

Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2020 – 2030



Contents

Contents	1
1.0 Foreword	4
2.0 Introduction	6
3.0 Background	6
3.1 What are Public Rights of Way	6
3.2 Northamptonshire	7
3.3 Northamptonshire Rights of Way Policy	8
4.0 Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2007-2017	9
4.1 Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2007-2017: The Actions	10
4.1.1 Create a Safe Joined-up Network	10
4.1.2 Make Access Easier for Everyone	10
4.1.3 Improve People’s Health and Enjoyment	10
4.1.4 Improve Links between Communities	10
4.1.5 Improve Signage.....	10
4.1.6 Increase Publicity and Interpretation	10
4.1.7 Improving Maintenance.....	10
4.1.8 Travel Choices	11
4.1.9 Harnessing Growth	11
5.0 Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2020 – 2030	11
5.1 The Way Forward.....	11
5.2 Parish Results.....	12
5.3 Asset Data Collection	13
5.4 Walking and General Use	13
5.5 Horse Riding.....	14
5.6 Cycling.....	15
5.7 Motorcycling / Driving	17
5.8 Land Managers and Legislation	18
5.9 Enforcement	19
5.10 Maintenance.....	19
5.11 Definitive Map	21
5.12 Consultations	21

5.13 Changes to the Network.....	21
5.14 Closures	22
6.0 Action Plan and Programme 2020/21	23
6.1 Mobility.....	28
6.2 Monitoring and Review	24
6.3 Statement of Action.....	28
7.0 Acronym Summary.....	31

1.0 Foreword

Easy access to the beautiful Northamptonshire countryside is one of the joys of living in the county and our rights of way network provides just the opportunity to lose ourselves in the wonderful natural habitats that surround us.

Not only is this of huge benefit to the people that live here in terms of health and wellbeing but creating such a network for walking, cycling or horse riding further enhances our county as a great place in which to live for those round the country looking to relocate.

Of course there are environmental benefits too, as diverting people away from their cars helps reduce the use of fossil fuels as well as congestion on the roads. Additionally, paths between fields, alongside hedgerows and by watercourses, provide opportunities to protect and enhance wildlife and habitats.

Economic benefits arise from the desire of people wanting to visit, live and work in an area with such wonderful access to such lovely countryside.

Although the rights of way network has developed over hundreds of years, the Rights of Way Improvement Plan recognises that it must meet the current and future needs of the public.

One of our roles at the County Council is maintaining and enhancing this network of routes which thread through the rolling fields and woodlands.

Our original Rights Of Way Improvement Plan included data which was taken from a number of surveys, the oldest dating back to 2001 and as such, it needed updating.

We decided to obtain new information by asking all Parish Councils, Northamptonshire Local Access Forum (NLAF) and the Ramblers for their views. We have used this valuable feedback to shape the new Rights Of Way Improvement Plan 2020 – 2030, which we present here.

Like everywhere else in the country, the County Council will face a challenging financial position over the life of this plan, as the future levels of funding for rights of way maintenance cannot be predicted. However, people will naturally want continued access to the countryside and, quite rightly, expect improvements to be made to the rights of way network.

With a clear vision in the form of a Rights of Way Improvement Plan we will be better placed to seek additional funding as and when the opportunity arises. We will utilise innovative methods in the delivery of the service to ensure that the rights of way meet peoples' needs as much as possible.

We aim to manage the countryside access network effectively and efficiently, working with communities, farmers, landowners, partner organisations, volunteers and, of course, users.

It is our mission to seek to improve the connections within the network, ensuring people use the paths responsibly, whilst addressing the changing needs and demands of both people who use the paths and landowners.

Not only do we have to do this but we have to do it whilst sustaining the precious environment that people have come to enjoy in the first place. Long may this continue.



Councillor Jason Smithers, Portfolio Holder for Place, Highways and the Environment

2.0 Introduction

The County's Rights of Way network, both urban and rural, forms an integral part of the transport network providing a healthier alternative to the car for accessing work, leisure facilities, shops, services and schools. It also provides access to the outstanding Northamptonshire countryside together with many places of interest including historic sites, woodlands and waterways all of which provide support for the local economy. The promotion of safe, off-road routes can help towards the County's road safety objectives by reducing accidents for walkers, cyclists and equestrians providing great leisure and amenity value along with healthier lifestyles.

The Rights Of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) 2007 - 2011 and the subsequent extension to 2017 were published following an extensive assessment, consultation and review process. Likewise the Rights Of Way Improvement Plan 2020 - 2030 has followed a similar approach to ensure it addressed the requirements of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000 by considering the needs of the public, identifying the opportunities rights of way provide for open-air recreation and ensuring good accessibility of the Rights of Way network.

Northamptonshire County Council has reviewed and gradually restructured the management of the 1929 miles (3105km) of rights of way network seeking to respond to budget constraints with minimal disruption to the rights of way service.

Under our current arrangements the operational teams that maintain the rights of way network are employed by the Northamptonshire Highways Service Provider and the staff providing the definitive map, rights of way searches and development management function are employed by the County Council.

Maintaining and improving the Northamptonshire rights of way network links with high level outcomes contained within the Northamptonshire Transport Plan specifically promoting a naturally resilient and low carbon Northamptonshire. The rights of way network supports recreation, tourism and enabling people to make choices about how they travel. Due consideration will be taken of the policy developed in the Walking Strategy (January 2013) and any future updates to these documents.

Although the Authority has been through, and is still in, challenging economic times, the desire to maintain and improve the rights of way network remain the same. The effect of reduced budgets requires different sources of funding to be identified as well as more efficient ways of working to be found. Resource limitations may necessitate works to be prioritised or as a last resort scaled back.

There will be new and challenging demands as, "Well Managed Highways – a risk based approach", was implemented in October 2018, this is the national Code of Practice produced by the UK Roads Liaison Group and is supported and endorsed by the DfT/ADEPT amongst other organisations.

3.0 Background

3.1 What are Public Rights of Way

Natural England and Defra have the following information on their websites:-

England alone has circa 124,280 miles (200,000 km) of footpaths, bridleways, byways and other rights of way.

They are the most important way for visitors to the County to enjoy the countryside and they are also useful for local people to use to get to the shops, school and work.

Definitions

- Footpath open to walkers only, way marked with a yellow arrow
- Bridleway open to cyclists, horse riders and walkers, way marked with a blue arrow
- Restricted Byway open to cyclists, horse riders, carriage drivers and walkers, way marked with a plum coloured arrow
- Byway (Open to all traffic) open to all walkers, cyclists, riders and motor vehicles, way marked with a red/ orange arrow.



3.2 Northamptonshire

Since 1960 Northamptonshire's population has increased by 50% to over 745,610 residents. It still remains predominantly a rural county but it is interspersed with several large and small towns.

Northamptonshire has significant natural heritage with important areas in the western uplands and the Nene Valley. Its man-made heritage can be seen in the limestone villages in the Northampton area, whilst important contributions are also made by the small industrial towns and the Grand Union Canal.

The County also provides some tourist attractions in particular Silverstone motor racing circuit, a number of stately homes, Towcester Racecourse and Stoke Bruerne which is the most popular location on the wider attractions of the Grand Union and Oxford canal.

Rights of way and the corridors in which they sit make a significant contribution to, and provide new opportunities for improving the quality of people's lives. They provide a basis for more sustainable transport modes; they can enhance access to local places of heritage, recreational and cultural interest, and improved health from more active lifestyles and access to areas for environmental education. They also support the local economy through tourism and employment with numerous signed linear paths and trails which cross the County including:-

Millennium Way, Lyveden Way, Jurassic Way, Hereward Way, Knightly Way, Grafton Way, Grand Union Way, Swans Way, Three Shires Way, Macmillan Way, Midshires Way, Nene Way, Northampton Round, Ouse Valley Way and Battlefields trail. There are also aspirations to develop Welland Valley Way to link the Greenway with Brampton Valley Way.

3.3 Northamptonshire Rights of Way Policy

In accordance with the guidance issued by DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) the work to create the ROWIP assessed the extent to which local rights of way meet the present and likely future needs of the public. Highway authorities are required to:

- Study the Definitive Map and Statement of rights of way;
- Collate and consider data on:-
 - a. applications for modifications to the map and statement;
 - b. requests for improvements to the network;
 - c. the condition of the network;
- 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
- Identify any other relevant information, including other plans and strategies for that area.

In the light of this guidance, an assessment was undertaken to evaluate information that already exists, identify what data was required and how this was to be used to develop aims and ultimately the Action Plan and Programme.

To ensure our commitment to managing the network we adhere to the following policy;-

- Maintenance standards and outputs will be reviewed periodically with consideration of the increasing use of the Rights of Way Network.
- Where necessary and to the extent where this is possible the Rights of Way Network will be publicised through the media and by leaflets, interpretation boards and signage.
- Promote the use of Rights of Way by walkers, cyclists and horse riders to develop healthy lifestyles.
- Improve and where possible create new links to provide sustainable inter-village links to local communities and places of interest.
- Undertake a continuous review of the Definitive Map and Statement to maintain an accurate record of all Rights of Way and reflect any changes to the network. This will also include identification of Lost Ways which will necessitate historical research in order to meet the cut-off date of January 2026 to avoid them being otherwise extinguished. To help meet this demanding timescale the Ramblers have been working with landowners, land managers and local authorities to find ways to make the process for recording paths more efficient, consistent across the country, and less contentious, helping to identify and claim as many historic paths as possible before the 2026 cut-off date.
- We will continue to work in partnership with farmers and landowners to keep routes open and passable.
- Development and implementation of an Enforcement Policy in conjunction with Defra, National Farmers Union (NFU) and Country Landowners Association (CLA) reflecting the significant changes in agricultural practices and policies.

- Provide support, information and advice to Northamptonshire Local Access Forum (NLAFF) on all issues affecting all areas of public access in the County including the Rights of Way Network.
- Develop and promote support for all Rights of Way Volunteers including Parish Path Wardens and the Ramblers.
- Develop a close working relationship with Developers and Planners to ensure the accessibility of the Rights of Way network is maintained and where possible obtain funding or resources for improvements.



4.0 Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2007-2017

The original Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) was made public in 2007 based on previous BVPI 178 Surveys, consultation periods, feedback and the agreement by the County Council to a series of new strategic goals to steer the way the authority was to work for future years.

However, since the previous ROWIP was written the national economic landscape has changed dramatically, one of the impacts of this has been the reduction in local government budgets which has restricted the volume of work which can be undertaken on the highway and rights of way network.

The targets highlighted in the previous ROWIP required a predetermined level of work and funding on an annual basis that can no longer be guaranteed as a result of the reduced funding levels. This has meant some of the proposals made within the ROWIP could not be achieved. However

whilst funding restrictions prevent the fulfilment of the outcomes of the previous ROWIP the targets set previously remain valid but it is accepted that a number of outcomes are rendered as aspirational as it is unknown whether that the level of funding will be realised.

4.1 Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2007-2017: The Actions

The Rights of Way Improvement Plan proposed 38 outcomes encompassed within nine core actions which reflected both the suggestions of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 as well as the findings of a needs assessment undertaken by Northamptonshire County Council (NCC). Consideration was given to how the outcomes could then be implemented.

4.1.1 Create a Safe Joined-up Network

NCC continues to aspire to grow the rights of way network and create new routes that complement the existing routes.

4.1.2 Make Access Easier for Everyone

To have a transport system that is fit for people to choose how they travel, ensuring that people have options available to them to be able to choose the best form of transport for the journey they make. This includes making information on the rights of way network available to the public.

4.1.3 Improve People's Health and Enjoyment

NCC continues to recognise walking and cycling as important ways for people to improve their health.

4.1.4 Improve Links between Communities

When considering the rights of way network it is clear that they were established to travel between villages for work and for social inclusion. Today they can continue to provide such an amenity and also access places of interest for leisure purposes.

4.1.5 Improve Signage

Adequate and purposeful signing is essential for a rights of way network that is available for use by a wide range of users.

4.1.6 Increase Publicity and Interpretation

NCC provides support for the production of leaflets and pamphlets, however with the increasing number of walks and rides available the most complete resource is the NCC website.

4.1.7 Improving Maintenance

Maintaining the existing rights of way network to a standard where the network can safely be used by all users is a primary priority for NCC. The maintenance work includes cyclical works such as mowing, routine maintenance such as vegetation clearance, finger post replacement or repair to surface damage and capital maintenance such as bridge replacement.

4.1.8 Travel Choices

NCC continue to promote enabling the people of Northamptonshire to make choices about how journeys are undertaken, it is also a desire to have transport systems that reduce car travel to reduce the effect car travel has on the built, natural and historical environment.

4.1.9 Harnessing Growth

Developments across the county provide opportunities to improve and enhance the rights of way network, either included within the planning consent process or later through developer funding avenues such as S106 funding; this will prevent the rights of way network being adversely affected by new construction.



These core actions are still relevant, as can be seen in the findings from the Parish Survey results (5.2 below) undertaken as part of the process requirements for this improvement plan.

5.0 Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2020 – 2030

5.1 The Way Forward

In April 2017 we wrote to all 269 Parishes within Northamptonshire, asking that they inform us of their observations and points of concern regarding the rights of way network, as the information used from BVPI 178 in the previous ROWIP needed to be updated. This request was made necessary by the withdrawal of the statutory responsibility to report such information. It is considered vital that we have relevant and current information.

This request was in some part responsible for the delay to the production of the current document as it took some time to gather all of the information requested. However, this delay was worthwhile as we had 149 responses with meaningful information from the Parishes.



5.2 Parish Results

The following findings are within each respective Parish, we have grouped them together in the categories used in the original ROWIP for ease of understanding;

Core Action	Parish Findings	Responses
4.1.1 Create a Safe Joined-up Network	Good for dog walking Has historic value Not connected / Severed / cul-de-sacs Misuse of route	56 6 25 4
4.1.2 Make Access Easier for Everyone	Easy Access, good views, open countryside Overgrown vegetation / requires siding out	70 37
4.1.3 Improve People's Health and Enjoyment	Good circular walks Too few paths in the parish	43 1
4.1.4 Improve Links between Communities	Good links within villages and to amenities	62
4.1.5 Improve Signage	Missing, damaged, no signs or waymarkers Damaged or no stiles / gates / missing furniture Not clearly defined / poor surface	28 22 21

Core Action	Parish Findings	Responses
4.1.6 Increase Publicity and Interpretation	Is a promoted route?	18
	Too far from villages	18
4.1.7 Improving Maintenance	Has poor drainage	12
	Has livestock within the routes	16
	Blocked by buildings/ structures	4
	Too many stiles/ furniture	4
	Landowner blocked/ changed entrance	11
4.1.8 Travel Choices	Appealing walk and well used	43
	Better alternative route available/ of little or no use	33
	Starts/ ends/ crosses or runs adjacent to busy roads	30
4.1.9 Harnessing Growth	Anomaly with alignment	5

The data provided gives us both things to work on and good news within the findings which will enable us to plan our continued maintenance and improvement works within the financial constraints we are presented with.

5.3 Asset Data Collection

We have, since 2016, committed to undertake detailed inspections of the rights of way network at a rate of 20% per year which is identifying any issues with the network and also detailing the assets we have along each route.

The information we already have will be used to link in to the information provided by the Parishes so we optimise our resources to undertake planned and meaningful repairs or improvements as required.

We also utilise the information provided by the Ramblers Path Watch which generates reports and issues from their walks, which will either enable us to update our inventory or discuss any potential works with landowners or Land Managers. We are also able to access information on Street Doctor for complaints logged on this system.

5.4 Walking and General Use

The greatest number of people accessing the countryside and subsequently the rights of way

Network is on foot. This is evidenced with the numerous planned walks around the County such as the Waendel Walk which actively promote walking in addition to the Ramblers routes. We also have walks in association with places of historic interest (e.g in conjunction with the National Trust and historic England) along with such locations as Rushden Lakes where commercial activities sit side by side with walking.

As a County we also have a number of walks which can be accessed through the National Walking for Health scheme and can be found on www.walkingforhealth.org.uk.

Whilst the coverage of public footpaths and other access in the County is very broad, there are a number of issues which have been highlighted in the ROWIP consultations, which may hinder the ability of users to enjoy such paths.

Northamptonshire County Council is legally responsible for the maintenance of the surface of public rights of way to a standard appropriate for its defined use (such as cut up growth on headland/ field edge rights of way, anything else is landowner's responsibility). In most cases the natural surface is adequate and it is unnecessary to introduce materials that could detract from the landscape or adversely affect biodiversity.

In some locations however, the natural surface is subject to conditions such as poor drainage or high levels or certain types of use, which may mean the natural surface is unsuitable for some or all of the time. Such unsuitability can act as a barrier to use or result in damage to the natural/historic environment.

Improving path surfaces can be very costly and it is important to balance the needs of users with the effect on the natural and historic environment. Nevertheless, the County Council recognises the need for appropriate improvement in specific locations where there is demand and the benefits can be demonstrated.

It is also the case that some of these issues can result on occasion in conflict between different parties. For example, poor way marking can lead to a walker straying off the public right of way and coming into conflict with a landowner. Thus, appropriate improvements to way marking can often reduce the potential for conflict and also improve the accessibility of the public rights of way network.

Key issues for walkers and general users determined from the Parish Survey:

- Overgrown/blocked paths
- Poor way marking
- Difficult stiles



5.5 Horse Riding

Horse riding is an increasingly popular activity however horse riders have access to only 30.5% of the total amount of the public rights of way network in Northamptonshire (27% bridleways and 3.5% byways).

Due to the often fragmented nature of bridleways, this means that horse riders will need to use the road network at least in part, to provide for many of their journeys. The increasing volume of traffic on Northamptonshire's roads, results in horse riders being amongst the more vulnerable road users. There is a need to identify ways in developing more opportunities for alternative routes for horse riders.

The following issues have been identified through the British Horse Society as particularly hindering the ability of horse riders to enjoy their use of the public rights of way network.

Key issues for horse riders:

- Busy roads
- Overgrown/blocked bridleways
- Locked gates on bridleways
- Gates which are difficult to open, particularly from horseback
- Lack of bridleways
- Fragmented bridleway network
- Lack of circular routes



5.6 Cycling

The rights of way network and other routes segregated from the main carriageway can provide for a range of users by bicycle, including those undertaking mountain biking or 'off-road' cycling and also less confident users who would prefer not to cycle with motorised traffic.

Local networks of off-road routes are often very important for families with children who are too young to cycle on roads. There is a growing demand for off-road recreational cycling in the County

as demonstrated by the popularity of cycling on routes such as the Brampton Valley Way, the East Northants Greenway and around Pitsford Reservoir and Salcey Forest.

The Northamptonshire Transport Plan contains a Cycling Strategy, the aim of which is to “increase the number of people choosing to travel by cycle for trips under 5 miles through a combination of improvements to the on and off road cycling environment, promotion and training”

The strategy also states that off-road cycling facilities should be integrated with other shared-use cycle tracks away from main carriageways through parks, alongside rivers, canals or using old railway alignments to provide an attractive alternative to the road network for all cyclists. Routes such as these can also support the rural economy and opportunities to investigate designating rural recreation routes should be investigated. These types of routes are generally more closely associated with leisure routes, but are just as valuable as part of utility routes. A good example of this is the Ways Through Waterside (Connect2) scheme in Northampton. Where such routes are proposed there needs to be full public consultation and the design needs to have full regard to the safety of pedestrians.

Several trends are influencing the volume and nature of the demand for cycling facilities including, the increasing interest in health and fitness, the cost of other forms of travel, road safety and the environment. The County, however, shares the negative issues common to many areas of an inadequate supply of routes, small budgets for route development and publicity, incomplete linkages between routes and often substandard maintenance of traffic-free cycle ways or shared-use routes.

The pressures of urban expansion across the region bring with them tremendous opportunities for improved access, not only connected directly with growth areas, but also more generally across the county. For example, there are a number of former railway lines across Northamptonshire that have the potential to provide safer off-road routes between larger villages and urban areas.

One successful project that has achieved significant non-motorised use of a disused railway is the Brampton Valley Way between Northampton and Market Harborough in Leicestershire. This facility is part of the National Cycle Network Route 6, which stretches ultimately from London to the Lake District and is used regularly by people for recreation and commuting into Northampton.

Several sections of former rail line are currently being investigated to assess the potential for creating access for walkers and cyclists.

For example, NCC are working with East Northamptonshire Council on their East Northants Greenway programme, which hopes to open up stretches of former rail line ultimately linking Wellingborough with Peterborough. Sections of the Greenway already exist linking Rushden to Higham Ferrers along a former rail line, and also from Higham Ferrers to Irthlingborough across the Nene Valley at Irthlingborough Lakes and Meadows. Work is currently progressing to open walking and cycling access to link Ditchford Road to the east of Wellingborough with existing routes at Stanwick Lakes.

Other routes where investigative work is being undertaken includes linking Wellingborough, near to Little Irchester with Summer Leys Nature Reserve, a route which would be continued towards Earls Barton when reinstatement is completed in accordance with planning conditions following future cessation of gravel extraction in the area. Work is also ongoing with Daventry District Council to extend the existing disused rail line cycle track in Daventry as far as Braunston village.

It is unlikely, given the huge capital costs involved, that proposals to re-open any of the disused railways in Northamptonshire to rail services will be considered in the foreseeable future. Funding aside, there is, therefore, little reason to prevent the investigation and, ultimately, realisation of current and future proposals to use disused railways for walking and cycling.

For all terrain cycling, there is a need for more dedicated routes in order to increase safe, conflict free, opportunities.

Key issues for cyclists:

- Poor surfaces on bridleways
- Overgrown/blocked paths
- Lack of circular routes
- Lack of bridleways/cycle tracks
- Lack of dedicated mountain bike routes



5.7 Motorcycling / Driving

There is limited opportunity for driving on Byways Open to all Traffic (BOAT's) and unsurfaced roads in Northamptonshire at present and the introduction of the category of Restricted Byway in 2006 as a consequence of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 is anticipated to provide fewer additional opportunities for off-road driving over the next few years, however we are not advocating greater use of the right of way network for these purposes.

We have received reports of occasional illegal use by motor vehicles and motorcycles on footpaths, bridleways and public open space. This type of activity can be difficult to control. Both lawful and illegal or inappropriate use can lead to conflict with other users, landowners and local communities (approximately 30% are closed to vehicular access due to inappropriate use during winter months).

This use may demonstrate a need for alternative provision for a variety of off-road driving and motorcycling at more appropriate locations where there can be less potential conflict. Off-road driving in appropriate locations and driving on BOAT's and unsurfaced roads may also provide opportunities for some users with limited mobility to enjoy the countryside on an equal basis.

Key issues for motorcyclists and off road vehicle users:

- Lack of byways/opportunities to drive/ride
- Poor signage
- Lack of information about where legitimate access is available
- Increased traffic on the general road network creating conflict and greater level of hazard and dangers to rights of way users, where they meet.



5.8 Land Managers and Legislation

Where a public right of way crosses a fence line, hedgerow or other boundary, it is marked by a gap, gate or stile. Such structures are known as limitations and may be legally authorised, and recorded by the County Council on the Definitive Statement, or unauthorised. Authorised limitations are required for stock control or other appropriate land management practice.

The County Council's working practice is to ensure structures at least conform to the authorised limitation and to the Eurocode Standards, whilst taking account of local distinctiveness and potential impact on the landscape. Unauthorised structures will either be required to be removed or can be authorised if they are necessary and meet legislative requirements.

The County Council recognises the rights and operational requirements of land managers, and is committed to improving accessibility by working with land managers to remove, replace or repair structures where appropriate and providing incentives, practical advice and support.

Working with local communities, land managers and user groups there are opportunities to identify locations where enhanced levels of access for all legitimate users are desirable. Such an improved network would offer significant potential benefit in terms of access to services and facilities, the local economy, health, well-being and informal recreation generally

There has been a rationalisation of locations where rights of way are concurrent with highway maintainable at public expense, the rights of way have been incorporated in to the highway inspection schedules. We still have a small number of these anomalies to resolve mainly on new housing estates where roads and footpaths have been built the existing right of way was incorporated in to the development and subsequently adopted.

We also know that we have a number of rights of way which are over land which are **NOT** highway maintainable at public expense both in urban and rural areas and these belong to a number of bodies such as;- boroughs, districts, parish councils and farmers/ landowners.

We still legally have to ensure these are usable and we will continue to do this on our reactive approach and our 20% per year detailed asset inventory and condition inspection. If we are made aware or come across any issues related to these rights of way it is our duty to liaise with the landowner to resolve the concern.

5.9 Enforcement

Some public rights of way in Northamptonshire continue to be obstructed and where problems do occur they are resolved amicably through discussion with the land managers. Occasionally, however, it is necessary to take formal action to resolve matters.

When this occurs the appropriate enforcement will be undertaken.



5.10 Maintenance

Work is allocated on a prioritised basis – more urgent problems (health and safety issues and paths which are completely obstructed) are investigated reactively as quickly as resources allow and, in the case of health and safety problems, normally within a target time of five working days.

Less urgent problems are investigated via a number of proactive approaches:

- a) **General maintenance** - whilst reports are prioritised according to their severity, where there are opportunities to deal with less urgent problems at the same time and make best use of resources available in an efficient manner.
- b) **Field Edge (Headland) paths** - We are responsible for the upkeep of field edge (HEADLAND) rights of way and to fulfil this obligation we have a regime of **Annual Grass**

Cutting - We have two annual mowing programmes which encompass mowing, strimming and some weed spraying the square metre area is detailed in the table immediately below.

N/A	Total Linear Length (m)	Total Area (m ²)
Contractor Mowing	107,690	163,339
Landowner Mowing	173,371	n/a
Contractor Clearance and Siding	41,490	139,045

c) **Parish Path Wardens**- the Parish Path Warden Scheme is very much up and running. A number of new inductions over the last 12 months have been carried out – with more inductions to take place as the year progresses. The Parish Path Warden Scheme operates as follows:-

- a. Parish Path Wardens (PPW's) are appointed to monitor the rights of way network locally. The Commitment made by Parish Path Wardens forms an important link between the Rights of Way Officers and each parish or town in the county. This link not only provides valuable information which assists in maintaining and improving the rights of way network, but also ensures the views and requirements of the local community are represented.
- b. There are three Rights of Way Officers that are assigned an area within the County and they are responsible for the network in each parish, giving full support and advice to individual Parish Path Wardens.
- c. The main purpose of the scheme is to involve local communities and councils in the management of the County's rights of way network. This helps to ensure that routes are not obstructed, are clearly defined, properly maintained and available to all members of the public throughout the seasons of each year.
- d. Parish Path Wardens form an important community link between Northamptonshire County Council and their Service Provider. They are the 'eyes and ears' for all issues that affect the rights of way network in their area. They play a vitally important role in ensuring maintenance issues are detected, reported and followed up.
- e. Parish Path Wardens come from all walks of life, but share a common interest in the countryside and in particular the rights of way network. In the majority of cases a prospective Parish Path Warden is recommended by the parish or town council. Occasionally the recommendation may come from another source, but they must have parish/town council support. The Ramblers can also report problems on the network, have liaison meetings to identify and seek to resolve problems, and they also carry out minor maintenance such as clearing foliage around stiles and waymarkers, whilst also promoting walking in the countryside.
- f. Once a formal recommendation has been received, a meeting is arranged between the prospective Parish Path Warden and the Rights of Way Officer for that area. Details of the scheme are explained, relevant documents provided together with appropriate training and advice.
- g. At the conclusion of this meeting, providing both parties are in agreement, the appointment of the Parish Path Warden is confirmed.

The minimum requirement that we ask of a PPW is to carry out an inspection of all rights of way in their Parish at least once a year. Identify any problems, maintenance issues or improvements on their local network and report them to the Rights of Way Officer for that area.

We also ask that they maintain regular contact with their Parish or Town Council to ensure they are fully updated on all rights of way issues. This helps to ensure that the needs of the local community in respect of the rights of way network are being represented.

Full training is given to all new Parish Path Wardens by the local Rights of Way Officer. This training includes details of the scheme, what support is available, maintenance issues, and information on the local rights of way network. An induction pack is provided containing a parish map and statement, Parish Path Warden Handbook and other information relevant to the scheme.

Ongoing support and advice is always available from the area Rights of Way Officer. In addition the officer endeavours to ensure each Parish Path Warden is contacted regularly throughout the year.

We have registered 194 Parish Path Wardens in Northamptonshire which leaves with 77 Parishes without a Parish Path Warden which we will work towards communicating with them in an attempt to encourage this role.

5.11 Definitive Map

The Definitive Map and Statement is a legal record of public rights of way and it is made publicly available at the County Council's offices and website, and local libraries.

Modification of the Definitive Map and Statement can only be made by statutory procedure and only in order to correct an error or omission. This occurs either because a legal event has occurred which has changed the public rights of way network and hence the Definitive Map and Statement needs to be updated to reflect that change, or because evidence of an error or omission has been discovered.

Anyone who discovers such evidence may make an application to the County Council for a definitive map modification order and both historical documents and users' testimony can be cited.

Such modifications to the record do not change public rights but are only used to correct errors and omissions and must be based solely on evidence.

5.12 Consultations

The Definitive Map Team aim to check all planning applications, from the relevant planning authority, for any possible effect on public access and respond appropriately. Whilst the existence of public rights of way is a material consideration in planning, it is rarely prohibitive to planning consent being obtained and the objective in checking applications is to ensure that public rights of way are not likely to be restricted, encroached or made less accessible by the proposals.

Sometimes there may be opportunities for improving access and applicants are also advised of the necessary measures before a public right of way is diverted, extinguished or temporarily blocked.

5.13 Changes to the Network

There are three ways in which a public right of way can be changed namely:-

1. diversion

2. extinguishment
3. creation

Public rights of way can only be changed by means of a statutory procedure by an appropriate authority. The majority of changes result from applications either to the relevant planning authority in order to carry out development for which there is planning permission or to the County Council when it is the interests of the landowner.

The most common type of application to the County Council is to divert a path across an area of land, agricultural or residential. This may be to improve agricultural management, to secure privacy and security (including bio-security) or to reduce the possibility of conflict or danger.

The procedures involve consultation with the public and a right to object to orders, so that the interests of the land managers and those of the users of the rights of way can be balanced.

Where new rights of way are to be created and / or diverted then these should be well designed to ensure that the right of way does not lead to anti-social behavioural or criminal activity problems

5.14 Closures

Sometimes there is an event that requires a public right of way to be temporarily closed as a matter of urgency for the protection of the public. This includes events such as the discovery of a dangerous bridge, landslip, dangerous wall or trees about to fall onto the path, gas leak, notifiable animal disease and other occurrences over which we have no control and cannot take sufficient mitigating measures at the time, these are emergency closures.

These emergency closures can be put into effect at very short notice and only last for a few days. The purpose of them is to enable work to be carried out to remove, or reduce sufficiently, the danger or to arrange for a longer temporary closure.

Temporary closures can last up to six months but they take a few weeks to put into place and must be advertised in the local paper and on site. The purpose of such closures is to allow work to be carried out either to the path itself, such as where an emergency closure for a collapsing bridge does not last long enough for the work to be carried out, or on adjacent property which would present a danger to the public, such as where a public right of way crosses the site of a proposed new development.

Where works are planned, the closure must always be of this type, an emergency closure cannot be used for this purpose and if a temporary closure has not been requested in advance it may be necessary for the person carrying out the work to arrange the initial work so that it does not affect the path, or even to delay the start until the closure is in place. This procedure carries a real cost which is recharged to the applicant where relevant.

The work undertaken and the order in which it is undertaken are based on data currently held, including records of reported problems provided by the public, PPWs and information gathered through site inspections by officers.

There may be opportunities to identify and secure additional sources of funding, whether via further developing mutually-beneficial external partnerships which fulfil ROWIP aims, or by making a sound business case for internal funding. In all cases, effective marketing is key to securing those funds through thorough research and clear demonstration of the potential benefits, whether to health and social well-being, the environment or the economy.

With competing demands on both potential County Council and external funding, it is essential that existing resources are used efficiently. Furthermore, if we are to be successful in securing additional funding we must be able to demonstrate that a business-like approach is integral to our way of working.



6.0 Action Plan and Programme 2020/21

Northamptonshire County Council is fully committed to its responsibility to record and keep public rights of way open and accessible through the Rights of Way inspection and cyclical maintenance regimes. However, with limited funding, it is necessary for us to prioritise works which fulfil our statutory duties and attend to a limited number of the issues raised and identified as part of our service.

Whilst there is not the funding currently to introduce new rights of way initiatives, we will endeavour to obtain additional funding from external sources e.g. Section 106 funding.

We will continue to reactively deal with public enquiries as they arise and also with our detailed asset inventory inspections aiming to complete another 20% of the network taking us up to 80% of the network being surveyed at the end of this financial year. This detailed asset inventory also highlights where we have any concerns on the network which are passed on to our Rights of Way Officers to prioritise and deal with in an orderly manner based on safety concerns as we cannot fund every highlighted issue within a given financial year.

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We will continue to engage with all Parishes with an aim of encouraging each one to have a Parish Path Warden and where this is not possible trying to understand what barriers may exist to this. We will use the information provided by these Warden's to help shape our future maintenance and improvement plans.

We will undertake an annual Parish Survey with specific reference to the rights of way network in each Parish and provide each one with an opportunity to report on these.

Northamptonshire Local Access Forums (NLAF) is an advisory body that provide independent advice on public access to land, for recreational and other functional and utility purposes, it has a legal function to advise a collection of bodies and organisations which includes;-

- a. the appointing authority
- b. any county, district, unitary or borough council within the area of the forum
- c. any Secretary of State or government department
- d. Natural England
- e. English Heritage
- f. The Forestry Commission
- g. Sport England
- h. Any Parish or Town Council in the area of the forum

The main remit of the group is to advise the county council, as well as district and borough councils, on the management of the county's public rights of way. We will review the action plan annually with NLAF.

Ramblers have been working with landowners, land managers and local authorities to find ways to make the process for recording paths more efficient, consistent across the country, and less contentious, we are encouraging this to continue thus helping to claim as many historic paths as possible before the 2026 cut-off date.

We will continue to work on our case history and provide an annual progress report.

British Standards and Defra good practice guidance refer to the need to consider the least restrictive options on all rights of way with a hierarchy from best to worst of gaps, gates, kissing gates and stiles, which are updated on their web sites.

There are new British Standards for stiles regarding height of steps, provision of posts etc which most of the existing stiles in the County do not comply to and we need to ensure that when we undertake such replacements that they are to the latest specification and standard.

6.1 Mobility

The County Council will always consider the needs of people with mobility problems and other disabilities when assessing, maintaining and improving all public rights of way.

Improvements will be made to public rights of way wherever it is possible to do so, to ensure they are accessible to all users. All newly installed structures (Stiles/Gates/Bridges) will be continually assessed to ensure they comply with the Equalities Act 2010 and as a minimum meet their approved appropriate British Standard wherever reasonably possible. Each enquiry regarding a route and/or path will be assessed on its own individual merits before improvement works are carried out and the following will be considered: -

- The needs of users e.g. Parents with children in Pushchairs
- Accessibility of the route as a whole
- The historical character of existing structures and the landscape
- The existing and potential usage of the route
- Needs of the landowner (i.e. Stock Control)

It is essential to consider all the above to ensure that the maintenance and improvements to the rights of way network within Northamptonshire is targeted and focused where it can have the most impact whilst balancing the needs of landowners and users.

6.2 Monitoring and Review

Although the County Council is required to review its plan within 10 years of its publication the current 2007 plan was deemed still to be applicable while this revised plan was being developed, consulted upon and approved.

We will, following each annual survey, review the information provided and amend as required our programme of works and future work requirements depending upon available funding.

There will be continued dialogue with NLAF and the Ramblers to encourage collaborative working.

6.3 Statement of Action

The following Statement of Action lists an indicative set of projects that the Council aims to deliver within the ten year period 2020 – 2030. What can actually be achieved is dependent to varying degrees on the availability of funding and landowner agreement. The Council will need to retain flexibility in order to take advantage of opportunities arising, for example, from future development proposals or other partnerships. It follows that the Council may deliver alternative projects to the schemes listed here.

It is expected that funding from central government, local authority budgets and other sources are likely to be static or reduced in the future. Therefore, the importance of partnership working in improving the network and the need to draw in external funds from other sources must not be overlooked.

The delivery of projects will also be subject to the organisational changes that will occur within the Council, particularly with the transition to unitary authorities.

Alongside these ROWIP projects, ongoing maintenance works and smaller scale improvements will continue to be undertaken through the maintenance budget of the public rights of way team. These works are aligned to the policies of the ROWIP as well as satisfying the authority's duty to maintain public rights of way. This duty is undertaken in accordance with the authority's prioritisation system for different categories of maintenance and enforcement issues on public rights of way.

This section sets out how, based on the results of our assessments and the likely available resources, we plan to secure an improved network of local rights of way, whilst the table outlines the specific tasks required to deliver on this. Overall we are aiming to provide:

A rights of way network infrastructure maintained to an acceptable standard through the efficient use of available resources: Most public rights of Way are maintainable at public expense which means that Highway Authorities have a legal duty to keep them in a condition suitable for their use by ordinary traffic at all times of the year. Our Rights of Way Improvement Plan seeks to build upon this work and sets out our arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which we exercise this function, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

An accurate and up to date Definitive Map and statement: The Definitive Map and Statement together are the legal record of public rights of way. We have a legal duty to keep them under continuous review and investigate allegations that the details they contain are either correct, or otherwise. If the allegations are proven we may make definitive map modification orders to rectify errors. We also have discretionary powers to close, create and divert rights of way which we may use to facilitate development, for example.

A safer, more connected and accessible network for all: As we hope to make walking and cycling the natural choices for shorter journeys in Northamptonshire we need to remove the barriers people may face to using the rights of way network. The speed and volume of motorised traffic on the rural road network can deter vulnerable users; there are not enough routes connecting the places people live with the services they need, and parts of the network are off-limits to those who find structures such as stiles and steps too challenging.

Protecting the network and influencing development: Rights of way need to be protected from illegal obstruction and the adverse effects of development. Regulatory activities undertaken in this context will be transparent, accountable, proportionate and consistent. We may oppose developments which will have a disadvantageous effect on the rights of way network. As traffic on rural roads continues to increase we will consider carrying out safety audits at junctions with the rights of way network.

Promote greater use of the network and increase availability of information: Accessible, comprehensive and well-promoted information on the rights of way network will be required if we want to increase levels of use. Promotional activities should be coordinated, cross-sector efforts to ensure programmes offered by different sectors are complementary, and to avoid duplication. Objective information is important to everyone visiting the countryside, but without reassurance disabled people will often assume that it is not accessible to them so we should publicise available facilities and include information that people with impairments will require.

Implementation Plan:

This plan includes a number of proposals for improvements to the rights of way network. Where budgets and resources allow, we intend to prioritise these works to our network.

Furthermore, the County Council will transition to two new unitary authorities in 2021 and it may be that the ROWIP will be reviewed and amended in line with the new authority boundaries.

These proposed schemes are therefore aspirational and no clear plans have yet been drafted for implementation.

No.	Scheme Name:	Resource Implications:	Proposed Completion Date:
1	Two replacement footbridges at Chester Farm (TL5)	High	2021
2	Replacement footbridge at Eydon (AL14)	High	2021

No.	Scheme Name:	Resource Implications:	Proposed Completion Date:
3	Ground investigate and stabilisation works to byway ND16 at Lowick	Medium	2022

7.0 Acronym Summary

ADEPT	- Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport
BOAT	- Byway Open to All Traffic
BVPI	- Best Value Performance Indicator
CLA	- Country Landowners Association
CROW Act	- Countryside Rights of Way Act
Defra	- Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
DfT	- Department for Transport
DMMO	- Definitive Map Modification Order
NCC	- Northamptonshire County Council
NFU	- National Farmers Union
NLAF	- Northamptonshire Local Access Forum
PPW	- Parish Path Warden
ROWIP	- Rights of Way Improvement Plan
S106	-Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 is an agreement between a developer and the planning authority which can often release funding to deliver projects within a local area and are designed to ease the impact of a new development on the local community.