

WEDNESDAY, 12TH FEBRUARY 2025

Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2025- 2035

Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to:

- Update the Committee on how the Council has been developing the next 10-year statutory Surrey Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) and
- Request consideration of feedback on the draft ROWIP before a final version is presented to Cabinet for formal adoption in March 2025.

Executive Summary

1. As the local Highway Authority, Surrey County Council has a duty to maintain public rights of way in Surrey. Public Rights of Way (PROW) include footpaths, bridleways, restricted byways and byways open to all traffic. In Surrey there are 2,175 miles of PROW used for recreation, enjoyment, health and wellbeing and commuting.
2. Under section 60 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (CROW) Act 2000 Surrey County Council has a duty to prepare and publish a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) and to review it at least every 10 years. The ROWIP contains the actions the Council proposes to take to both maintain and improve the rights of way in Surrey between 2025 and 2035 and meet the public's current and future needs.
3. The legislation sets out what the ROWIP must consider. Key considerations are: the current and future needs of users; the reasons and opportunities for use; and accessibility for blind or partially sighted persons and others with mobility issues. The plan also needs to be aligned with other key strategies such as: the Council's Community Vision for 2030; Greener Futures climate change delivery plan 2021 to 2025, the Climate Change Adaption and Resilience Strategy, known as "Surrey Adapt"; the Local Nature Recovery Strategy; the Local Transport Plan, Local Cycling and Walking Plans and the Vision Zero Road Safety Strategy.

4. Annex 1 of this report contains the draft ROWIP for 2025-2035. Production of the ROWIP has included technical assessments and a comprehensive engagement exercise via online surveys and in person workshops over a 12-month period, the results for which were analysed and are contained in the two reports in Annex 2. The draft ROWIP was produced to reflect the feedback received and put out for public consultation for a 12 week period ending 9th February. This version incorporates comments and updates from the consultation.
5. To facilitate feedback from the Committee, this paper provides an outline of what engagement has taken place, a summary of the feedback received and an outline of the draft themes, objectives and actions that have been developed as a result.

Rights of Way Improvement Plan Development Process

6. Engagement is an essential part of the development of the ROWIP to
 - a) determine background information on the areas for consideration (see para 3),
 - b) provide an assessment of the current condition of the public rights of way network, and
 - c) capture the views of Surrey's residents and users of the network.
 - d) understand how the Council can work most effectively with community groups, parish councils and other stakeholders.
- a) A consultant was engaged to carry out an engagement exercise which addressed all the above points and to ensure consultation was carried out in line with legal requirements and reflected local findings from the technical assessment. They were also commissioned to analyse the results, produce the technical annexes, draft the Plan and finalise it once the public consultation was complete.
7. Given the ten-year period the plan covers, a broad engagement exercise was carried out encouraging members of the public, stakeholders, landowners and statutory consultees to provide feedback. This included:
 - a) an online public survey between 20th December 2023 and 10 March 2024, supported by a social media campaign, posters and press coverage.
 - b) A separate online survey for Parish Councils and presentation to Surrey Association of Local Councils (SALC) which included both Clerks and Councillors,
 - c) An online briefing for members,
 - d) A workshop for Surrey landowners,
 - e) Several meetings and a workshop with Surrey Countryside Access Forum (SCAF),

- f) Attending user group forums,
 - g) Attending fora and user group forums for those with disabilities, sight issues and groups presently underrepresented in the countryside.
 - h) Statutory consultees such as the Surrey Hills National Landscape,
 - i) and internal and external specialists.
- b) Nearly 4,300 online responses were received from the online surveys, one of the largest responses received from any Council consultation.
- c) A 70% response rate was received from Parish Councils, compared with the normal rate of 40% expected by SALC. It was an extremely successful engagement exercise and now provides an invaluable record of current use and need for rights of way in Surrey.

<p>Summary of Feedback received from Engagement</p>
--

8. In summary, feedback showed:

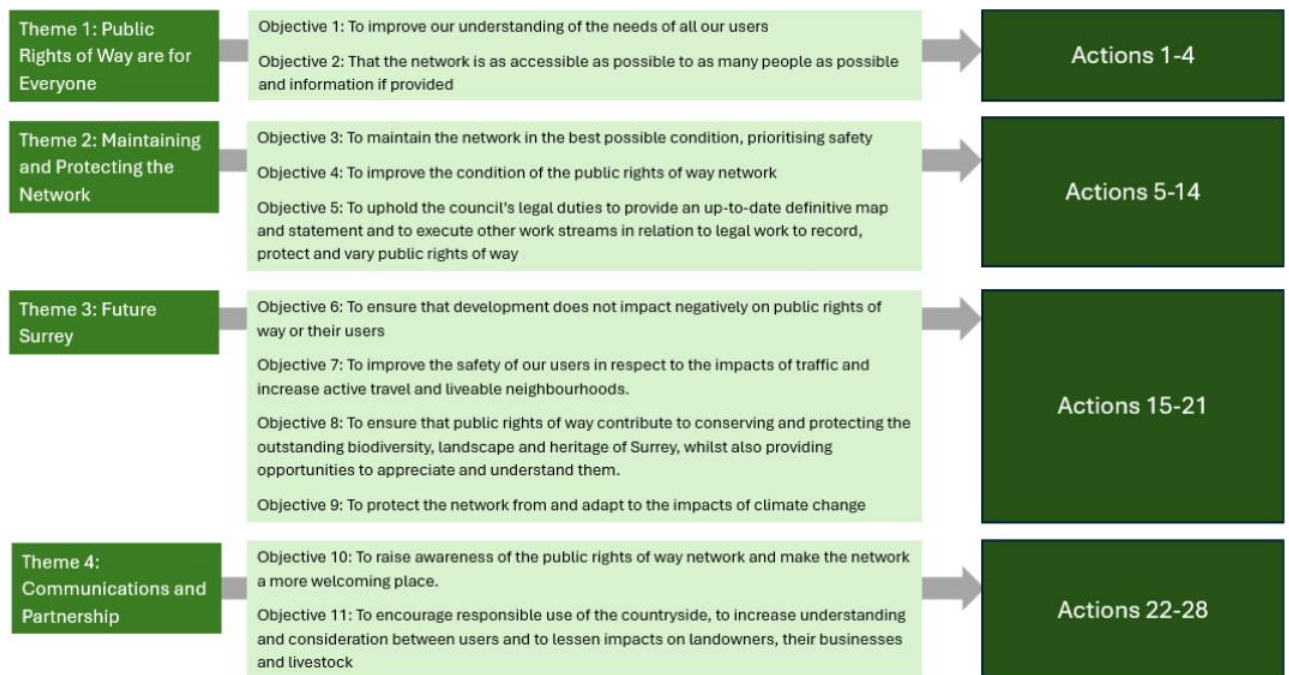
- Respondents were walkers (87%), cyclists (30%), horse riders (19%), 4WD users (6%) and motorcyclists (5%).
- Why they use rights of way:
 - 91% of respondents stated they use public rights of way to enjoy the landscape, countryside or view,
 - 90% of respondents said they used them for their health, and
 - 85% of respondents said they used them for their mental wellbeing.
- 35% of respondents use public rights of way to commute to work, school, shops or the station.
- Respondents explained what negatively affected their experience of rights of way: 74% cited overgrown paths, 68% poor surface condition, 51% fallen trees and other obstructions, 41% that the paths were not accessible enough and 37% cited lack of waymarking along the route.
- Respondents shared strong preferences for priorities in the ROWIP:
 - maintaining the current public rights of way network is either very important or important (99% agreed),
 - it is important to protect and improve the rights of way network through changes due to development and major infrastructure changes (94% agreed),

- to improve access for people to improve their health and wellbeing (90% agreed),
- to improve access for those living with disabilities (82% agreed), and
- to improve the network for commuting (73% agreed).

Objectives and Actions in the Draft Plan

9. The Plan has been drafted based on the above feedback and extensive analysis of responses by various characteristics. As set out in the diagram below, it is set out under four themes, 11 objectives and 28 actions. The ROWIP provides far greater detail for each theme, setting out the rationale for each objective, providing background data and evidence, and information on the resourcing and partnership requirements for each action.

Diagram 1. The Structure of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2025-35 (objectives have been shortened for ease)



10. It is important the Plan includes reference to the Council's statutory functions as well as aspirations to improve the network. This is reflected in the legislation and guidance from DEFRA. This Plan is also aspirational in its approach, setting out multiple actions which will draw on funding from external sources to deliver more with funding from current Council budget envelopes. There are also areas for investment proposed to help secure external funding, especially where the network can be augmented and improve equality of access across the county's communities

11. Theme three: Future Surrey provides an essential link to connecting improvements to rights of way with cross Council objectives such as active travel routes and new community links created through development. It actively supports delivery of the Council's Climate Change Strategy, the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, Local Transport Plans, One Surrey Growth and Vision Zero Road Safety Strategy.

Delivery and Monitoring

12. Practical delivery or co-ordination of the 28 actions set out in the ROWIP will be carried out by the Council's Countryside Access Team, located within the Place/EPG Directorate.
13. The team are supported by regular groups of volunteers across the Council as well as partner organisations and landowners. Where necessary or appropriate to support delivery, work programme teams both within the Council and with external partners will be established to facilitate joint project delivery and provide effective project management and milestone monitoring.
14. It is important to note the Council will not be able deliver the Plan in isolation. Extensive collaborative partnership working will be required across the Council (Council's Planning Officers, Transport Development Planning Team and Spatial Planning Team) and with stakeholders' groups, Boroughs and Districts and other partners.
15. The ROWIP clearly sets out which actions are currently funded or resourced within existing capital and revenue budgets and those which will require input from partners or additional funding. Those requiring additional resource will be subject to internal business planning and budget setting processes.
16. Each year the Council's Countryside Access Team produces an Annual Report, evidencing work carried out to deliver the ROWIP. From 2025/26 onwards the format will be altered to reflect the structure of the ROWIP as Themes, Objectives and Actions so that the public and stakeholders are able to consider progress.

Conclusions

17. The evidence provided by Surrey's residents and stakeholders provides a sound basis for the Plan to deliver against need and aspiration, statutory and non-statutory actions and those for current users as well as non-users. The plan reflects key messages received and demonstrates the Council has heard which actions to prioritise. The four themes provide a clear reflection of what concerns Surrey residents, and which will be addressed through the 11 Objectives and 28 actions.

18. The Draft ROWIP has been out for public consultation for a 12-week period which ended on 9th February 2025. By the 8th of January 2025, 345 responses had been received. On average, 86% of those that responded agreed with the 4 Themes and 90% agreed with the 11 stated Objectives.

Recommendations

19. To review and provide feedback on the direction and content of the Draft ROWIP.

Next Steps

20. The final draft of the ROWIP will be considered for adoption by the Cabinet in March 2025.

21. The recommendations to Cabinet will be:

- a) To approve the adoption and publication of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2025-2035 for implementation
- b) To delegate delivery of the Plan to the interim Director for Place/EPG, Simon Crowther, in collaboration with the Cabinet Member for Environment, Marisa Heath.

Report contact

Claire Saunders, Countryside Access Team Manager, Environment, Property and Growth

Contact details

claire.saunders@surreycc.gov.uk

Sources/background papers

Annex 1:

Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2025-35 – Consultation Draft.

[Rights of Way Improvement Plan Draft](#)

Annex 2:

Rights of Way Improvement Plan - Evidence Report 1 Surveys and Stakeholders

[Evidence Report 1 Surveys and Stakeholders](#)

Rights of Way Improvement Plan – Evidence Report 2 Network and Needs Assessment

[Evidence Report 2 Network and Needs](#)

This page is intentionally left blank