-UP NETWORK THAT MEETS THE NEEDS AND DEMANDS OF USERS WHILST ACCOMMODATING THE INTERESTS OF LAND MANAGERS, THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT AND OUR CULTURAL HERITAGE

Outcome 3: Detailed knowledge of the extent and adequacy of the public rights of way network for each type of user in relation to settlements, facilities and attractions

Action	Key issues and page in <i>Assessment of Need</i>	LTP objective	RESOURCES	Key partners & stakeholders	Original Timescale (year from 2006)			
						1-2	3-4	5+
3.1 Undertaking a desktop Geographical Information System (GIS) assessment of public rights of way and non-statutory access (including permissive paths, nature reserves, Woodland Trust, Environmental Stewardship and National Trust sites), include plotting of contributions to the RoWIP process	4, p22 5, p27 6, p28 7-15, p31,32 16, p33 17, p36	Accessibility Road Safety Quality of Life	ES	Local councils, user groups, RDS, land owning bodies	Q✓			
3.2 Agree a standard for defining network adequacy for each user type	5, p27 7-15, p31,32	Accessibility	ES	OCAF, user groups	Q✓			

Outcome 4: Increased understanding of the needs, demands and satisfaction with the current and future public rights of way network

4.1 Undertake Citizens Panel research every 2 years	7-15, p31,32	Quality of life	ES					
4.2 Enable opportunities for feedback on our rights of way functions	7-15, p31,32	Quality of Life	ES	Users				

ACTION TABLE KEY	Q ✓ <i>Quick Wins</i> – can be done in first year	ES <i>Existing Staff</i> - can achieve this	AS <i>Additional Staff</i> are needed	P <i>Partnerships</i> can help achieve this
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Outcome 5: Additions that complete disjointed networks, provide access to and from settlements and attractions, and provide alternatives to road use

Action	Key issues and page in <i>Assessment of Need</i>	LTP objective	RESOURCES	Key partners & stakeholders	Original Timescale (year from 2006)			
						1-2	3-4	5+
5.1 Continue to seek ad-hoc opportunities to improve the network through planning, agri-environment schemes and other processes	) ) ) ) )		ES P £2,000-£20,000+ per scheme	Natural England, AONBs, district & local councils, planners, developers, land managers, user groups, TOE	Q✓	✓	✓	✓
5.2 Produce framework for assessing feasibility and prioritising improvements	) ) )		ES	OCAF, AONBs, RDS	Q✓	✓		
5.3 Produce costed and prioritised programme of strategic additions to the network based on that framework	) ) ALL)))	ALL	ES	OCAF, AONBs district & local councils	Q✓	✓		
5.4 Identify sources of additional resources to deliver improvements	) )		ES	OCAF, funding providers	Q✓	✓	✓	✓
5.5 Deliver programme of improvements on existing and new public rights of way	) )		AS plus £2,000-£50,000+ per scheme	Land managers, district & local councils			✓	✓

ACTION TABLE KEY	Q ✓ <i>Quick Wins</i> – can be done in first year	ES <i>Existing Staff</i> - can achieve this	AS <i>Additional Staff</i> are needed	P <i>Partnerships</i> can help achieve this
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AIM 3: A PUBLIC RIGHTS OF WAY NETWORK WHICH ENABLES ACCESS FOR ALL

Outcome 6: Local rights of way are made as accessible as possible whilst balancing the needs of current and future land and livestock management.

Action	Key issues and page in <i>Assessment of Need</i>	LTP objective	RESOURCES	Key partners & stakeholders	Original Timescale (year from 2006)			
						1-2	3-4	5+
6.1 Recommend gaps and gates to replace existing stiles in line with BS5709:2001	6, p28 7-15, p31,32 16-18, p34-38	Accessibility Quality of life	ES, P	Land managers, NFU, CLA	Q✓	✓	✓	✓
6.2 Seek the agreed removal of stiles and gates where no longer needed for livestock control	4, p22 6, p28 7-15, p31,32 16-18, p34-38	Accessibility	ES, P	Land managers, local councils, NFU, CLA	Q✓	✓	✓	✓
6.3 Produce a programme of improvements to achieve ten additional 'paths for all' across the county per year	2, p16 4 p22 6, p28 7-18, p28-38	Accessibility Quality of Life	AS, P plus £1000-£20000+ per route	OCAF, AONBs, local councils, land managers, access groups, RDS		✓	✓	✓

Outcome 7: Farmers and land managers support making the countryside more accessible

7.1 Develop a programme of awareness raising and information sharing to encourage easier access	17, p36 18, p38	Accessibility Quality of Life	ES	OCAF, land managers, CLA, NFU, AONBs, community and access groups, RDS		✓		
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ACTION TABLE KEY	Q ✓ Quick Wins – can be done in first year	ES Existing Staff - can achieve this	AS Additional Staff are needed	P Partnerships can help achieve this
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AIM 4: A THRIVING COUNTRYSIDE WHERE RESIDENTS AND VISITORS ARE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND AND ENJOY THEIR RIGHTS, IN A RESPONSIBLE WAY

Outcome 8: Promoted routes, on and off-site information, websites and activities provide comprehensive information and guidance for increased and sustainable access to the countryside

8.1 Continue to ensure a high quality standard of accessibility, maintenance and provision for all local authority and other organisations' promoted routes	) ) ) )	) )	) )	) )		1-2	3-4	5+
						✓	✓	✓
8.2 Continue to attend country shows and circulate information panels around appropriate venues	1-2, p15, 16 4, p22 15, p32 17, p36 18, p38	)Accessibility)Quality of Life ) ) )	) ES) £200-£2,000+) per leaflet,) panel or venue)	District and local councils, AONBs, National Trails Team, Land managers, user groups, CoAg, RDS		✓	✓	✓
8.3 Continue to develop information panels, leaflets and signs that support understanding & responsible use of public rights of way and open country.)))))))))))		✓	✓	✓

Outcome 9: Public rights of way and countryside access contribute directly to a thriving local community

9.2 Include local businesses, services and public transport in all access information media	1, p15 3, p18	Quality of Life	ES	District Councils, AONBs, CLA, NFU, suppliers, retailers	Q✓	✓	✓	✓
9.3 Seek to maximise benefits from economic and health programmes that link with countryside access	1, p15 2, p16 3, p18	Quality of Life	ES	Health bodies, District Councils, AONBs, CLA, NFU, RDS, CoAg, local councils	Q✓	✓	✓	✓

ACTION TABLE KEY	Q ✓ <i>Quick Wins</i> – can be done in first year	ES <i>Existing Staff</i> - can achieve this	AS <i>Additional Staff</i> are needed	P <i>Partnerships</i> can help achieve this
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Achieving the Plan

15. The RoWIP sets out our vision for improving, modernising and sustaining access to the countryside for our residents and visitors from 2006-2014. It is aspirational in nature and does not imply a financial commitment to implementation. Government requires the authority to undertake the research and then produce the RoWIP but there is currently no statutory duty, nor specified funds, to implement it.
16. The aims, outcomes and actions are strategic in nature and necessarily do not include improvement suggestions for individual rights of way. The programme of specific rights of way improvements will be led by an annual 'business plan'. The content of each year's RoWIP Delivery Action Plan (DAP) will be dependent on the level of additional funding and support that has been secured. Monitoring of achievements in the previous year will be included.
17. The annual DAP is produced early in the new financial year once budget allocations are known. A draft is submitted to the Oxfordshire Countryside Access Forum for advice and approval, and the Rights of Way Monitoring Group are also encouraged to contribute to it. Regular updates are given to OCAF members as needed and a more formal 6-monthly update is submitted to OCAF.
18. At the end of the financial year an end-of-year position summary report is made for the DAP's delivery and this is included alongside the next year's plan. OCAF members are invited to comment, and advise of amendments and improvement. All information is published on the RoWIP web pages at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/rowip. This annual process will continue until the end of RoWIP1.
19. A review of progress against RoWIP aims at the end of three years was undertaken in 2009. A full review of RoWIP1 will be undertaken as part of the process of producing RoWIP2 or its equivalent.

Oxfordshire's Countryside Access Mission Statement

We want the public to get the most value from all accessible countryside and public rights of way in the county.

This is because the countryside access network:

- Supports the health and wealth of the community. It provides people of all ages with opportunities:
 - For exercise and wellbeing: walking running, cycling, and horse riding provide important social and health benefits.
 - For recreation: anything from the pleasure of a days walking with friends, to daily exercise with the dog
 - For cultural enrichment, education and enjoyment: the chance to interact with our heritage, historic and natural environment
- Forms part of the highway network. It provides routes to work, school and local facilities for walkers and cyclists, and helps reduce traffic congestion
- Is an asset to the rural economy for residents, visitors and tourists. It provides access to Oxfordshire's attractive rural countryside and a connection between city, town and countryside.

To help the public get the most out of this valuable resource we will:

- Make sure they are usable and accessible to all:
 - Keep rights of way defined, open and well maintained with improvements focused where they have most effect – those routes most used and valued, and/or which create networks
 - Suitable for *all* users where most appropriate (e.g. support and encourage change from stiles to gates)
 - Keep an up to date record of public rights of way, commons and village greens
- Respond to evolving needs and spatial growth:
 - Understanding how population, settlements and transport infrastructure will change and how access needs to adapt
 - Ensure that access is considered in planning and transport decision making
- Help people to understand it and enjoy it:
 - Providing clear information, signage, interpretation and promotion
 - promote and develop the network especially close to key centres of population
- Work with the national and local agendas and within constrained economic climate:
 - Increase public and community engagement in monitoring, maintenance and development of the network
 - Seek to meet community needs by securing resources from development and grants.

Part B - Assessment of Need

Methodology for the assessment of need

20. Section 60(2) of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 specifies which matters should be assessed by the local highway authority in the production of its Rights of Way Improvement Plan:
 - a. the extent to which local rights of way meet the present and likely future needs of the public,
 - b. 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,
 - c. the accessibility of local rights of way to blind or partially sighted persons and others with mobility problems, and
 - d. such other matters as the Secretary of State may direct.
21. Government's statutory guidance for RoWIPs sets out the six step process that local highway authorities should take in assessing the extent to which local rights of way meet the present and likely future needs of the public:
 - a. study the definitive map and statement of rights of way;
 - b. collate and consider data on applications for modifications to the map and statement;
 - c. collate and consider data on requests for improvements to the network;
 - d. collate and consider data on the condition of the network
 - e. undertake a survey to assess the nature and scale of the present and likely future needs of the public (both local people and visitors to the area) in relation to the rights of way network; and
 - f. identify any other relevant information, including other plans and strategies for the area
22. Oxfordshire County Council adhered to legislative requirements and tried to follow the guidance in the preparation of this part of the RoWIP. However the presentation of information within the assessment of need differs from the above layout in order to follow a more useful and logical order. Firstly, we show why the rights of way network benefits users, then what access is available in Oxfordshire, what users and organisations think about this access, and finally, how we manage this access. For each of the key issues a link to the appropriate aim in the statement of action is provided.
23. For reasons of readability and space within the final RoWIP, this version of the assessment of need is condensed and some of the sections' numbering has been altered. The complete version, with charts, is available from www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/rowip.

The potential opportunities provided by local rights of way for exercise and other forms of open-air recreation and enjoyment

24. Oxfordshire is an outstanding place in which to live, work and visit. The public rights of way network forms an integral part of this living landscape. Put simply, a well-maintained and well-marked network, with information and improvements that meet the needs of users and potential users, offers almost unlimited potential for our residents and visitors to enjoy Oxfordshire's unique countryside. Particular opportunities include:

- Tourism & Economy
- Health & Social
- Transportation

Tourism and Economy opportunities

25. Oxfordshire is a mainly rural county. Seventy percent of its area of 1,007 square miles is devoted to agriculture. Almost 75 percent of the county is designated as Area of Outstanding Beauty, Area of High Landscape Value or Green Belt (Audit Commission, 2003), which means that there is an extremely rich and diverse variety of countryside within Oxfordshire. This includes the Cotswolds Hills to the west, Ironstone Hills to the north, the Chiltern Hills to the south and east and the Berkshire Downs to the south. The River Thames, its tributaries and other more minor rivers and valleys wind their way through the county (plate 1), and the Oxford Canal links Oxford to the Coventry Canal. This natural and cultural landscape is a rich resource for residents, visitors, workers and students within the county, and for visitors from further afield. (Audit Commission, 2001).



Plate 1: River Thames and Thames Path National Trail at Pinkhill, near Farmoor

26. Of the urban areas, Oxford City is the principal cultural and heritage centre. Other market towns include Abingdon, Banbury, Bicester, Chipping Norton, Henley on Thames, Wantage and Witney. Blenheim Palace is a World Heritage site and the county is well endowed with many other historical, cultural and architectural attractions such as the Henley Regatta, Blenheim Horse Trials, Cotswold Wildlife Park and National Trust properties, all of which draw in millions of visitors.
27. The public rights of way network is the main means of accessing and enjoying the countryside, and contributes to the 'value' of tourist access (Box 1). Often this access is taken directly from urban areas using 'green corridors' or alternatives to private motor vehicles. Knowing that there is an attractive range of accessible countryside in an area can be an attractor in its own right for tourism as well as encouraging more overnight or multi-night stays. The Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) outbreak of 2001 demonstrated the extreme side of what can happen to local enterprises when this resource, often taken for granted, is no longer available or when the countryside is perceived as being inaccessible.

Box 1: The value of tourism and countryside access

Tourism is a vital part of the south east economy with spending estimated at £10 billion per year and a full time equivalent (FTE) workforce of 290,000. Within Oxfordshire the total value of UK residents and overseas resident spend was £499 million in 2002. This benefit is distributed more evenly through the season for UK residents but shows greater peaks in the summer season (April-Sept) for overseas residents (Tourism South East, 2004).

Christie and Matthews (2003) used existing national and regional research and information such as Audit Commission data, National Rights of Way Condition Survey and UK Day Visitors Survey (UKDVS) to review the economic and social value of walking. They found that:

- Over 527 million estimated walking trips are made annually to the English Countryside
- The income generated from these trips is estimated to be between £1.4 billion and £2.7 billion and supports between 180,559 and 245,560 FTE jobs

Despite their estimated costs of £69.2 million necessary to restore the existing path network to an acceptable standard for public use, plus another £18.55 million per year to maintain the network **they concluded that the total benefits from walking are greatly in excess of the costs of path restoration and maintenance**

Data for equestrian and cycle economic benefits are not so comprehensively documented. Cycle use is lower; the 1996 UKDVS estimated that 32% of the population own a bicycle and at least one bicycle is available to 50% of homes. Approximately 17 million (30%) of the population ride occasionally. However, within Oxford and in immediate surrounds these figures are likely to be much greater.

Horse ownership is generally much lower than bicycle ownership and use, except in particular 'hotspots' around equestrian riding and stabling centres and in certain parts of the Vale and West Oxfordshire districts. A 1996 survey by the British Equestrian Trades Association estimated that 1% of the national population are horse owners and 3.8% are occasional horse riders. Tourism South East and Cheshire County Council cite the BHS national 2001 estimate of 2.4 million people (4.5%) taking part in riding regularly. This increase would suggest that horse use is increasing.

Equestrian activity can be seen as a particularly high spending sector, despite lower levels of use, because of the nature and expense of keeping live animals safely. This can have major positive impacts on the local economy through stabling, servicing and equipment suppliers. In addition there is a developing market for walking, cycling and horse-riding 'package' type holidays.

KEY ISSUE 1: Countryside access has the potential to play an important strategic and local role in generating and sustaining the local economy as well as delivering other economic benefits such as reducing car use. However there is no specific investment with regard to these aspects in relation to the core resourcing of the network's management and development. The experience and satisfaction of residents and visitors is directly attributable to the investment that is made in the maintenance, information and promotion of the entire countryside access network, and how local rights of way are perceived and integrated with tourism, local enterprises and local transport networks.

AIM 1-4

Health and Social opportunities

28. Despite the Nation having a more sedentary lifestyle, studies show that 30 minutes of moderate or vigorous activity, five days per week can reduce the chance of heart disease by 30%. It can also reduce the risk of diabetes by 50%. Walking as a low-impact form of exercise can also reduce the risk of strokes, osteoporosis, high blood pressure, bowel cancer, Alzheimer's disease, arthritis, anxiety and stress. In addition regular walking can improve a person's well-being by increasing confidence, stamina, energy, weight control and life expectancy (Walking the Way to Health Initiative, 2004). All of these factors have direct and indirect economic benefits for the individual, the local highway authority, the health authority and the community.
29. The first 'Health Walks' project was set up by Dr William Bird, a GP at Sonning Common in Oxfordshire. The aim of the project was to improve peoples' fitness and well-being by encouraging them to use their local countryside for walking. This project has now been taken up nationally and within Oxfordshire there are currently 14 schemes benefiting many hundreds of people. Sonning Common Health Centre have extend the scheme even further by running 'Health Cycles' and a 'Green Gym' to benefit peoples' health even further. In addition, local groups such as the Cotswold AONB Voluntary Wardens, Ramblers' Association, Chiltern Society and the 'Second Lease' walking club provide these benefits through their group's activities, and many also undertake voluntary maintenance work on Oxfordshire's rights of way as well (plate 2). Outside of these schemes, groups and individuals able to easily access the countryside should be more likely to partake in informal recreation on a regular basis.
30. Oxfordshire's residents are relatively wealthy. However there are still a significant number of residents and visitors who may be excluded from making use of Oxfordshire's countryside because of information, perception or physical provision factors. This includes members of the public who do not have any impairment, as exclusion can occur when the rights of way are not managed well.
31. Oxfordshire has a population of 626,000 of whom around 40 per cent are younger than 16 or older than 60. Overall, the proportion of older people is increasing. The ethnic minority community population is 3.3 per cent compared with a national figure of 5.5

per cent. This rises to 10.5 per cent in Oxford (source Audit Commission, 2001). There are also 23,000 'Blue Badge' parking permit holders in the county who will have some sort of mobility impairment. Many of these users require additional provision, in order to make the countryside more accessible and enjoyable.



Plate 2: Chiltern Society volunteers clearing vegetation at Goring © Howard Dell

KEY ISSUE 2: The countryside has an important role to play in improving peoples' health and social life. This can have real economic and 'inclusiveness' benefits to the individual, the local authority and the community. Countrywide health walks schemes are only a small part of the actual use of the network, and show the sheer potential that could be realised if the whole of the rights of way network was properly defined, maintained and promoted. The overall aim should be to make the countryside as accessible as possible whilst retaining the attributes that stimulate people into wanting to experience it. In order to do that, it is still necessary to ensure that the basic standard of path provision, maintenance and information is increased to such a level that all users can have the confidence to know that they can use the routes that they wish to.

AIM 1-4

Transportation opportunities – Public Rights of Way and the Local Transport Plan

32. Other economic issues concerning residents and visitors relate to transport out into the countryside and for daily journeys. Motor vehicle dependency is choking the towns and countryside and reducing the very qualities that people value in their local area or that which they are visiting. This damages the economy through congestion, pollution, stress and the destruction of peace and quiet. The local rights of way network offers one of the best opportunities to reduce this motor vehicle use especially those short journeys to work, school, local facilities and local walks, provided that it is properly provided and integrated in the local transport network.
33. Government intends that the RoWIP and the Local Transport Plan (LTP) are fully integrated from 2010. However, Oxfordshire County Council has coordinated the production and linking of both plans from 2006. The RoWIP helps meet the strategic objectives in the LTP in the following ways.
- a. **To tackle Congestion:** An improved local rights of way network in urban areas would provide alternatives to car use for short local journeys, which place a significant strain on urban road networks. For longer recreational trips, especially at weekends; a dual approach could deliver reductions in congestion. Firstly, improvements to the immediate local rights of way network would enable more direct access to the countryside from settlements to be made, reducing the need to drive to particular or popular areas. Secondly, improvements to public transport provision or linking routes from establishments near to popular destinations could reduce the localised traffic impact at these sites by encouraging people to walk or cycle to the area.
 - b. **To deliver Accessibility and improve Quality of Life:** A high quality, well maintained and protected rights of way network can provide important links to jobs, services and recreational opportunities for people who do not have access to a car or bus service, or who would wish to walk or cycle to these facilities. Many settlements and routes, including the Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails, are made difficult to use because of road, rail and river barriers. Examples of major roads that need improved crossings for walkers, cyclists and equestrians include the M40, A34 and A420. Major rivers and canals that would benefit from improved crossings and access are the River Thames at Bablock Hythe and Shillingford, and the Rivers Windrush, Dorn, Evenlode and Cherwell, and the Oxford Canal.
 - c. In addition, a number of (individually) small-scale improvements to the network, including path surfacing, road verge mowing, improved gates and bridges, additional linking routes, better signing and increased vegetation clearance, could all make a significant difference to the quality of the local environment and the numbers of people being able to use and enjoy the public rights of way network.
 - d. **To improve Air Quality:** High quality walking, cycling and riding routes and facilities would enable and encourage the use of non-vehicular transport in vulnerable urban and rural locations.
 - e. **To reduce safety problems:** An unsafe road environment can deter walkers, cyclists and equestrians from choosing to take part in these activities directly from their settlements. Improvements to the rights of way network, in particular the creation of

facilities for safer road, rail and river crossings, and the creation of additional or alternative routes, can be combined to make a better experience for users and increase the choices available to people for utilitarian and recreational journeys. Where there is no alternative to using roads, traffic management measures such as warning signage, barriers and improved verge/hedge cutting, can increase drivers' awareness and responsible behaviour towards walkers, cyclists and equestrians. These users can also be encouraged to ensure that they are highly visible to motorised vehicle users when using roads (plate 3).

- f. **To improve the street environment.** The urban rights of way network offers the opportunity for car free journeys within a settlement. Many of these rights of way could be improved by surfacing, lighting or landscaping work to provide a safer environment that will encourage people to use the routes. For example, since 2004, the Countryside Service and Oxfordshire Highways have joined forces (using LTP funds) to improve a small number of village and town paths each year that are unsurfaced and in poor condition, and replaced the paths with asphalt surfaces – a significant benefit for local residents and the future maintenance of the route .



Plate 3: Two vulnerable road users who are ensuring their visibility to motorists

KEY ISSUE 3: The LTP and the RoWIP have a number of shared goals. Improvements to the rights of way network may help in meeting the LTP's objectives.

The individual's choice and ability to access the countryside by private car should be considered in relation to the negative factors of car use. These include overcrowding and congestion, environmental pollution, theft and vandalism. OCC and partners can help influence behaviour by offering realistic local solutions that encourage alternative travel. This includes making routes easily accessible from centres of population, more joined up, and with safer road and river crossings, or routes accessible by public transport. In addition, OCC can encourage an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding between motorised and more vulnerable road and road-verge users, providing alternative provision where these are necessary and desirable and ensuring there is increased provision for the socially excluded

The extent to which local rights of way and other access resources meet the present and likely future needs of the public

Network adequacy - study of the Definitive Map and Statement

Availability of the network to different classes of user

34. Access to Oxfordshire's countryside is predominantly achieved through the 2,602 mile public rights of way network. Thus according to the paths' recorded status *walkers* should be able to use 100% of the network, figure 1. *Horse riders and cyclists* should be able to use 872 miles (33%) of the network as bridleway, byway open to all traffic (BOAT) and restricted byway, figure 2. *Horse carriage drivers* should be able to use 200 miles (7.7%) of the network on restricted byways and BOATs, figure 3. *Motorised users* should be able to use 44 miles (1.6%) of network on BOATs, figure 4, with uncertain rights on another 156 miles (6.1%) of restricted byways. N.B. Under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006, Roads Used as Public Paths (RUPPs) were redesignated as restricted byways and so motorised users are unable to use ex-RUPPs without lawful authority. ***However all of these figures must be taken in the context of a sometimes disjointed, fragmented and obstructed network.***

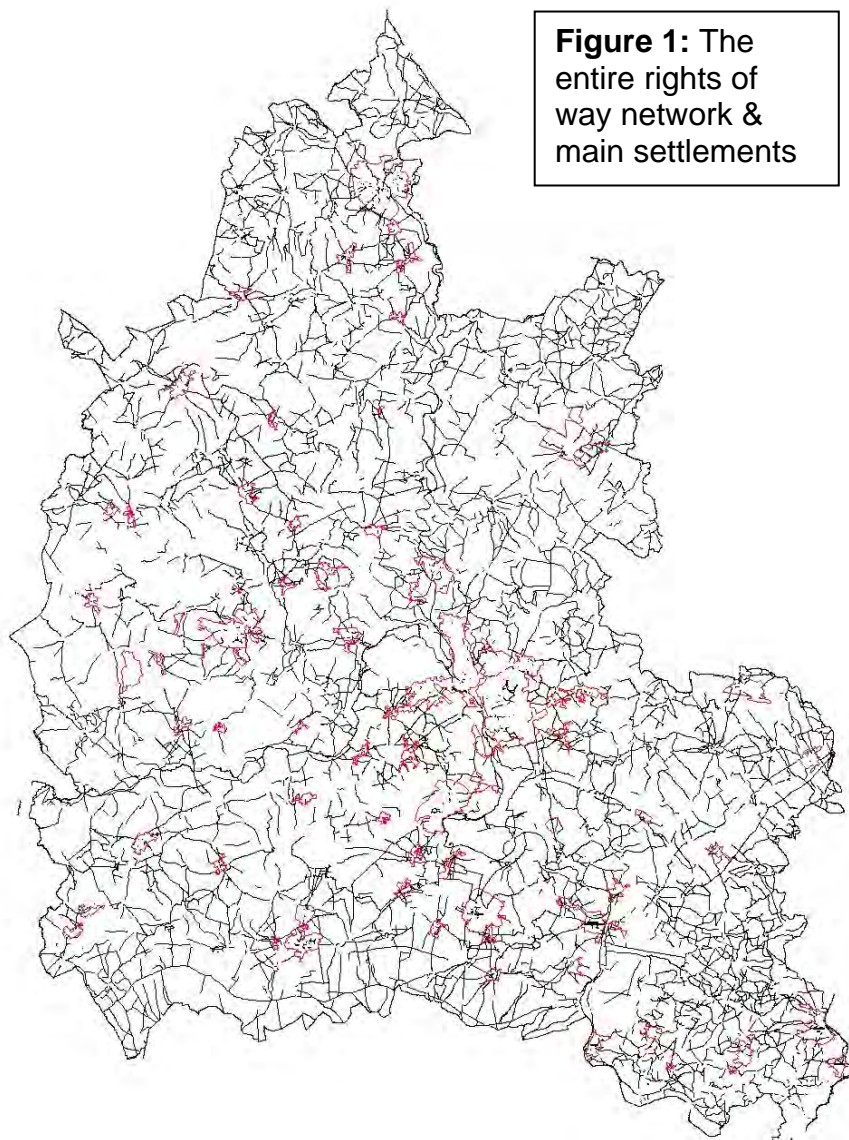


Figure 2: The cycle and horse riding rights of way network

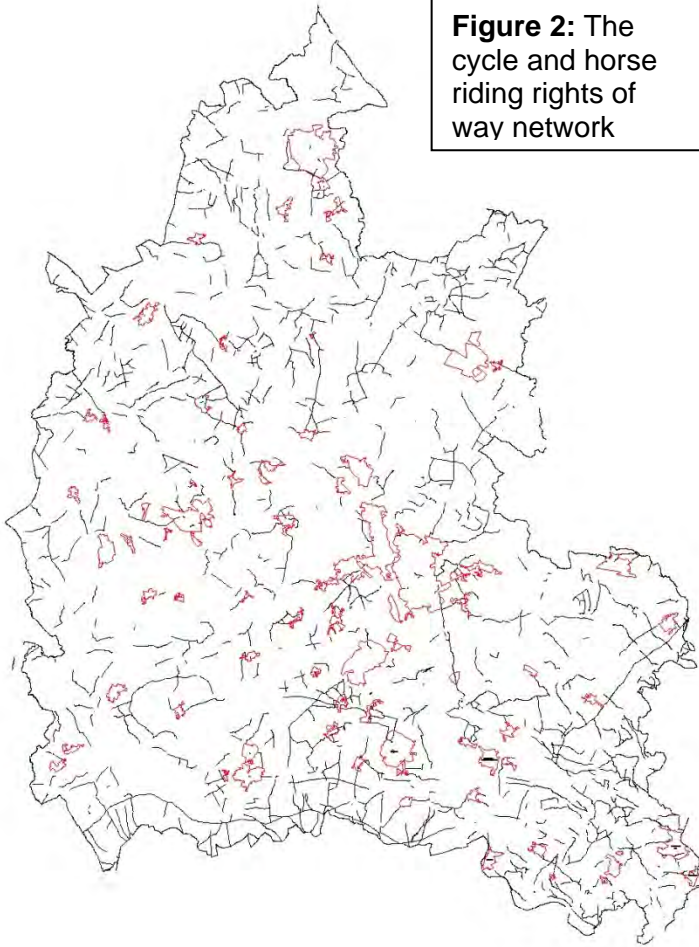


Figure 3: The carriage driving network

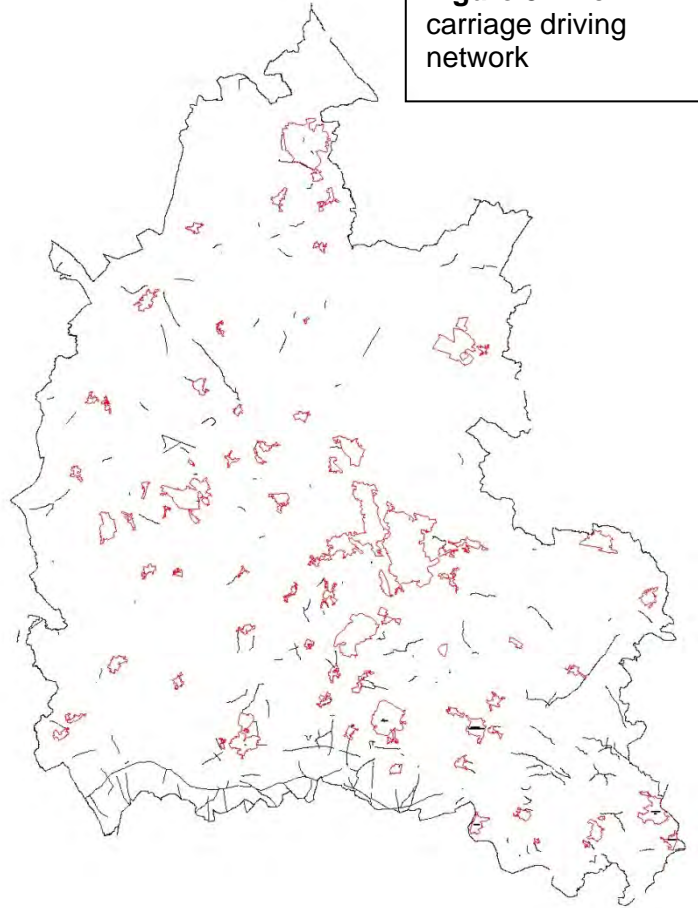
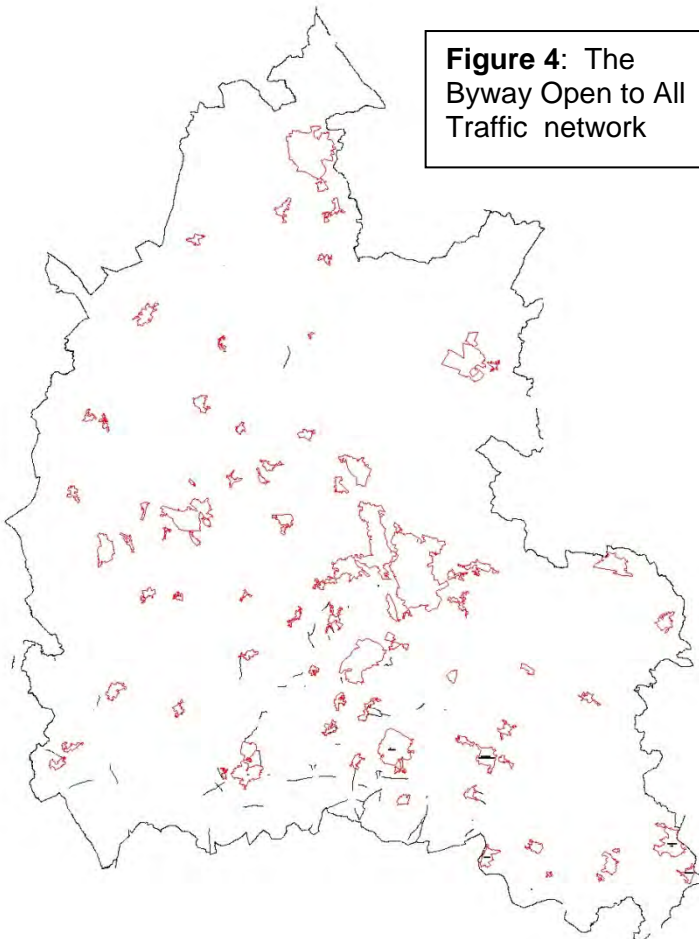


Figure 4: The Byway Open to All Traffic network



Length of PRow Network

Footpath – 1,730 miles (2,768km)

Bridleway – 672 miles (1,075km)

RB – 156 miles (250km)

BOAT – 44miles (71km)

Total – 2,602 miles (4,164km)

Areas deficient in rights of way and suggestions for improvements

35. The rights of way network has evolved over many hundreds of years, and continues to evolve today. It is not a planned network and, although it is similar in length to the county roads network, there is less connectivity between individual rights of way, and people in settlements are not always able to access a right of way and enjoy a decent amount of traffic-free or quiet countryside. Even from a glance at the network diagrams it can be seen that the distribution and density of the network differs widely between different areas of the county and especially for the different user types.
36. Annex 2 contains network assessments undertaken after RoWIP1 was published. These include the 'connected network', the 'disconnected network' and the 'needs' put together by respondents to the RoWIP consultation (see below).
37. Respondents to the various phases of our RoWIP consultations have provided some very detailed comments. Forty seven local councils made over 500 suggestions for improvements to existing paths, as well as suggestions for potential new routes (Box 2). The large number and the sheer variety of suggestions, from less than one fifth of local councils, demonstrate the extent and complexity of the demands that are currently unmet on the existing network..
38. The Ramblers' Association too, amongst others, have made some specific suggestions (Box 3). They are keen to point out there are many more improvements that they would be happy to see across the county. They feel that these are indicative of the kind of deficiencies that Oxfordshire County Council must address if anything resembling genuine improvement is to be attained. Add these to the suggestions made by local councils and other bodies, plus those in areas who did not respond, and the true extent of this demand emerges. The real challenge here is building capacity so that the authority can respond adequately to these local residents' and visitors expressions of need.

Box 2: Potential access improvements in Oxfordshire (local councils' response to RoWIP scoping survey 2003.

Issues (*Some responses have multiple issues per entry*)

- Routes & improvements to enable and encourage more people to access the countryside – **171**
- Routes & Improvements to join up the countryside access network – **130**
- Routes & Improvements that enable better access for all – **126**
- Routes & Improvements to paths affected by transport corridors – **41**
- Routes & Improvements to link people to local facilities – **19**
- Paths no longer needed – **13**
- Routes & Improvements to link people to public transport – **2**
- Routes & Improvements to link people to attractions – **1**