

SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL**CABINET**

DATE:	22 APRIL 2025
REPORT OF CABINET MEMBER:	MARISA HEATH, CABINET MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT
LEAD OFFICER:	SIMON CROWTHER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR FOR ENVIRONMENT, PROPERTY AND GROWTH
SUBJECT:	RIGHTS OF WAY IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2025-2035
ORGANISATION STRATEGY PRIORITY AREA:	No One Left Behind / Growing A Sustainable Economy/ Tackling Health Inequality / Enabling A Greener Future / Empowered and Thriving Communities

Purpose of the Report:

The purpose of this report is to gain Cabinet approval for the Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2025-2035. As the Highway Authority for Surrey, Surrey County Council (SCC) has a duty to produce a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP). Every ten years the ROWIP must be reviewed and updated. Following extensive engagement between December 2023 and January 2025, including a 12 week statutory consultation, a new ROWIP (2025-2035) has been produced (Annex A).

Recommendations:

It is recommended that Cabinet:

1. Approve adoption of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) 2025-2035;
2. Delegate decisions on delivery of the ROWIP to the Executive Director for Environment, Property and Growth, in consultation with the Director for Environment and Cabinet Member for Environment, through annual implementation plans and performance indicators.

Reason for Recommendations:

The ROWIP is a statutory document requiring review every 10 years. The four proposed themes in the revised ROWIP reflect feedback from the public and partners which focused on: supporting access for all; maintaining rights of way so they are safe; a desire for improved connectivity where possible and a willingness from residents and partners to work with SCC to inform how the network could be used. Feedback from the 12 week statutory consultation shows 80-90% of respondents agreed with the priorities. Delivery will be through an annual implementation plan which needs to be able to respond to changing conditions on the network and availability of funding.

Executive Summary:

1. As the local Highway Authority, Surrey County Council (SCC) has a duty to maintain the public rights of way in Surrey that are maintainable at the public expense. Public Rights of Way (PROW or the Network) 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 2000 (CROW) SCC has a duty to hold a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) and to review it every 10 years. The ROWIP contains the actions SCC proposes to take to both maintain and improve rights of way over that period.
3. The legislation sets out what the ROWIP must consider. This includes: 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 needs to be aligned and delivering where possible key strategies that align with the Council's Community Vision for 2030 such as: health and wellbeing; climate change mitigation and adaptation; the Local Nature Recovery Strategy; the Local Transport Plan; Local Cycling and Walking Plans and Vision Zero Road Safety Strategy.
4. Annex 1 of this report contains the proposed Rights of Way Improvement Plan (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. Annex 2 contains the ROWIP Executive Summary and Annex 3 contains the Technical reports.

Rights of Way Improvement Plan Development Process:

5. An intensive engagement process was undertaken to:
 - a) provide background information on the areas for consideration
 - b) assess the current condition of the public rights of way network
 - 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 to improve the network
6. Engagement included:
 - an online public survey - 20th December 2023 and 10 March 2024, supported by a social media campaign, posters and press coverage
 - an online survey for Parish Councils and a presentation to Surrey Association of Local Councils (SALC), both Clerks and Councillors

- an online briefing for Members,
- an online survey and workshop for Surrey landowners,
- meetings and a workshop with Surrey Countryside Access Forum and other group forums, including forums for those with disabilities, sight issues and groups currently underrepresented in accessing the countryside,
- dialogue with statutory consultees such as the Surrey Hills National Landscape

7. Nearly 4,300 online responses were received from the online surveys, one of the largest responses received from any Council consultation. 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 provides an invaluable record of current use and need for public rights of way in Surrey.

Summary of Engagement Feedback:

8. In summary, respondents were walkers (87%), cyclists (30%), horse riders (19%), 4WD users (6%) and motorcyclists (5%). Respondents said they used PROW:

- to enjoy the landscape, countryside or view (91% of respondents)
- for their health (90% of respondents)
- for their mental wellbeing (85% of respondents)
- to commute to work, school, shops or the station. (35% of respondents)

9. Respondents also stated that the following factors negatively affected their experience public rights of way:

- overgrown paths 74%
- poor surface condition 68%
- fallen trees and other obstructions 51%
- that the paths were not accessible enough 41%
- lack of waymarking along the route 37%

10. Respondents shared strong preferences for priorities in the ROWIP which focused on:

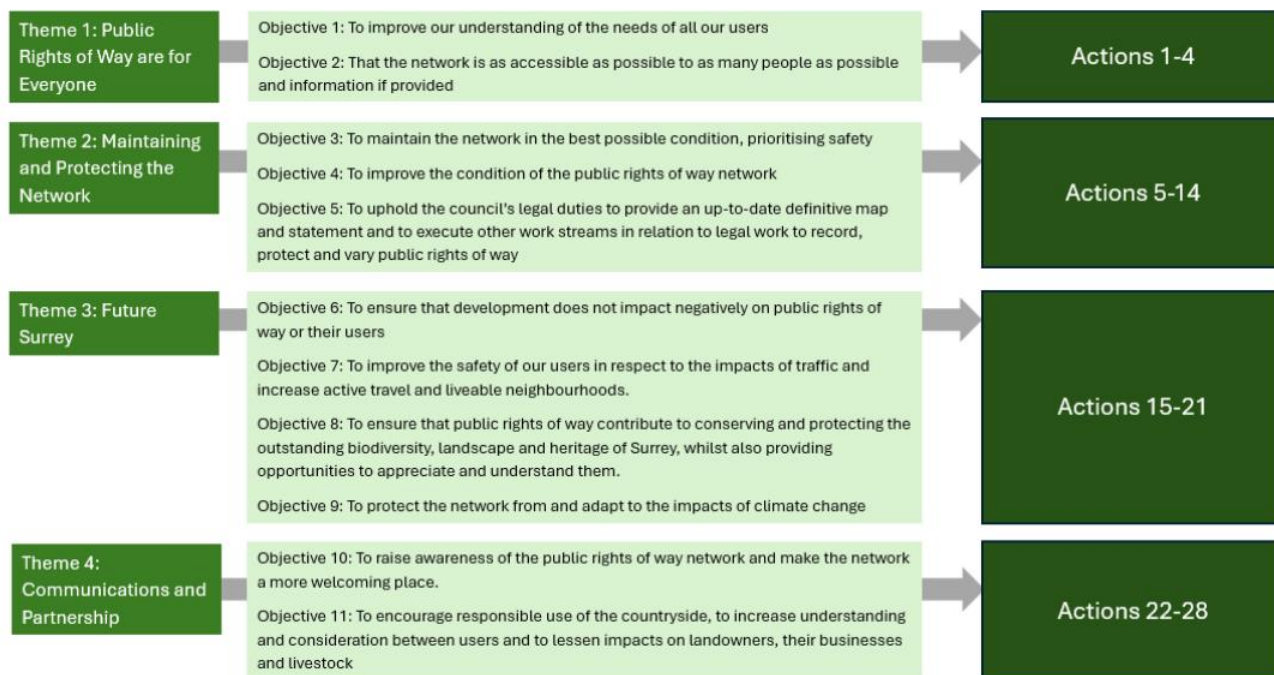
11. maintaining the current public rights of way network, 99% agreed either very important or important;

12. protecting and improving the rights of way network as part of development and major infrastructure changes (94% agreed); improving access for people to improve their health and wellbeing (90% agreed); improving access for those

living with disabilities (82% agreed), and improving the network for commuting (73% agreed).

Objectives and Actions in the Plan:

13. The ROWIP has four themes, 11 objectives and 28 actions. The diagram below provides a summary, more detail is included in the Plan including resourcing and partnership working. *Diagram 1. The Structure of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2025-35 (objectives have been shortened for ease)*



14. It is important the plan includes reference to the Council’s statutory functions as well as aspirations to improve the network since they are all considered improvements. This is reflected in the legislation and guidance from DEFRA.

15. Though the Plan is aspirational in its approach, investment will be within current budget envelopes subsidised wherever possible from external sources to deliver any improvements which are beyond existing budgets. It will be crucial to continually manage expectations.

Links to Cross-Council Objectives:

16. Theme three: Future Surrey provides an essential link to connecting improvements to rights of way with cross Council objectives such as active travel routes, safe routes to school 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, Local Cycling and Walking Plans, One Surrey Growth and Vision Zero Road Safety Strategy. In addition, there are significant opportunities to achieve positive outcomes through linking more strongly to the health and well being agenda,

tackling the wider determinants of health as well as issues of social isolation for elderly residents.

Delivery and Monitoring:

17. 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 Directorate.
18. The team are supported by a 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.
19. 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 and with stakeholders including parish, boroughs and districts authorities, resident groups and other partners.
20. 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 only proceed once funding has been identified and on the basis of a full business case.
21. Each year SCC 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 and impact.

Conclusion:

22. The evidence provided by Surrey's residents and stakeholders provides a sound basis for the ROWIP to deliver against need and aspiration, statutory and non statutory actions and those for current users as well as those currently not using the network and future users. The Plan reflects key messages received from residents, partners and stakeholders and this has been reflected accordingly within the ROWIP through the four themes, 11 objectives and 28 actions.

Consultation:

23. An intensive engagement process was undertaken which has been outlined in the Summary of Engagement section above. In addition, the Environment and Highways Select Committee has also been engaged and the feedback received reflected in the resulting ROWIP.

Risk Management and Implications:

24. The main risk associated with the ROWIP is managing the public and partners .delivery expectations. Any investment needed to deliver the Plan will need to be within the Service's approved revenue and capital budget envelope or funded through external funding such as the Community Interest Levies (CIL) or Section 106 funds. The funding currently available will not deliver all of the actions outlined in the ROWIP. The ROWIP identifies all potential works to enable it to be responsive to geographically based development funding opportunities as they becomes available. Stakeholders are aware of this and a clear system of prioritisation is in place.
25. There is a risk this level of funding may fall during Local Government Reorganisation. Any changes in funding levels and the implications on programme delivery will be reflected in the Annual Delivery Plan.

Financial and Value for Money Implications:

26. The ROWIP will be delivered using a prioritisation system already agreed by Cabinet which is based on a cost benefit approach to maximise positive outcome. Where possible links will be made with other services and partners delivering within the areas proposed to be able to maximise funding available. Work will be limited to current approved service budget envelopes (both revenue and capital). Additional funds for improvements will be sourced from external funding such as s106 agreements and the Community Interest Levy and agreed through internal governance processes.

Section 151 Officer Commentary:

27. Surrey County Council, like all local authorities, continues to operate in a very challenging financial environment, with significant budgetary pressures and future funding uncertainty. Despite coming from a position of strong financial resilience, the Council is not immune to the impact of increasing demand and costs of service delivery. The Council has a duty to ensure its expenditure does not exceed the resources available and therefore it is vital that we continue to place significant importance on financial management, the delivery of efficiencies and reducing spending, to protect service delivery and achieve a balanced budget position each year.
28. In addition to delivering services within a balanced budget, the Council needs to consider the medium-term financial outlook beyond 2025/26. With little clarity on the Council's funding in the medium term, our working assumption is that financial resources will continue to be constrained. This, coupled with the impact of Local Government Reorganisation, places an onus on the Council to continue to consider issues of medium term financial sustainability as a priority, in order to ensure the stable provision of services both for the remaining term of Surrey County Council and that of future unitary authorities into the medium term.

29. Expenditure on the ROWIP will need to be met from existing approved budgets, or where applicable once additional funding has been identified. Decisions will be made through normal governance processes, including consideration of financial implications.

Legal Implications – Monitoring Officer:

30. Under section 60 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW) SCC has a duty to prepare and publish a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) and to review it every 10 years. The ROWIP must contain an assessment of the extent to which the present and likely future needs of the public are met by local rights of way, the opportunities provided for exercise and other forms of open-air recreation, accessibility to blind or partially sighted persons and those with mobility problems and such other matters relating to local rights of way as the Secretary of State may direct. The ROWIP must include a statement of the action proposed for management of local rights of way and for securing an improved network. The publication of a ROWIP is a legal requirement and failure to produce one may lead to legal challenges.

31. It is important to note the legal duty is to produce and publish a ROWIP, but ,while clearly desirable, there is no duty to implement all the actions it sets out.

Equalities and Diversity:

32. There are no direct equalities and diversity implications arising from approving the Rights of Way Improvement Plan. An EIA has been completed and individual projects will be subject to an EIA as appropriate.

Other Implications:

33. The potential implications for the following Council priorities and policy areas have been considered. Where the impact is potentially significant a summary of the issues is set out in detail below.

Area assessed:	Direct Implications:
Corporate Parenting/Looked After Children	Improvements to public rights of way will provide opportunities for health and well-being from greater access to walk to school routes, community routes and general opportunities for recreation close to home.
Safeguarding responsibilities for vulnerable children and adults	Improvements to public rights of way will provide opportunities for health and well-being from greater access to walk to school routes, community routes and

	general opportunities for recreation close to home.
Environmental sustainability	Individual projects will consider types of materials used, the emissions from vehicles used works, the impact of digging and planting on sustainability. This will be carried out in conjunction with sustainability guidelines in the procurement protocols in the Countryside Framework.
Compliance against net-zero emissions target and future climate compatibility/resilience	Yes, the plan provides for consideration and direct action in relation to climate change resilience and compliance against net zero emission targets.
Public Health	Improvements to public rights of way will provide opportunities for health and well-being from greater access to walk to school routes, community routes and general opportunities for recreation close to home.

What Happens Next:

34. Following adoption the Plan will be published. The First Annual Implementation Plan will be drafted by the end of April for delivery in 2025/26, with the Annual Report published in April 2026 alongside the Implementation plan for the following year.

35. A progress report will be provided to CEH Select Committee by October 2025

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Consulted:

Details of who has been consulted on the issue, external and internal (including officers, members, public, stakeholders, partners, etc).

Annexes:

List the annexes attached to this report.

Sources/background papers:

Annex 1:

Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2025-35

Annex 2:

Rights of Way Improvement Plan Executive Summary

Annex 3:

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](#)

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