



Northumberland County Council

Cabinet

Tuesday, 11th March 2025

Rights of Way Improvement Plan (2025-2035)

Report of Councillor(s) John Riddle, Cabinet Member for Improving Roads and Highways

Responsible Officer(s): Paul Jones, Director of Environment and Transport

Link to Key Priorities of the Corporate Plan

Achieving Value for Money – the delivery plan associated with the Council's Rights of Way Improvement Plan will focus activity and expenditure on agreed policy areas.

Tackling Inequalities – improvements in the provision and management of the County's public rights of way network, in particular the provision of easily accessible routes and structures, will increase access to Northumberland's countryside for all residents and visitors. Many public rights of way also provide active travel routes for people to access leisure, education and employment opportunities.

Driving Economic Growth – Northumberland's rights of way network drives access to the county's countryside, villages and towns and the facilities and services they provide. Regional and national trails bring visitors to the county and expand the opportunities of the rural economy.

Purpose of report

To outline the feedback received to the draft plan following the recent consultation exercise and to seek agreement to the adoption of the Council's new Rights of Way Improvement Plan for 2025-2035.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Cabinet:-

- A) Considers the contents and policies of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP).

- B) Notes the consultation responses (as summarised)
- C) Notes the concerns raised by the Joint Local Access Forum (JLAF) and survey respondents relating to the resourcing of the delivery plan.
- D) Agrees to the adoption of the Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2025-2035.

Forward plan date and reason for urgency if applicable

Not applicable

Background

All Local Authorities have a statutory responsibility, under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW Act), to provide a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) which explains how improvements to the local Public Rights of Way network will provide a better experience for walkers, cyclists, horse riders, horse and carriage drivers, people with restricted mobility and people using motorised vehicles.

It is also a requirement of the CROW Act that the ROWIP is informed by consultation with interested parties including highway authorities whose areas adjoin the authority area, parish councils, National Park Authorities, Natural England and Local Access Forums.

The proposed Northumberland ROWIP 2025 – 2035 has been developed in line with national guidance and the requests of key stakeholders, such as the Joint Local Access Forum, and presents a strategic action plan for the next ten years. It replaces the previous Rights of Way Improvement plan.

The Northumberland ROWIP sets out how Northumberland County Council will identify, prioritise and plan improvements across the PROW network for the next ten years, working towards a vision which is shared with our partners and local stakeholders. It sets out nine policies and associated actions focussing on maintenance, recording, access, information, connectivity, communities, tourism, partnership and climate change. These form our strategy for the next ten years and will be delivered through rolling three-year Delivery Plans to be developed in consultation with the JLAF and community stakeholders.

Following approval by the Council's Rights of Way Committee in June 2024, the draft ROWIP was released for consultation from June to October 2024. The consultation invited comments from numerous stakeholders including town and parish councils, neighbouring highway authorities, the Northumberland Joint Local Access Forum, public rights of way user groups, Northumberland National Park Authority, the North Pennines and Northumberland Coast National Landscape Partnerships, and members of the public (a full list of consultees is provided at Annex 1).

Comments on the draft plan's structure and scope were broadly positive, welcoming the stated policies and proposed actions; many useful comments were received and incorporated into the final plan.

Criticisms of the draft plan related primarily to concerns over the adequacy of current resources available for ROW management and maintenance and that this situation would continue to prevail, resulting in an assumed lack of resources to deliver the

desired improvements outlined under the Delivery Plan. Other criticisms referred to the lack of data demonstrating the Council's performance in respect of ROW works.

The consultation highlighted the breadth of individuals and groups that have an interest in PROW in Northumberland and that the needs/priorities of different user groups are not always aligned and can sometimes conflict with each other. Several consultees commented that public safety was not properly addressed by the draft plan and that the ROWIP should make sure to take full account of NCC's commitment to nature recovery, climate change and connecting people to public transport.

Parish Councils responding to the consultation raised questions about their role and access to PROW information for their parish. Individuals and groups echoed this with comments relating to involvement with ROW maintenance.

Discussion

Members of the Northumberland Joint Local Access Forum, which represents a wide range of PROW users and stakeholders with a great deal of knowledge on public access to the countryside, have provided valuable assistance in the compilation of the ROWIP. The JLAF have expressed concerns over the Council's delivery against the stated policies in the ROWIP (see letter at Annex 2); these concerns are discussed in turn below.

Resources

The Council's Countryside and Green Spaces Team and Infrastructure Records Team carry out the authority's duties and responsibilities in respect of rights of way management, maintenance and enforcement and maintenance of the county's Definitive Map and Statement respectively.

The concerns expressed by the JLAF in respect of funding refers primarily to the staffing and resources available for the Countryside and Green Spaces team's management, maintenance and improvement of public rights of way. At the present time, the Council employs four Area Countryside Officers to investigate and resolve ROW reports and complaints, with works on ROW being carried out by a Project Officer who directs Council Field Teams or contractors (depending on the nature of the work). The Council's works on rights of way are funded either through revenue budgets (typically around £75,000 per annum for works) or using a portion of the Local Transport Plan budget for capital works (typically around £300,000 per annum but for 2025/26 the draft LTP includes an allocation of £765,000 for PROW maintenance and improvement works). The JLAF consider the policy aims and improvement actions within the proposed ROWIP to be undeliverable with the current level of staffing and resources.

The Countryside and Green Spaces Team deliver significant PROW works and improvements within current budget provision and the delivery plan actions in the ROWIP have been produced on the assumption that the budget for PROW works will remain at current levels. Whilst limits on expenditure may mean that the ambition of the ROWIP and the demands of stakeholders might not fully be met, the ROWIP and delivery plan mean that the service is well placed if funding is increased across the lifetime of the plan. Rolling 3-year delivery plans will be reviewed and updated each year that will reflect the resources available for the delivery plan period, with this process being aligned to the Council's MTFP budget setting process so that the relative prioritisation for allocation of Council resources can be considered.

Communication between NCC teams

Access for people on foot, by bike and on horseback, and by vehicles is spread across a wide network of adopted highways (roads, pavements, cycle paths), public rights of way (footpaths, bridleways, restricted byways and byways), permissive paths and other non-recorded routes. Access on foot also allows members of the public to enter and pass through areas of Access Land (as brought about by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000). This means that different but connected routes used by people to access and enjoy Northumberland fall under the responsibilities of different teams within the County Council – for example footways being maintained by the Highways Maintenance teams with Countryside staff maintaining PROW. As NCC teams necessarily work within their own areas of service responsibility there is a risk that this can lead to a lack of a joined-up approach and apparent ‘silo working’ and the JLAF is concerned that this does not reflect the experience and needs of users, and prevents full implementation of the ROWIP’s policies and actions.

The senior management restructure within the County Council, which saw the formation of the Place and Regeneration Directorate, has brought together all the services that help to shape Northumberland as a place. This includes all the planning, regeneration, tourism, countryside, highways and transport services which have a role to play in relation to PROW. The Countryside and Green Spaces Team are functionally aligned with Neighbourhood Services, Highways, Strategic Transport and Climate Change under the Director of Environment and Transport and already work closely with colleagues in Highways (in particular in the prioritisation and allocation of LTP capital funding for PROW schemes, inspection and maintenance of key PROW infrastructure such as large footbridges, and in the physical delivery of larger capital maintenance and improvement schemes) and other teams within NCC. The team have also recently acquired a seat at NCC’s Walking and Cycling Board and will look to develop relationships within and beyond that forum to support the delivery of the ROWIP’s proposed actions.

However, it is acknowledged that there is always room for improved communication and joint working and further links need to be developed between the Countryside Team and others within NCC and beyond where this can allow ROWIP ambitions and actions to be realised. The Countryside and Green Spaces Team will work to further improve internal communications and joint working arrangements and to establish new links with partners and strengthen existing links.

Disused Railway Tracks (DRTs)

The JLAF and other respondents to the ROWIP consultation have highlighted the value of bringing about public access along disused railway tracks and consider DRTs in Northumberland as a potentially very significant component of the rights of way network that should be developed under the ROWIP delivery plan.

Establishing public rights on DRTs, which tend to be in private ownership, is difficult to bring about. Some sections of DRT have public access secured along them, in particular the former South Tyne Rail Line, most of which is leased by NCC or remains in NCC’s ownership. Where DRTs are part of private land holdings, landowner agreement to the creation of public rights of access is preferred (as opposed to creation without agreement) and NCC officers will continue to look for opportunities to bring about new rights by agreement.

As referenced in the ROWIP, a recent example of the establishment of new public access along a DRT is that of the Aln Valley Railway project where the Aln Valley Railway Trust have collaborated with Northumberland County Council to create a multi user route alongside the rail line between Lionheart and Greenriggs. The County Council continue to work with the Trust on the development of the final section of line linking Greenriggs to Alnmouth, a crucial part of this being NCC's adoption and improvement of the Eden Hill Bridge.

Development and new housing

The JLAF consider it essential that the Design and Access Statements address the need for future residents to use existing rights of way, to have suitable new links on foot or cycle and to include improvements to assist those with disabilities to make use of access routes. It is suggested that the ROWIP contains a statement of intent and endorsement by NCC Planning. It is suggested also that the Northumberland Local Plan should state expressly how networks for everyday walking, cycling and horse riding will be protected and enhanced.

NCC Planning regularly consults with the Council's Countryside and Green Spaces Team and Infrastructure Records Team on proposed developments, and this allows recommendations to be made which create or improve public access routes. Comments relating to the Northumberland Local Plan have been passed to NCC Planning for consideration and response.

White Paper on access to nature

The JLAF refer to an expected Government White Paper on delivering access for everyone to nature within a 15 minute walk of home and suggests that this ambition is reflected in the ROWIP.

The ROWIP does reference Defra's 2023 Environmental Improvement Plan commitment to everyone being within 15 minutes walk of green or blue space and includes NCC's commitment to contributing to this goal. The Council has already invested in a rolling capital programme to improve access to its parks, green spaces and PROW network through its Parks Improvement Programme and Queen Elizabeth II Commemoration Programme. These capital programmes have included the provision of new accessible path networks, improvements to existing paths and provision of interpretation information at multiple sites across the whole county so that more people are able to access and enjoy their local countryside and connect to nature. Further schemes are in development and delivery through these programmes in 2025/26, including two new community woodlands in Alnwick as well as the creation of a new public green space at the Lindisfarne site in Alnwick and further improvements to Blyth Promenade and Links.

Gaps in the network

The JLAF wish to see gaps in the ROW network identified and addressed.

NCC officers already take advantage of opportunities to address gaps in connectivity in the PROW network and this will continue under the new ROWIP which acknowledges the existence of gaps in the PROW network and commits to identify

and address these, including in its delivery plan actions to create and record missing links and crossings of the A1 that effectively interrupt the PROW network.

NNPA revised accord

NCC officers are in dialogue with their counterparts in NNPA in respect of the rights of way accord that identifies how the two partners will deliver ROW management, maintenance and improvements. A revised and updated accord will be produced.

The Countryside and Green Spaces team will seek to raise awareness of the new PROWIP within the council and to work with colleagues to identify opportunities for improved co-ordination and collaboration to support the delivery of the aims and actions contained within the plan. This improved internal joint working is already being facilitated by the new service alignments within the Council with service areas already working collaboratively to deliver common aims and objectives, such as economy and generation teams working closely with colleagues in strategic transport and Countryside teams to secure funding for active travel schemes and provision of new path networks within green spaces as part of wider regeneration schemes. The PROWIP is also strongly aligned with the Council's key corporate objectives as it is acknowledged that improving connectivity, tackling climate change and supporting nature recovery are critical to delivering economic growth, tackling inequality and improving value for money.

ROWIP review process

The JLAF are keen to see the ROWIP held and used as a living document and ask that a review process is established. To this end, the Countryside and Green Spaces Team will provide an annual report for the JLAF and the Council's Rights of Way Committee setting out progress against the ROWIP's policies, objectives and delivery plan actions.

Options open to the Council and reasons for the recommendations

It is a legal requirement under Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW Act) the for the Council to produce a Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan.

Implications

Policy	The Right of Way Improvement Plan sets out nine new policies that determine the Council's approach to its management and improvement of the rights of way network. It replaces the previous document and policies set out in 2006.
Finance and value for money	Improvements to the rights of way network are delivered in large part using funding from the Council's Local Transport Plan allocation. Where possible external funding for PROW improvements are also sought from developers as part of the planning process, from Government grants as part of wider regeneration and active travel programmes and from other bodies where available. As such, projects and schemes are subject to scrutiny and approval both from NCC and where

	applicable, from external funding bodies. This plan does not, in and of itself, request additional funding.
Legal	The production of a Rights of Way Improvement Plan for Northumberland is a requirement of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.
Procurement	None identified.
Human resources	None identified at this stage.
Property	None identified
The Equalities Act: is a full impact assessment required and attached?	Yes - required and attached Appended to report. Development, consultation, finalisation and implementation will apply public sector duty and should be positive for all groups.
Risk assessment	Reputational risk if plan is not made and published. No other risks identified.
Crime and disorder	None identified
Customer considerations	The Rights of Way Improvement Plan sets out how the authority will be able to bring about improvements in access for all users of Northumberland's Rights of Way network. The associated delivery plan sets out improvements to the network over a rolling three year period for the lifetime of the plan.
Carbon reduction	Improvements to the Council's rights of way network will enable residents and visitors to make more convenient and more frequent use of off road routes. Increased use of the county's rights of way network has the potential to bring about a concomitant reduction in travel by car.
Health and wellbeing	Improvements to the Council's rights of way network will support healthy living by better enabling residents and visitors to access and enjoy the outdoors.
Wards	(All Wards);

Background papers

2025-2035 Rights of Way Improvement Plan

Equality Impact Assessment_ROWIP_May 24

Links to other key reports already published

Not applicable.

Author and Contact Details

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Annex 1 List of ROWIP consultees

The following organisations were invited to respond to the ROWIP consultation:

North Tyneside Council,
Gateshead Council, Newcastle City Council,
Durham County Council, Cumberland Council,
Westmorland and Furness Council,
Scottish Borders Council,
Northumberland National Park Authority,
North Pennines National Landscape Partnership,
Northumberland Coast National Landscape Partnership,
Natural England, Sustrans,
National Trust,
National Trails UK,

All Northumberland town, parish and community Councils,

Northumberland Joint Local Access Forum,
The Ramblers,
British Horse Society,
Cycling UK,
Byways and Bridleways Trust,
Trail Riders Fellowship,
Green Lane Association,
Country Landowners Association,
National Farmers Union,
Disabled Ramblers,
Open Spaces Society,
Northumberland Rivers Trust,
Tyne Rivers Trust,
Northumberland Wildlife Trust,
Prudhoe Path Force,
Kielder Partnership.

Annex 2: Letter from Northumberland Joint Local Access Forum

To: Leader and Chief Executive, Northumberland CC
Chair Rights of Way Committee, Cllr Catherine Seymour
Cabinet member Local Services, Cllr John Riddle

Cc: Directors of Highways, Planning, Public Health, Sustainability
Chief Executive, NNPA
Mayor North East Combined Authority

Dear All

Letter of Advice

As I am sure you are aware, the Joint Local Access Forum (JLAF) has a statutory duty to provide advice on Rights of Way and wider public access across Northumberland to the Local Authority, to the National Park Authority and to any other organisation with an interest or responsibility for public access. I would like to summarise our collective response to the revised Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) – also a statutory document, currently being finalised by the County Council following consultations. We would also like to pass on some key messages and priorities from the JLAF members.

Public Rights of Way are often taken for granted but we would like to remind you that they are a hugely valuable part of the national heritage with great historic and cultural significance. Above all, rights of way are rights for everyone, allowing us to enter on to land and pass through: on a route that is usually free from motor traffic. Some routes may be new but many more have been in use for centuries if not millennia. We need to care for the routes as much as other heritage features: Hadrian's Wall, historic buildings, ancient trees, and more.

We would like the revised ROWIP to be a plan for action and positive outcomes contributing to achieving more active travel. This will not happen without funding. The Local Access Forum has consistently expressed concerns about the underfunding of the Rights of Way service and infrastructure. The revised ROWIP makes no commitment to additional resources, suggesting it will only be delivered within available funding. Without additional resources the ROWIP becomes undeliverable as existing funding levels are not able to meet current levels of demand for maintenance and repair. Growing pressures resulting from erosion, driven by increasing number of extreme weather events, and the need for additional rights of way as housing stock continues to expand, means more funding is required simply to maintain the Rights of Way network.

JLAF members believe the original 2007 ROWIP was ambitious but remained unrecognised and unsupported within and outside Northumberland County Council. Work on transport, highways and access stayed in silos: this poor communication needs to change. Sustainable Transport, Climate Change, Active Travel, Cycling and Walking and Public Health strategies are all receiving funding and need to be aligned with Rights of Way improvement through a multi-agency approach. JLAF members were surprised to hear that Rights of Way have only recently gained representation on the Walking and Cycling Board for example. JLAF members seek a stronger commitment from Northumberland County Council and other delivery partners to help achieve the aims of the ROWIP. Those involved with projects to improve transport through better infrastructure, active travel and climate resilience need to recognise the role of Public Rights of Way, understand the challenges in provision and maintenance and above all

support rather than side-line the efforts of the County Council's Countryside and Green Spaces Team.

The JLAF very much applauds the achievement of the Northumberland Rights of Way Team, working with the assistance of consultant Katherine Williams to produce the draft ROWIP document and recognises the excellent work that has gone into the document. In the main we are happy that the policies and objectives reflect our own priorities and will lay the foundations for the next 10 years delivery across the Rights of Way Network. JLAF members have held informal consultation to test public opinion at several recent local County shows. They received and discussed regular progress reports and have also responded individually to the draft ROWIP consultation. Collectively through our Community Action and ROWIP Task group, a workshop on 14 November compiled the group's remaining concerns and agreed priorities. (See attached record from the workshop) We look forward to receiving the final plan and the development of the first 5-year delivery plan in due course.

We list the following to receive prominence and priority in the final draft.

1 Disused Railway Tracks (DRTs)

The County Council has been successful in retaining a few DRTs along the Tyne Valley but there are stretches of former track that are still in existence, neglected and underused, in private ownership. There is unfortunately no legal method to restore these former public assets to public ownership and public access but with vigilance, opportunities do occur from time to time and should be taken forward energetically. It is important that the ROWIP fully reflects the strong public desire for these routes to be made available for public access. (An informal county show survey put the re-use of DRTs as the surprise top Rights of Way priority.) The JLAF has consistently supported the re-purposing of DRTs as public greenways.

2 Development and new housing in particular

With a change of government it is to be expected that planning authorities will be dealing with new housing development applications and it is essential that the mandatory "Design and Access Statement" addresses the need for future residents to use existing Rights of Way, have suitable new links on foot or cycle and improvements to assist those with disabilities to make use of the access routes. The proposed Newcastle Movement Strategy will suggest "*using development powers to improve infrastructure around new developments, such as better bus services, cycling paths and footpaths.*" A similar statement of intent should be included in the ROWIP and should carry a formal endorsement by the Local Planning Authority. The current Northumberland Local Plan mentions PROW and ROWIP but needs to do much more than pay lip service in the terms of "protect and enhance" (S9.9) and state expressly how this will be done.

3 White Paper on access to nature

The new Government has indicated there will be a White Paper on delivering access for everyone to nature within a 15 minute walk of home. The path for walkers should also be a multi user route free from motor vehicle traffic and this should be included as a ROWIP ambition.

4 Gaps in the network

There is a strong mood of support across the JLAF membership to identify and address gaps in the network and other barriers that deter use of rights of way. No-one wants to encounter obstructions, deep mud, locked gates, lack of signage, having to walk on to a busy roadside, a path that just peters out or a bridleway that changes to a footpath without warning. A particular concern is the glaring lack of non-vehicular crossing points on the A1 and the railway: path users are often forced on to a road bridge or underpass. Gaps can also arise as a result of climate-related loss and damage: floods, fallen trees, erosion and droughts can all cause routes to be blocked, lost or severely damaged. In order to address the gaps they need to be recorded and mapped. As a footnote we are conscious that gaps and barriers are not all physical: users may feel lost, unwelcome or intimidated.

5 Northumberland National Park Authority – Partnership Working

We welcome the existence of the NNPA Accord and suggest that similar accords/agreements need to be drawn up with the other organisations listed. This is to be included but the JLAF believes there must be similar synchronisation and a formal commitment to help deliver the ROWIP from within the County Council and the region. This means engaging the opportunities arising through the following.

- The Local Planning Authority (Northumberland Council)
- The Regional and Local Transport Plan – Local Highway Authority and the North East Combined Authority, in particular the Mayor’s forthcoming Local Transport Plan – aiming at “...a joined up network - simple and affordable to use with wider reaching infrastructure that is fit for the future. Striving for our network to be greener, more reliable, and safer.”
- Local Cycling and Walking Improvement Plan team and Active Travel Plans (Northumberland Council)
- Climate Change Team (Northumberland Council)

6 Review

JLAF members have committed much time to helping to develop the revised ROWIP and did not put their efforts in to see the plan sit on a shelf gathering dust. With this in mind we ask that a review process is established. The JLAF discussion with the ROWIP team highlighted only limited oversight of the work of the rights of way delivery teams as reporting is captured at a more strategic LTP level. We understand there will be annual delivery plans created and would welcome improved monitoring and evaluation through a published annual report. An annual report to the Rights of Way committee should set out progress in implementing the ROWIP and indicate how the improvements support broader County Council priorities such as the climate emergency, improving people’s health and wellbeing and contribution to the visitor economy.

We hope that our advice is helpful and will aid delivery of a better rights of way network.

Yours sincerely

Alex K MacLennan

Alex MacLennan
Chair
Northumberland JLAF