

KCC consultation on Rights of Way Improvement Plan

Introduction

Following the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000, a duty was placed on Kent County Council to produce a Rights of Way (PROW) Improvement Plan and to keep it updated. The Plan's purpose is to:

- Increase the usage and enjoyment of Kent's public rights of way and open green space;
- Support Kent's regeneration by delivering improvements which will contribute to a better environment
- Provide opportunities to improve health and wellbeing.
- Provide a gateway to explore Kent's heritage, wildlife and iconic landscapes,
- Improve the quality of life for residents and visitors of Kent.

Request from KCC

KCC asked three key questions to help guide its future plan:

1. What is the extent to which local rights of way meet the present and likely future needs of the public?
2. What are the opportunities provided by local rights of way for exercise and other forms of open-air recreation and the enjoyment of the authority's area?
3. What is the accessibility of local rights of way to blind or partially sighted persons and others with mobility problems?

In respect of the following:

- access to the countryside or a particular viewpoint, feature or attraction
- access to woodland as well as other land types and to improve provision for cyclists, horse riders and disabled users
- routes to support tourism, regeneration or community projects
- alternative routes for cyclists, horse riders and walkers to avoid using busy roads
- circular routes for leisure use, e.g. walking, running, cycling
- paths and routes by water or the sea which need repairing
- crossings over roads, railways, rivers and canals
- existing rights of way, e.g. those that end in cul-de-sacs or that have different rights along their length
- routes for local journeys, e.g. walking to work, the shops, railway stations
- routes to help people travel through or around heavily developed areas

Formed in 2005, the Town Forum is the voice of the 50,000 residents of Royal Tunbridge Wells on issues of common interest

Town Forum Management Group

Adrian Berendt (Chair); Alex Green (Deputy Chair); Alastair Tod (Deputy Chair); David Wakefield (Finance); Jane Fenwick (Transport); Linda Lewis (Culture, Leisure & Tourism); Mark Booker (Strategic Planning); Michael Holman (Water in the Wells)

Response from the Town Forum

On behalf of the Town Forum, the Management Committee's response focusses on PROWs within the town and their links to PROWs in the surrounding countryside.

- PROWs need to be seen as a strategic part of the transport network, supporting KCC's strategy of active travel, as well as a leisure facilities.
- There are many opportunities for KCC to work with other parts of local and national government and their agencies – Borough/District Councils, Highways England, the Canal and River Trust and so on. Sometimes this works; sometimes it does not
- The needs of all users need to be considered as a whole – the able-bodied and the disabled, the old and the young. ***“Design for the disabled and the facility will be usable by the able-bodied.”***

Detailed responses

How have KCC's plans for PROWs influenced your strategies, policies or projects?

As the voice of 50,000 people living in Royal Tunbridge Wells, the Town Forum supports initiatives that enable more people to make more journeys on foot or by bike as a contribution to reducing congestion, improving physical and mental health and reducing pollution. As such, its aims complement those in this Plan.

What strategies, policies or projects does your organisation have that could link to the new Rights of Way Improvement Plan?

The RTW Town Forum has developed a green networks plan which allows those on foot or using a bike to travel between the town centre, residential areas and the surrounding villages and countryside. We are pressing Borough and County Councils to build / adapt existing pedestrian and cycling infrastructure to ensure that anyone from 8-80 can get around by bike and on foot. This includes new cycle paths, reduced speed limits on streets where people live and work, better infrastructure for pedestrians - raised tables, more crossings etc - and better information about how to access safe routes.

In your experience how is the current PROW Network being used?

It is underused. It is seen largely as a leisure facility or, in urban settings, as a cut-through to get from place to place. Too often PROWs are not usable by bicycles or those in mobility vehicles, when they easily and safely could be.

The PROW network doesn't join up and there appears to be no strategic plan to do so. In any discussion about transport, the need to move motor vehicles trumps all other objectives. A key reason for fewer and fewer people walking and cycle is that it's largely unpleasant. Like many other residents living in the middle of Tunbridge Wells, we often drive 10 / 15 minutes to start the walk a countryside, when is easy to walk from the door, but is often an unpleasant experience.

There are many places in towns – paths, parks an so on – where the PROW says "no cycling", but where it is perfectly to do so. With small changes to permissions and to signage, many routes in towns could be significantly improved for those wanting to use their bike or mobility vehicles to get around. We have identified several of these in Tunbridge Wells.

The RTW Town Forum's Green Networks Plan needs to be incorporated in any future planning for walking and cycling in the town. The Tunbridge Wells Borough Council strategy to increase walking and cycling in the Borough includes leisure as well as transport. Building leisure routes such as the Spa and Castles route (Tonbridge / Tunbridge Wells / Penshurst / Hever) could make a significant contribution to the local economy.

Conversion of existing footpaths to bridleways or similar could help, where suitable. This would be a cheap and effective way of extending the transport network.

Do you think the PROW Network needs to evolve to meet future demand over the next 10 years?

Yes. PROWs originally evolved as a means of transport, either on foot or on horseback. With the advent of the car, many were converted to use by motor vehicles. The remainder mostly became viewed as leisure facility. The original purpose of PROWs needs to be reconsidered.

The complementary nature of cycling and walking as a mode of transport and as a leisure activity needs to be considered in any strategic plan. The specific needs of, e.g. the commuter cyclist over the casual walker are different, but improvements for one can often benefit the other. A strategic plan for moving people actively needs to be developed and then implemented. This is particularly true where there are new housing and or transport schemes.

There are countless examples throughout the county where new developments have been granted permission without extending PROWs to enable their use for travel. Examples of failure include:

- The new housing development at Hawkenbury in Tunbridge Wells has no provision for active travel to the town centre, despite being little more than a mile away.
- The housing scheme at Great Chart in Ashford seems to assume that everyone will drive.
- The newly dualled A21 between Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells holds three valuable lessons:
 - It includes a Non Motorised User route which was originally designed as a route for horses and would have included a rough surface. Thanks to the intervention of local pressure groups, the surface has been upgraded, making it usable by bicycles. As a consequence, the route will also be usable by horse-riders in winter, when it might otherwise have been impassable.
 - The NMU could then have been a key route for active travel, linking the two towns, Pembury and the hospital. Unfortunately its use by cyclists and by those in disability vehicles is likely to be restricted because there is no safe connection to the local network.
 - An original PROW across the A21 was lost some years ago when the section between North Farm and Kippings Cross was dualled. A new bridge will re-instate the route for pedestrians, but is too narrow for bicycles, disability vehicles and horses.

Can you provide us with ideas how we can improve the accessibility of local rights of way to blind or partially sighted persons and others with mobility problems?

New PROWs need to be capable of being used by those using mobility vehicles and those on recumbent cycles and on cargo bikes. Designing entrances that are wide enough and surfaces

smooth enough for those in wheelchairs or disability scooters. using raised tables instead of drop kerbs on side roads to improved access for the disabled.

The newly installed cycle/foot bridge over the A21 at Blackhurst Lane is an excellent example of a new facility which fails to provide such access and which does not even comply with Highways England own guidance note (IAN 195).

Can you provide us with ideas how we can improve the accessibility of local to woodland including to equestrians and cyclists?

Ensure that the cycling facilities which do exist are reachable by bike and by those with disabilities. Design for the disabled and the facility will work for the able-bodied. Often people have to use their car to get to facilities in order to cycle and this should be made unnecessary. E.g. Bewl Water, Bedgebury, PORC etc are all great leisure facilities, but inaccessible to those using a bike as no safe routes exist. E.g. The walks and lanes at the back of Pembury are easily accessible on foot or on bike, but the ways of getting there are limited, except by car.

Consideration could be given to changing the legal status of suitable footpaths into bridleways, with a long-term plan for making them usable in future by bikes and mobility vehicles scooters etc

Can we improve the way KCC currently works with your organisation?

More meaningful consultation with local groups and other agencies at an early stage in new developments – as well as the RTW Town Forum, those representing walking groups, horse-riding organisations and those groups that believe that developing our PROW network can make a significant contribution to active travel.

Can you suggest any improvements / changes to the way we currently provide and receive information?

Reporting poorly maintained PROWs, stiles, overgrown paths etc could be made easier with phone apps, including, e.g. 3D bar codes to identify the locality of an issue, GPS tracking etc. Are PROWs automatically included in mapping tools to show the shortest route between places?

Please provide any additional information you think we should be aware of?

As well providing a leisure facility that can make the county more attractive to residents and visitors, PROWs should be regarded as a key component of KCC's ambition to make active travel the preferred alternative for short journeys.