



BEDFORD
BOROUGH COUNCIL



Rights of Way Improvement Plan

2024-2029

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Foreword

Welcome to the latest Borough of Bedford's Rights of Way Improvement Plan.

This plan outlines the Borough Council's goals, objectives, and practical initiatives to enhance the public use and enjoyment of the Borough's network of public rights of way from 2024 to 2029.

The public rights of way network spans over 950 kilometres of byways, restricted byways, bridleways and public footpaths and stands as a significant community, cultural, and heritage asset, that requires our safeguarding, and ongoing enhancement and promotion.

This extensive network serves as both a crucial recreational and a sustainable transport resource, catering to the needs of walkers, cyclists, horse riders, and others seeking to appreciate the countryside. Public rights of way play a pivotal role in providing people of all ages the opportunity to explore their local landscapes, delve into the area's history and to enjoy its scenic beauty.

Recognised as a cherished means of escaping the hectic pace of modern life, these rights of way contribute to connecting individuals with nature and can help foster physical and mental well-being.

I wholeheartedly support this plan, encouraging all of us to venture out to use the public rights of way in the Borough.

Jim Weir

Councillor Jim Weir

Cabinet Environment Portfolio Holder

Borough of Bedford Local Access Forum

The Borough of Bedford Local Access Forum (BoBLAF), set up under the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000, advises Bedford Borough Council on Public Rights of Way and Access matters within the Borough. As a consultee, the BoBLAF has welcomed the opportunity to be involved in the generation of this latest Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP).

This RoWIP clearly identifies what improvements are planned and how these will be accomplished. There is also a mechanism for periodically reporting progress of these activities. The BoBLAF look forward to monitoring these improvements over the lifespan of the Plan.

In these days of financial constraint, it is important to be able to demonstrate value for money. The RoWIP gives the required visibility of what is being achieved. Given a sufficiently high profile, it should influence the allocation of appropriate future funding for the maintenance of and improvements to the current network of Public Rights of Way (PRoW) in the Borough. With appropriate promotion, these PRoWs, and the access they provide to the countryside, can play an increasingly important role in helping improve the health and wellbeing of residents in the Borough.

Bob Wallace

Bob Wallace

Borough of Bedford Local Access Forum Chairman

Our Vision

“ To enable people to use and enjoy the Borough’s Public Rights of Way network and to involve everyone in protecting and managing this valued asset.

This will be achieved by ensuring that the network is improved, marketed and valued as a key public cultural, social and heritage asset, capable of meeting the current and future access needs of the residents of the Borough. ”





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Section 1
**Introducing Bedford Borough
Council's RoWIP 4 2024-2029**

1. Introducing Bedford Borough Council's RoWIP 4 2024-2029

1.1 Introduction

This is the fourth version of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP) for the Borough of Bedford. It provides the context for the future management of and investment in the Public Rights of Way (PRoW) network to meet user's current and future needs for the period of 2024 to 2029.

Public Rights of Way are highways that allow the public a "right of passage" and are maintained by the Borough Council as the Highway Authority for the area.

1.2 RoWIP 4 Purpose and Scope

The RoWIP provides the means to how Council identifies changes and improvements to local rights of way networks in order to meet the Government's aims of better provision for walkers, cyclists, equestrians (horse riders and horse and carriage drivers) and people with disabilities.

The RoWIP is required to have two main parts: the Assessment of users' needs and the Statement of Action (Action Plan).

This updated plan reflects the current position of how people get into the countryside and how the footpaths, cycle tracks, bridleways and byways are being used.

National guidance indicates that RoWIPs should be incorporated into Local Transport Plans (LTP) to help address sustainable transport and road safety issues. The RoWIP will also consider biodiversity, community safety, culture and tourism, local economic needs, health, recreation and social inclusion. The aim of the RoWIP is to help inform emerging Transport policies.

1.3 RoWIP 4 Process

1.3.1 Make an Assessment

The Government guidance advises that the Council should assess the:

1.3.2 Produce a Statement of Action

Produce a Statement of Action to address the issues identified in the assessment. It outlines the strategic actions that will be used to bid for resources, especially from the LTP and planning gains, to help meet the identified needs and demands.

1.3.3 Consider a Strategic Environmental Assessment

This version of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP 4) has been reviewed and this process has concluded that it does not need its own Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), as there are no significant material changes to policy or service delivery.

1.4 The Borough of Bedford Local Access Forum

The Borough of Bedford Local Access Forum (BoBLAF) is a key partner. The Local Access Forum has a membership of both countryside users and those people who farm or manage the land. This balance of interests informs and advises the Borough Council on a wide range of countryside access and recreation matters. With its network of national, regional and local contacts, it has helped inform the development of the plan.



Summary

Aims and Objectives

Our headline principles and objectives for ROWIP 4 2024 – 2029 arising from the analysis of user needs are:

Aim 1: The PRow network is valued as an asset.

Aim 2: Improved service provision and working with network users.

Aim 3: A well maintained, safe and easily accessible network.

Aim 4: Getting involved.

Aim 5: Information and promoting the network.

Aim 1 - The PRow network is valued as an asset

Objectives

- 1.1 Ensure the ROWIP aims are integrated into all Bedford Borough Council plans and strategies in order to protect and improve Public Rights of Way (PRow).
- 1.2 Connect Rights of Way to the Public Health and wellbeing domain and unlock their potential for improving quality of life for local people.
- 1.3 Improve accessibility for all to the Public Rights of way network.
- 1.4 Maintain and improve the Public Rights of way network as a social, cultural, heritage and biodiversity asset.
- 1.5 Recognise and maximise the contribution the PRow network brings to both the rural and wider economy of the Borough of Bedford.
- 1.6 Improve the contribution the PRow network makes to enhancing non-motorised travel throughout the Borough of Bedford.

Aim 2 - Improved service provision and working with network users

Objectives

- 2.1 To ensure that the Legal Record of PRow – Definitive Map and Statement - is up-to-date and accurately maintained and to make it easier for people to engage in legal processes to change the Legal Record
- 2.2 Improve feedback to members of the public on all Legal and Technical rights of way processes.
- 2.3 Maintain an accurate and up to date database of information and mapping to enable effective PRow for management and deliver the ROWIP.
- 2.4 Monitor regional and national best practice for inclusion into the Rights of Way Team.

Aim 3 - A well maintained, safe and easily accessible network

Objectives

- 3.1 Improve maintenance so that it meets public needs and enables greater use of the Public Rights of Way network.
- 3.2 Develop a better connected and safe PRow network.
- 3.3 Make way marking and signage improvements to enable users to easily find their way.
- 3.4 Install a range of appropriate, safe and easy to use structures on the PRow network.

Aim 4 - Getting people involved

Objectives

- 4.1 Enable local people to get involved in maintaining and improving their Public Rights of Way.
- 4.2 Identify and develop a range of more effective partnerships to deliver improvements on Public Rights of Way, working with Parish Councils, users groups and volunteers.
- 4.3 Provide different volunteering opportunities for people of all ages and abilities to help improve the Public Rights of Way network.

Aim 5 - Information and promoting the network

Objectives

- 5.1 Enable PRow Users and Landowners/Farmers to understand and meet their statutory Rights and Responsibilities.
- 5.2 Encourage responsible dog ownership and minimise dog fouling and disturbance to livestock and wildlife on all public paths and in the Countryside.
- 5.3 Encourage responsible use of Byways Open to All Traffic (BOATs) by motorised users, working with partners and user groups.
- 5.4 Improved management of the production and distribution of information about the Public Rights of Way network
- 5.5 Carry out market research and address gaps in information about PRow users and their needs.
- 5.6 Make effective use of current and emerging Information technologies.

Action Plan 2024-2029

Meeting present and future user needs

Our headline aims arising from the analysis of user needs are:

Aim 1: The PRoW network is valued as an asset.

Aim 2: Improved service provision and working with network users.

Aim 3: A well maintained, safe and easily accessible network.

Aim 4: Getting involved.

Aim 5: Information and promoting the network.

Delivery of each individual action in the plan will be led by Council officers working in partnership with key stakeholders, including landowners/Farmers, Parish Councils, user groups and volunteers.



Aim 1	The PRow network is valued as an asset	
Aim	Description	Key Partners
1.1	Ensure the ROWIP aims are integrated into all Bedford Borough Council plans and strategies in order to protect and improve PRow	
A	To continue to align the RoWIP with the Highway planning policy and LTP and develop complementary projects to implement PRow improvements.	Planning Dept Developers Town & Parish Councils User & Interest Groups Neighbourhood Plans Local Access Forum
B	Incorporate the benefits the PRow network provides into the Borough Council's health and wellbeing strategies.	
C	Link the ROWIP with the forthcoming Green Infrastructure Plan and work with Parish Councils to encourage the PRow network to be included in Neighbourhood Plans as a vital infrastructure asset.	
1.2	Connect Rights of Way to the Public Health and wellbeing domain and unlock their potential for improving quality of life for local people	
A	Increase opportunities for people to get into the countryside on PRows and use the natural environment to improve their physical and mental health and wellbeing.	Public Health Team Town & Parish Councils User & Interest Groups Active Travel Volunteer Groups
B	Ensure that all policies and strategies consider horse riders alongside walking and cycling.	
1.3	Improve accessibility for all to the Public Rights of Way Network	
A	Authorise (S147) required structures to ensure improved physical access and remove any unnecessary structures.	Landowners Town & Parish Councils Access Groups User & Interest Groups
B	Work with User & Interested Groups, Town and Parish Councils to promote information to support those with disabilities to make informed choices.	
1.4	Maintain and improve the Public Rights of Way Network as a social, cultural, heritage and biodiversity asset	
A	Manage seasonal maintenance programmes to respect the needs of flora and fauna and remain within the law.	Town & Parish Councils Access Groups User & Interest Groups Local Access Forum
B	Work with User & Interest Groups, Town and Parish Councils to promote existing and create new walking, cycling and riding trails across the Borough.	
1.5	Improve the contribution the PRow network makes to enhancing non-motorised travel throughout the Borough of Bedford	
A	Work closely with Highways Planning and Policy team to highlight the contribution the PRow network makes to all non-motorised highway users in the Borough.	Planning Dept Developers Landowners

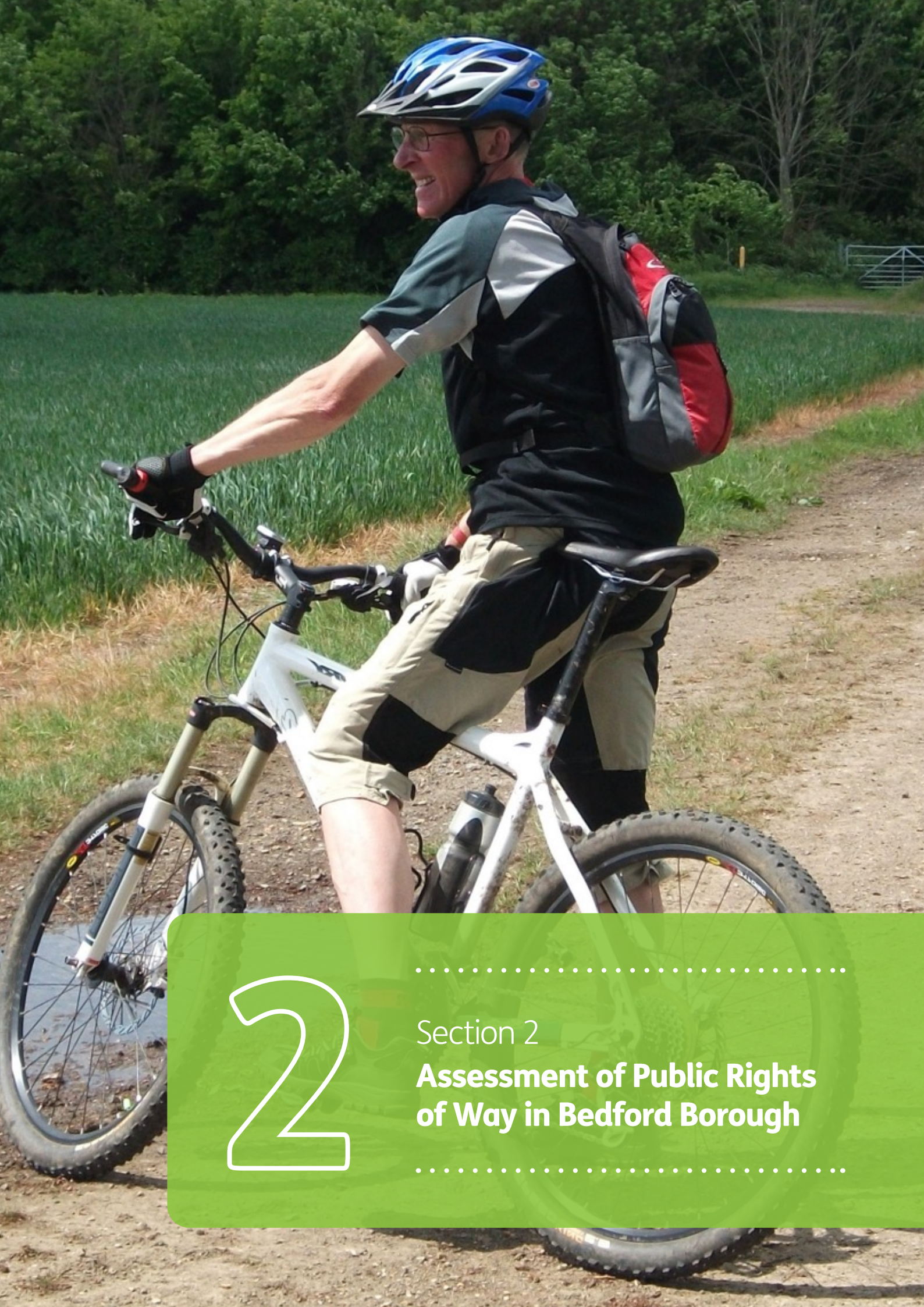
Aim 2	Improved service provision and working with network users	
Aim	Description	Key Partners
2.1	To ensure that the Legal Record of PRow – Definitive Map and Statement - is up-to-date and accurately maintained and to make it more accessible for people to engage in legal processes to change the Legal Record	
A	Review, update and correct the Definitive Map and Statement (DM&S) of Public Rights of Way to deliver ROWIP aims and objectives.	User & Interest Groups
B	Refine DMMO and PPO processes in response to the Deregulation Act (when enacted).	
C	Publish guidance and tools to enable customers to make online applications for DMMOs and PPOs.	
2.2	Improve feedback to members of the public on all changes to the Rights of Way Network	
A	Make use of communication via Social Media messaging to keep customers updated.	Communications Team Highways Team
B	Update PRow data available through the National Street Gazetteer (NSG).	
2.3	Maintain an accurate and up to date database of information and mapping to enable effective PRow for management and deliver the ROWIP	
A	Prepare an Asset Management Plan for the Public Rights of Way network which identify the value of the PRow assets and link this to the Transport Asset Management Plan databases.	
2.4	Improve Rights of Way Team working practices and maintain an accurate database of information	
A	Measure improvement in the relative condition of the PRow network through regular surveys and capture the satisfaction of its users and customers.	Communications Team

Aim 3	A well maintained, safe and easily accessible network	
Aim	Description	Key Partners
3.1	Improve maintenance so that it meets public needs and enables greater use of the Public Rights of Way Network	
A	Link a prioritisation scheme for PRow maintenance that reflects legal requirements and availability of resources.	Bridge Team Network Rail
B	Continue with a programme of bridge inspections and other PRow structures which will feed into the database and enable a rolling programme of bridge replacements/repairs based on their condition.	Environment Agency Town & Parish Councils User & Interest Groups Land owners
C	Specify and prioritise seasonal vegetation clearance (SVC) programme in collaboration with Parish Councils and User & Interest Groups.	Grounds Maintenance Team
3.2	Develop a better connected and safe Public Rights of Way Network	
A	Identify road and rail severance locations on the PRow network and explore opportunities to make improvements where possible.	
B	Ensure that the PRow network links seamlessly with highway, walking and cycling plans and infrastructure through working with internal and external partners.	Highways Team User & Interest Groups Town & Parish Councils
C	Identify opportunities to increase the size of the bridleway network to provide more links and loops for circular rides.	Active Travel Team Volunteer Groups
D	Identify opportunities to introduce Restricted Byways to provide routes for all non-motorised users.	
3.3	Develop a better connected and safe Public Rights of Way Network	
A	Deliver a rolling programme of erecting signposts with destination, distance and path number identification information within existing budgets.	Land owners Town & Parish Councils Access Groups
B	Install yellow topped 'Hi-Vis' way marker posts	User & Interest Groups Volunteer Groups

Aim 3	A well maintained, safe and easily accessible network	
Aim	Description	Key Partners
3.4	Install a range of appropriate, safe and easy to use structures on the Public Rights of Way Network	
A	Encourage landowners to choose the least restrictive option when replacing Rights of Way furniture or putting new structures on a diversion to also consider safety and security issues.	Land owners Land managers National Farmers Union Volunteer Groups Environment Agency Town & Parish Councils Highways Team
B	Carry out a rolling inspection and condition survey over one sixth of the rights of way network per year .	
C	Seek engagement with volunteers to help with the inspection and condition survey with the appropriate training.	
D	Review bridle gates to consider removal or replacement of structures with assistance of landowners and volunteers.	
E	Develop a long term programme to replace bridle sleeper bridges with culverts.	
F	Pursue a strategy of replacing stiles with gaps or gates on rights of way.	
G	Carry out enforcement against unauthorised gates / structures and those which cause difficulties with access.	
H	Carry out programme of works to improve the Byway (BOAT) network.	

Aim 4	Getting people involved	
Aim	Description	Key Partners
4.1	Enable local people to get involved in maintaining and improving their Public Rights of Way	
A	Assist and provide some resources, small amounts of funding, equipment and staff to Parish Councils and other community groups for joint work on local projects which meet ROWIP aims and objectives.	Town & Parish Councils Access Groups
4.2	Identify and develop a range of more effective partnerships to deliver improvements on Public Rights of Way	
A	Improve partnerships and joint working across Bedford Borough Council services to implement PRoW improvements.	Local Access Forum Communications Team Town & Parish Councils
B	Work with the Borough of Bedford Local Access Forum (BoBLAF) to ensure the ROWIP is delivered and continually reviewed.	
C	Seek ways to encourage and promote membership of the BoBLAF to work with the Council.	
4.3	Provide different volunteering opportunities for people of all ages and abilities to help improve the Public Rights of Way Network	
A	Recruit Volunteer task/group leaders to enable more self sufficiency, flexibility and continuity for volunteerism on PRoW across the Borough	Volunteer Groups Town & Parish Councils User & Interest Groups
B	Consider how the scope of the work that the existing Volunteer groups can be extended to include other types of works.	
C	Promote works carried out by volunteer groups to encourage others to become involved.	

Aim 5	Information and promoting the network	
Aim	Description	Key Partners
5.1	Enable PRoW Users and Landowners/Farmers to understand and meet their statutory Rights and Responsibilities	
A	Produce information for the public and farmers/land-managers which explains their rights and responsibilities in respect of PRoWs and using the countryside.	Land owners Land managers National Farmers Union Park & Open Spaces Town & Parish Councils Volunteer Groups
B	Work with Parks and Open Spaces to promote amenity and open access land.	
C	Produce quarterly newsletter detailing the improvement work that has been carried out by the Council and volunteer groups.	
5.2	Encourage responsible dog ownership and minimise dog fouling and disturbance to livestock and wildlife on all public paths and in the Countryside	
A	Work with partners, Parish Councils, Farmers and Landowners on provision of facilities, information materials and enforcement.	Land owners Land managers National Farmers Union Town & Parish Councils
5.3	Provide different volunteering opportunities for people of all ages and abilities to help improve the Public Rights of Way Network	
A	Recruit and train a number of Volunteer task/group leaders to enable more self sufficiency, flexibility and continuity for volunteerism on PRoW across the Borough.	Town & Parish Councils Volunteer Groups User & Interest Groups Police
B	Install easily updateable information panels/notice boards at Byway entrances.	
5.4	Improved management of the production and distribution of information about the Public Rights of Way Network	
A	Refresh how information is distributed to reach more people (printed media, web based and social media).	Communications Team Highways Team Town & Parish Councils
B	Use of Parish Councils to help with the promotion of routes and use of PROW network.	
5.5	Make effective use of current and emerging Information technologies	
A	Continue to update PRoW and countryside information on the Borough Council and Let's Go websites.	Local Access Forum Forest of Marston Vale Town & Parish Councils
B	Make use of interactive technologies for users to share information and enhance their experience when using PRoWs.	
C	Consideration of use of QR codes and other interactive information to help promote and guide user.	
D	Bid for funding for video survey of PROW network for internal and external use.	



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Section 2

Assessment of Public Rights of Way in Bedford Borough

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2. Assessment of Public Rights of Way in Bedford Borough

2.1 The Public Rights of Way (PRoW) network

Public Rights of Way are recorded in the Definitive Map & Statement (excluding unclassified county roads), which is a legal document last updated in 2020.

There are 4 types of Rights of Way in the Borough:

Public Footpaths

There are 600 kilometres which provide the right to walk with any 'normal accompaniment' (e.g. dog, pram or a wheelchair). There is no right to ride or wheel a bike, nor to ride or lead a horse, or to drive a horse drawn carriage.

Public Bridleways

There are 324 kilometres which allow the right to walk, ride or lead a horse or to drive animals. There is no right to take a horse drawn vehicle along a bridleway.

Restricted Byways

There is approximately 998m which allow the right to walk, ride, lead a horse and drive horse drawn vehicles (non-motorised).

Byways Open to all Traffic (BOATs)

BOATs provides rights to 34 kilometres for vehicular traffic (motorised or horse drawn) but to be used mainly for the purposes for which footpaths and bridleways are used.

The extent to which the PRoW network can be accessed by users is:

- 100% by walkers;
- 35.6% by cyclists and horse-riders;
- 3.5% by drivers of motorised vehicles.

2.2 Public Rights of Way Network Current Condition

Signing and way marking

The Council has a legal duty to place signs (finger posts) where public rights of way meet a road (metalled highway). There are 2907 fingerposts on the network.

The Council also installs wooden yellow top way mark posts along the network to act as visual targets for users in open countryside. This is not a legal duty and requires the co-operation of the landowners. The way mark posts have proved to be highly effective and greatly valued by users.

Volunteers have assisted in installing dozens of yellow topped way mark posts throughout the network over the last 5 years. There are currently over 2972 way mark posts on the network.

Obstructions on the network

An obstruction is classified as anything (including structures, crops and vegetation) that impedes the existing legal access and/or is an offence that could lead to prosecution. Recent data shows 162 cases of obstruction were identified by the Rights of Way Team. Current survey data indicates that 83% of all paths did not have any obstruction.

Ploughing and cropping

Available data shows that 144 kilometres or 14.6% of the PRoW network runs across arable land. Landowners have a right to disturb land over which a footpath or bridleway passes but legislation requires re-instatement within 14 days.

Users have reported increases in the number of farmers that fail to reinstate paths. The Rights of Way team has a seasonal cropping and ploughing programme to remind farmers of their rights and responsibilities.

Overgrown vegetation

Vegetation control on the PRoW is a significant task. The Borough Council is responsible for the surface vegetation growth and has a seasonal vegetation clearance programme (SVC) to deal with this.

Side growth (hedges, trees etc.) is the responsibility of the landowner. The Council will remind landowners of their responsibilities and take enforcement action where necessary.

Litter / fly tipping

Fly-tipping on the PRoW network is mostly in the form of building materials, abandoned vehicles and household waste. The Council will investigate and prosecute anyone found fly tipping on a PRoW.

Conflicts of use

Conflicts can occur between different classes of users on some routes - walkers and cyclists on some footpaths and horses and motorised users on some byways. Typically, these conflicts can be put down to illegal and insensitive use. Conflicts will be managed through design or informing users on appropriate behaviours when using the PRoW network.

Road safety

Busy roads fragment many links along the rights of way network. Evidence shows that users will stop where they meet a busy road then using other longer routes or turning back unable to complete their walk or ride.

Structures on the network

The network has a number of structures along it which exist to provide stock proofing and to enhance public safety. They include kissing gates, stiles, defined gaps, and barriers. All new structures require authorisation from the Highway Authority. Some structures have existed on a route since the paths were first recorded on the Definitive Map and Statement. There are over 9733 structures on the PRoW network in the Borough. Current data indicates there are 6525 structures are in good condition and a further 3029 in an acceptable but useable state.

In accordance with the Discrimination and Disability Act 2005 the Borough Council has adopted an “Inclusive Access” policy and will not authorise new stiles on the network unless they are essential for animal husbandry. The Council has been proactive in removing stiles where they are no longer needed for livestock control or are out of repair and replacing them with gaps or structures which are easier to use.

There are 201 stiles in good condition remaining and these will be systematically removed over the next 5 years where practicable to be either replaced by gates or to leave a gap.

Surface condition

In Bedford Borough, the majority of the PRoW network is found in the countryside. The Rights of Way network comprises of the following types of surfaces:

Natural (grassed), arable headland/ field-edge, arable cross-field, improved, (with some sort of made-up surface) and sealed (with tarmac or concrete)

As most of the network is un-surfaced it is always affected by seasonal weather conditions, vegetation growth, or by agriculture practices e.g. ploughing, cropping, all of which can vary the user experience.

2.3 Promoted Routes

The principal long distance promoted paths are the Ouse Valley Way, Three Shires Way, North Bedfordshire Heritage Trail and the Bunyan Trail. There are also over 50 locally promoted, shorter routes, which have been developed by a range of bodies including community groups, parish councils and user groups.

These are included on the ‘Let’s Go’ website and database at www.letsgo.org.uk. This website aims to make routes easily accessible to local people and visitors with details and maps to enable planning of trips and days out.

There are promoted cycle routes around Bedford and this in turn links to NCN51. Evidence from users has shown that there is a need to increase the variety of promoted routes for horse riders, runners, off- road motor users and dog walkers and those with limited mobility.

2.4 User Needs

An essential part of the ROWIP 4 process is making an assessment of user (& nonuser) needs i.e.

- Who currently uses the network? (Different classes of user and user groups);
- Why are people using the network? (What is the attraction and their motivation);
- How do they know where to go (Information sources);
- How do they get to the network to use it (Modes of transport);
- How easy is the network to use? (Ease of use).

It is proposed to publish a regular user needs questionnaire to help inform and continue to develop the ROWIP 4, through its lifetime.

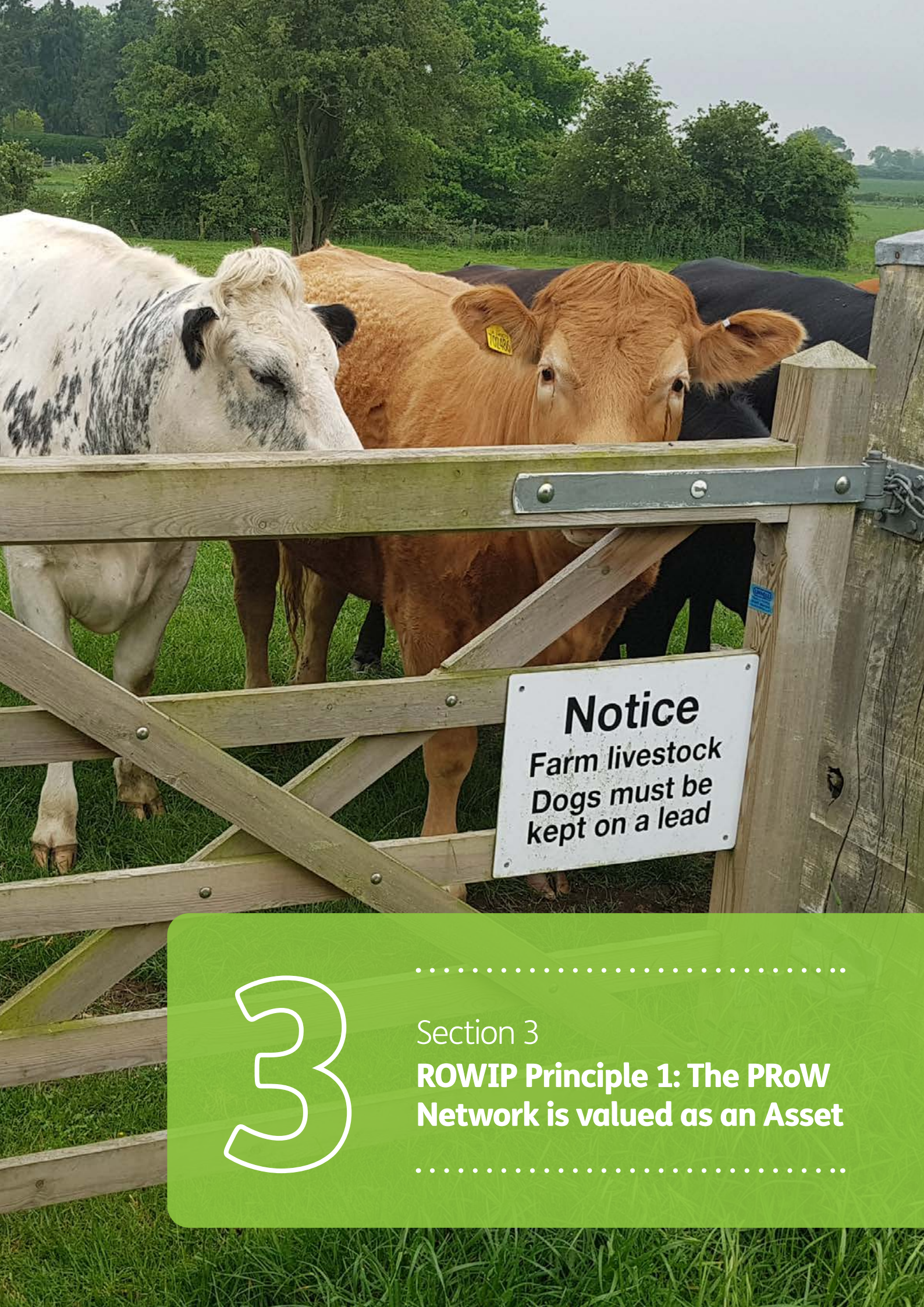
2.5 Highways – Roads, Roadside Verges and Unclassified Roads

A highway comprises all the land contained within the boundary of that highway including any verge, footway, margin, or roadside waste (land associated with the Highway).

Unclassified County Roads (UCRs) - 'White Roads' or 'green lanes' usually refer to the uncoloured 'road, drive or track' shown on Ordnance Survey maps. These are often non-tarmac routes maintainable by Bedford Borough Council and may or may not have motor vehicle rights. UCRs in Bedford Borough are not shown on the Definitive Map & Statement but they are listed on the Borough Council's "List of Streets" and the data is available on the Council's Geographical Information System (GIS).

The use of verges should be considered carefully and only used for walking, riding and cycling routes where it is safe to do so and when no other alternative off road route can be identified.

Bedford Borough Council works with Parishes Councils with advice from the Wildlife Trust managing some roadside verges known as Roadside Nature Reserves (RNRs). These act as invaluable wildlife habitats and corridors providing refuge and travel routes for many plants and animals. In some instances, managing or modifying these verges for increased access could be to the detrimental.



Notice
Farm livestock
Dogs must be
kept on a lead

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Section 3

ROWIP Principle 1: The PRow Network is valued as an Asset

3. ROWIP Principle 1: The PRow Network is valued as an Asset

3.1 Putting the RoWIP into Context

The Rights of Way Improvement Plan process provides the opportunity to recognise the contribution that improved Public Rights of Way and access to the countryside makes to the overall social, economic and environmental wellbeing of people in the Borough of Bedford both now and in the future.

The Public Rights of Way Network represents an invaluable cultural, heritage, wellbeing, recreation and green space asset. This asset is free to use, and the Borough aims to make it available for all.

3.2 Bedford Borough Planning and Future Development

Government guidance indicates that ROWIPs should consider wider agendas and obligations as the issues facing the Borough Council are complex and require a range of inter-related solutions.

The Borough Council's service delivery is directed by the Corporate Plan and the Local Transport Plan with its list of goals. Local plans and strategies also address issues identified by national government and will affect the delivery of the RoWIP.

Bedford Borough Council Corporate Plan

The Borough Council's Corporate Plan identifies 3 priorities; develop our urban and rural places, develop a more sustainable transport and infrastructure network and enrich our local environment for service delivery over the period of the plan. In broad terms these correspond with the vision and goals of the Sustainable Community Strategy. Rights of Way and the RoWIP have an important role in contributing towards the goals of this Corporate Plan.

Bedford Borough Council is preparing a Local Plan 2035 that will set out how much growth there should be in the Borough up to 2035 (housing, jobs and associated infrastructure) and where it should take place. This new local plan will extend the period that development is planned for. It will also contain policies that will be used to make decisions on planning applications which impact on public rights of way.

3.3 Local Transport Plan and Strategic Infrastructure

The promotion of sustainable transport and road safety is achieved through the Local Transport Plan 3 (LTP3). The LTP3 sets out the Borough Council's vision and strategy for the long-term development of transport around the Borough.

“To create a transport system in which walking, cycling and public transport are the natural choices of travel for the majority of journeys because they are affordable, healthy, convenient and safe alternatives to the private car.”

The LTP3 sets out goals for transport, which consider wider impacts on climate change, health, quality of life and the natural environment.

LTP3 is focused around the three key themes of Active Travel (walking and cycling), Efficient Travel (Infrastructure) and Smart Travel (information and choices).

It is recognised that a significant contribution can be made by the RoW network, through projects to develop sustainable transport links between settlements and key employment sites.

Bedford Green Wheel

The Bedford Green Wheel is a project to improve and extend the existing network of traffic free paths and quiet routes for cyclists and walkers around the Bedford/ Kempston conurbation linking parks, nature reserves, countryside and homes. The Green Wheel network project started in 2009 and is implemented over a number of years as opportunities and funding become available.

National Cycle Network route 51 (NCN51)

NCN51 is a long-distance cycle route running broadly east-west connecting Colchester and the port of Harwich to Oxford via Bury St Edmunds and Cambridge with the Borough of Bedford right at its heart.

The route forms part of the National Cycle Network, developed by Sustrans and locally provides a strategically important link through Bedford/ Kempston west to Marston Vale, Forest Centre and Milton Keynes; and east through the emerging Bedford River Valley Park to Willington and Sandy.

The Borough Council is working with developers, Sustrans, Marston Vale Trust and Bedford-Milton Keynes Waterway Park to realign the existing route between Bedford and Forest Centre, Marston Moretaine, to an off-road alignment. Cycleway improvements are made when opportunities arise. This are often linked to development and planning conditions.

Bedford – Milton Keynes Waterway Park

This strategic waterway project aims to complete a missing link in the national waterway network between the River Great Ouse and the Grand Union Canal and bring trade and prosperity to the area. The Bedford Waterway Park is seen as an important means to help regenerate the Bedford/ Kempston/ Marston Vale area economically and to provide a nationally important recreational resource.

The Waterway Park is currently being progressed in stages as opportunities and funds become available. The project aims to incorporate walking and cycle access into its infrastructure as well as accommodate parts of the NCN 51 cycleway west of Bedford through new housing areas.

East-West Rail

East-West Rail is a major project to establish a strategic railway connecting East Anglia with Central, Southern and Western England. The East-West Rail Team are considering each of the crossings and rights of way along the proposed routes.

3.4 Climate Change

Improved PRoW can play an important role in helping to address climate change. The government is committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions across the UK economy by at least 80% on 1990 levels by 2050. Changes to transport and how we travel (making greater use of PRoWs) will need to happen if we are to make a significant contribution to this target.

The Department for Transport is encouraging local authorities to help mitigate climate change by developing more sustainable transport systems, facilitating behaviour change and reducing the need to travel. Improving PRoW and creating a safe and attractive environment will enable people to walk ride and cycle for journeys and/or to use public transport and will reduce carbon emissions.

3.5 Green Infrastructure

Green infrastructure (GI) is the network of natural and semi-natural features, green spaces and rivers within and connecting villages, towns and cities.

‘Connectivity’ is fundamental to GI. A network approach to link destinations and promote sustainable transport, such as walking and cycling access, is embedded as a key function within each GI proposal.

3.6 Health and Wellbeing

Bedford Borough Health and Wellbeing Board was set up in 2011. It has a statutory responsibility to improve integrated working between local health care, social care, public health and other public service practitioners so that patients and service users experience more joined-up care, particularly when moving between health and social care.

The Bedfordshire Health and Wellbeing Board brings together local government (including public health, adult social care and children’s services), Bedfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group, the NHS and Healthwatch Bedford, to plan how best to meet the needs of the Borough’s population and tackle local inequalities in health. Its goal is to optimise the health and wellbeing of people in the Borough throughout the course of their lives.

The Health and Wellbeing Board produces the Bedford Borough Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy. This strategy sets out a range of aims pertinent to the RoWIP, which seek to enable good mental health and healthy lifestyles for children, young people and adults, recognising the challenges posed by increasing obesity and social isolation.

The role of the natural environment, in which the PRoW plays a significant part, has a clear and important link to physical activity and health and mental wellbeing. Scientific evidence points to more specific outcomes for its influence on obesity, cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, blood pressure, cognitive function, sleep and mortality.

Walking for Health (W4H) is a partnership between the Ramblers and Macmillan Cancer Support. They share their walking and health expertise to enable local schemes and groups to offer short, free, local health walks in communities across England.

The Chief Medical Officer recommends that adults should take a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate, physical activity each week to improve health and wellbeing, prevent disease and help people recover from both physical and mental illness. The natural environment provides the ideal venue for this activity and many of the Bedford Health Walks are led along PRow and local green spaces.

Rights of Way and Sport

Sport is championed nationally by 'Sport England' whose objectives are to encourage people to start, stay and succeed in sport and physical activity, including rambling, cycling, horse riding and horse & carriage driving, which are recognised by Sport England as beneficial healthy activities.

Bedford Sports Partnership (Team Beds & Luton) is one of many sports partnerships which assist the government and Sport England in the delivery of its sports strategy locally.

Team Beds and Luton's vision is:

"We aim to improve lives in Bedfordshire by working with local partners and growing grassroots sport and physical activity. Our passionate and knowledgeable team is committed to successfully making Bedfordshire a healthier, happier and fitter county."

The partnership works alongside a number of partners from the public, private and voluntary sectors, bringing together expertise, resources and ideas from the sports world in Bedford Borough and beyond. The Bedford Sports Partnership provides a central and coordinated sports service for the whole Borough to benefit from.

3.7 Age, Disability and Ethnicity

The gender split of Borough residents is roughly equal with around 49% male and 51% female. A quarter of the population is under the age of 20 whilst the elderly population is growing, with the number of people over 75 at the 2011 census approximately 8%. The largest age group is 30 to 44.

Whilst the Borough's population is predominantly white (British 71.5% and other white 9.1%) it is diversifying, with non-white groups representing 19.5% of the population, comprising:

- Mixed 3.5%
- Asian 11.4%
- Black 3.9%
- Other 0.7%

A large percentage of parents may need to take a pushchair taking children out. The availability of 'all terrain' pushchairs has increased the expectation of parents who are now able to use more of the PRoW network. Not all people with limited mobility use wheelchairs and some only have problems with specific obstructions, such as stiles and steps. Surfaces like concrete and tarmac should be flat with a minimum of cross slopes or loose stones, especially on corners or where the path is raised.

People who cannot bend easily will find problems with overhanging vegetation and stiles. People with limited mobility may require regular rest stops, accessible toilets, suitable car parking spaces and paths that have space for users to pass. Wheelchair users can experience difficulties when faced with a gradient above 1:15. Both traditional and powered wheelchair users have problems on off-road paths.

3.8 Natural & Cultural Heritage and Social Inclusion

The ROWIP must seek to deliver improvements in a context which includes:

- Duty to have regard to biodiversity as directed by the NERC Act 2006.
- Legal obligations under national legislation including (Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981).
- Legal obligations under international legislation (primarily European Habitats Directive).
- Biodiversity considerations as outlined within the National Planning Policy Framework.
- Similar specialist guidance, including Standing Advice from Natural England.
- Biodiversity Action Plans – national and local visions for biodiversity with habitat and species action plans.
- The Wildlife Working group for Bedfordshire and Luton manages the BAP process. Local Green Infrastructure initiatives which also reflect biodiversity.
- Protection, maintenance and enhancement of Bedford Borough's biodiversity.

The ROWIP is mindful of the above statutory legislation and best practice associated with protected habitats and species. Whilst increased public engagement with wildlife is important, the impact that access and disturbance can have on sensitive land management and biodiversity issues needs to be recognised.

3.9 Local Economy

The Rights of Way network brings economic benefits to Bedford Borough in many ways. The network is an integral part of the leisure and tourism industries. Users spend time in pubs and shops along the network and stimulate sales in accessories needed for taking part in activities on the network. The maintenance of the network also provides additional work to many contractors both small and large across the Borough.



4

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Section 4

**ROWIP Principle 2: Improved
Service Provision and Working
with Network Users**

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4. ROWIP Principle 2: Improved Service Provision and Working with Network Users

4.1 Legal Record - Definitive Map and Statement

There is a statutory duty to update and maintain the Legal Record on the PRoW network so that it provides better information and certainty for users. There are mapping anomalies and definitive map modification and public path order applications that will be addressed.

The Definitive Map and Statement

The Definitive Map is conclusive evidence of public rights, without prejudice to routes that may currently be unrecorded or rights that may not be shown. The Definitive Statement describes the routes shown on the map.

Copies of the Definitive Map and Statement (DM&S) are held at Borough Hall in Bedford. The Rights of Way can be viewed on Borough Council's website at www.bedford.gov.uk.

The DM&S can be modified where there is sufficient evidence to show it is incorrect, but the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 instructs that the DM&S will be closed in 2031 for modification applications based on historical evidence.

The RoWIP considers a twin track approach of two major projects to tackle the Bedford excluded (unmapped) area and the drive to closing the Definitive Map and Statement (DM&S) in 2031.

Applications to alter the Definitive Map and Statement

The Council receives and processes applications for changes to the DM&S. These include both Public Path Order applications (diversions, extinguishments and creations) and Modification Order Applications (adding unrecorded ways or altering the status or details for existing routes).

Bedford Borough has a relatively small backlog of such applications when compared to other authorities. These applications are referenced to the RoWIP as part of the criteria for assessing the value of any application.

4.2 Improve Feedback to the Public

The public require easy access to accurate and up-to-date information about the access network.

Successful customer service relies on accurate and up-to-date information on the character, condition, use and legal status of Public Rights of Way and other access. Data is collated on the Countryside Access Management System (CAMS), including Rights of Way issues reported by the public. This information forms the basis of PRoW work programming and is a valuable asset management tool.

This RoWIP proposes making better use of this tool by making it interactive and available to customers. This will assist us in managing the PRoW more effectively by engaging with local people directly.

4.3 Information Base - Asset Information

Robust and up to date information about the current character, condition and use of the PRow network is invaluable for their management, statutory maintenance duties and future strategic improvements.

4.4 Working Practices

The efficient management of reported access issues and queries, informed work programmes will result in improved working practices.

The Highways Helpdesk manages incoming calls, queries and reports from customers. The Highways Helpdesk will try to resolve enquiries at first contact. If unable to help in the first instance these are logged and recorded on the Council's database and passed to the Countryside & Public Access Team for investigation and action.

Regular training and update meetings are held with staff to improve working relationships and refine work practices.





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Section 5

**ROWIP Principle 3: A Well
Maintained, Safe and Easily
Accessible Network**

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5. ROWIP Principle 3: A Well Maintained, Safe and Easily Accessible Network

5.1 PRow Maintenance

Bedford Borough Council has a duty to assert and protect the rights of the public to use the Public Rights of Way network. It has a legal responsibility to sign paths at the roadside and keep PRow in good repair, safe and fit for public use (Highways Act 1980)

Maintenance of the PRow network in the current financial climate is a challenge for the Council. In order to rise to these challenging times, new ways of working will be developed to help engage volunteers, Parish Councils and other partner organisation and stakeholders from the wider community. There will be innovation in devising new approaches to maintaining the PRow network within emerging future financial constraints.

It is the landowner's responsibility to maintain stiles and gates on PRow on their land. Landowners are also responsible for cutting back vegetation e.g. hedges, trees and shrubs overhanging a Public Right of Way and to reinstate a cross field path within 14 days after ploughing and/or cropping. Headland paths should not be ploughed or cropped.

The assessment of user needs public consultation clearly shows that to improve outdoor access and enable greater use of the PRow network then problems affecting signage, structures and surfacing of paths need to be overcome.

Gates and stiles are the property of the landowner who should maintain them in safe condition so that they are convenient to use. The Council will enter into agreements with landowners to provide improvements i.e. to replace stiles with gates that are safer or more convenient for persons with mobility problems.

Many bridges are the responsibility of the Council. There are 787 bridges on rights of way in the Borough which require regular inspection. 269 Rights of Way bridges are made of timber with an expected life span of 15 years.

All repair / replacement work on structures will consider reducing future the maintenance costs. This will need to be balanced with considering the design and materials in relation to its location and surrounding landscape and some structures may be key local features.

The Council will advise landowners on the type of structures that meet the requirement of using the least restrictive option for new structures on a Public Rights of Way - Gap Gate Stile (British Standard BS5709:2006).

5.2 Network Development: Road Severance; Equestrian and Cycling Provision; Integration with Public Transport, Car Parks and the Wider Highway Network

In previous public consultations, users gave numerous requests and ideas for seamless networks of safe off-road routes enabling people of all ages, needs and abilities to walk/ride/cycle safely in and around their village/town, out to neighbouring settlements and into and about the wider countryside. The key issues cited preventing such networks are:

- Road severance;
- In some areas limited provision for equestrians and cyclists;
- Poor integration with wider highway infrastructure eg lack of pavement/cycle-lane, high kerbs;
- Poor integration with public transport and car parks.

Regardless of age, ability and/or experience, the pedestrian, horse-rider, cyclist and horse carriage driver often feel and often are vulnerable to the hazards associated with having to negotiate inconsiderate drivers and their vehicles. Disabled and visually impaired people, people using pushchairs and/or with young children and people supervising groups of children draw attention to their vulnerability when being forced onto roads. When walking/riding along a road, space can be limited with no adequate refuge.

In addition, walkers, horse-riders, cyclists and horse carriage drivers highlight that having to use roads can often reduce the enjoyment of the experience of being outdoors due to motorised traffic noise, pollution and spray. They can also feel anxious and pressurised when motorists feel they are inconveniently holding up traffic. These concerns are reinforced by the requests from equestrians and cyclists for more off-road routes. Where possible all new routes created will be to a multiuser status (such as Bridleways) where there are appropriate linkages of the same status.

Work is needed to effectively integrate PRoW with the wider highway network. This will be achieved through links between the RoWIP and the LTP3 and subsequent work with new developments. Where a strong need to resolve road severance is identified improvement solutions will vary and depend on available resources. The use of public transport to link with the countryside will increase the usage of the PRoW network especially for many local users and visitors.

5.3 Countryside Security Issues

There has been an increase in illegal activities and low-level crime in rural areas. Farmers and landowners are experiencing more illegal access from PROWs onto their land. This has resulted in damage to crops, structures and disturbance to livestock and wildlife.

There has also been an increase in fly tipping and dumping of material on PRoW and farmland.

As a result, there is an increased demand from farmers and landowners for the provision of gates and structure. These requests conflict with the policy of “inclusive access for all”. There is a need to balance access with countryside security.

Joint working is required between the Council, Farmers and Landowners, Parish Councils, and the Police Service to address this issue.

5.4 Dog Fouling and Fly Tipping

One area of particular concern for both access users and landowners is the problem of dog mess on paths and countryside sites. Some dog owners are not aware of the importance of clearing up after their dog when it fouls on town and village paths and out in the wider countryside in fields.

It can be detrimental to land-management. Enrichment of nutrient poor habitats managed for conservation and educational purposes not only threatens the delicate balance of special habitats, but also poses a health hazard for anyone working on the site clearing vegetation or conducting plant and animal surveys.

Farmers highlighted in the consultation the issue of dog disturbance and worrying of livestock and game, but of particular concern was the problem of un-wormed dogs. These dog owners are responsible for a range of health problems suffered by farm animals grazing land where dogs with intestinal parasites have defecated. Farmers also identified the problem of dog litter bags being left behind.

Dogs are required to be under close control on a PRow. Clear information regarding control of dogs is available via the internet.

Further information on Control of Dogs (in the countryside) available via the Kennel Club at <https://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/search/content-search/?query=countryside>.



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Section 6
**ROWIP Principle 4:
Getting Involved**

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6. ROWIP Principle 4: Getting Involved

6.1 Community Groups and Local People

Local people value the role the Council's rights of way network and countryside and how it improves the quality of life. Many respondents wish to become actively involved in their maintenance and improvement.

In particular these points are strongly made in Parish Council Neighbourhood Plans, by Parish and Town Councils, through the Borough of Bedford Local Access Forum and by user groups such as the Ramblers' Association, British Horse Society and off road motorised vehicle users (GLASS and Trail Riders Fellowship).

6.2 Partnership Organisations

There are many examples of good partnerships between the Borough Council and other organisations. Examples are:

- Bedford River Valley Park working together with the Forest of Marston Vale Charity to develop a floodplain forest and countryside access opportunities in the River Great Ouse Valley east of Bedford.
- National Cycle Route 51 and the Bedford/Milton Keynes Waterway working with partners including Sustrans, Bedford to Milton Keynes Waterway project, Forest of Marston Vale and developers.
- The Bunyan Trail in association with the Ramblers and local businesses.
- Monthly mid-week Volunteer tasks with the Ramblers RIPPLE volunteers.

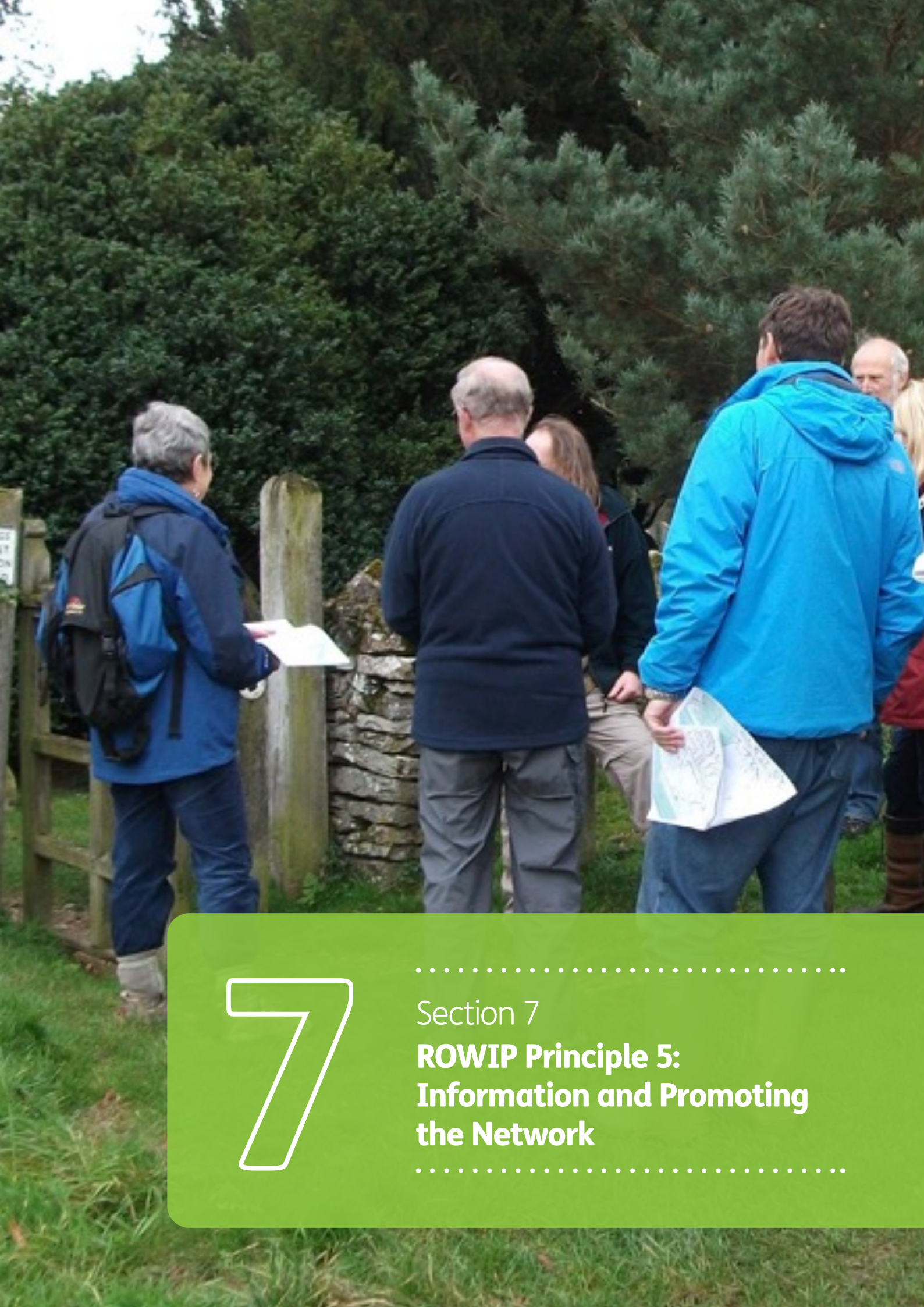
6.3 Volunteers

The Council Corporate Plan includes the desire to enable residents to contribute to the Borough and local communities. Hundreds of people already volunteer in a wide range of roles which help improve life in their local communities.

The Council is experienced in engaging with volunteers in the improvement of their local environment and public access. The PRoW network benefits from the activity of the Council's officers who lead volunteer tasks in conjunction with the Ramblers (known as RIPPLE tasks) and Parish Path Wardens who monitor and undertake minor repairs on local routes. This has proved invaluable to the delivery of essential maintenance and improvement objectives.

There has been an increase in volunteer efforts both time and number involved, demonstrating that coordinated and well managed community volunteers can have a significant role to play in ensuring that the network is well maintained and easy to use.

The Borough Council wants more people to play an active role in managing the PRoW network. Over the period of this plan the range of volunteer roles will need to be diversified, allowing people to contribute to path management and maintenance, surveying, leading walks and activities, carrying out research, interviewing users or undertaking practical improvements in small teams.



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Section 7

**ROWIP Principle 5:
Information and Promoting
the Network**
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7. ROWIP Principle 5: Information and Promoting the Network

7.1 User Rights and Responsibilities

The RoWIP aims to encourage an informed approach to both the use and care of Rights of Way and countryside. This means people who use the network understand their rights and responsibilities and show respect for the needs of agriculture, forestry, environmental conservation and other users.

The provision of good information is vital. It informs users the routes to follow, what they can do and what to expect. This enables people to enjoy paths and sites confidently and responsibly, sympathetic to the needs of land management.

It also necessitates that landowners understand their rights and responsibilities and provide good access.

7.2 Managing Information

The Council works with other stakeholders and groups to produce literature, organise walks and activities, and install signs and panels for the purposes of education, interpretation, information and promotion of paths and the countryside. Such material helps to promote the work of the Council, our partners and engage public support.

7.3 Information Gaps

The Council aims to review the information that is currently provided to identify and fill gaps.

There is a reasonable amount of information currently available for walkers but there is a need for further information for horse-riders, cyclists, horse carriage drivers, motorised vehicle riders/drivers, young people and people with disabilities.

There is an opportunity to “theme” material and produce it in different formats so that it appeals to a wider audience and extends the purpose of access by catering for different interests and needs.

Such information would assist the Borough Council to address wider issues such as outdoor activities for better health, celebrating local cultural, environmental and historic heritage.

7.4 Social Media and Emerging Technologies

There is scope to develop Council's webpages and make use of current social media and other emerging technologies to promote the Borough's rights of way network and countryside.

The Let's Go website www.letsgo.org promotes Bedfordshire's PRoW access network and countryside sites. This site links to the Borough Council website.

There is scope to develop the Council website to better meet the needs of the public in using PRoW and countryside, reporting issues and gain feedback to help inform future management and improvement of the public rights of way network.

7.5 Walks and Events

The Council actively supports the Bedfordshire Walking Festival which is organised by the Ramblers. Officers will lead walks outside of office hours and there is a demand for a programme of guided walks throughout the year.

The Council also supports the British Horse Society's leisure rides which enable them to engage with riders whilst they actively pursue countryside access.

Walks and events are important for engaging directly with countryside users and to share that experience. It helps to promote the Council's work, builds confidence for people and shows the way to enjoy the countryside. The aim is always for people to repeat their walk or ride with friends and family outside of the programmed event and share positive experiences of using the PRoW network.



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Section 8
Delivering ROWIP 4

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8. Delivering ROWIP 4

8.1 8.1 Implementing the new RoWIP 4

The delivery of the plan will be through a rolling 5-year action plan, 2024– 2029. The action plan has been developed based on what can realistically be achieved over the 5-year timeframe.

The Council will seek wherever possible new funding made available for the development of outdoor access and the rights of way network arising from the Growth Area and associated planned development.

The RoWIP will be used to inform bids to fund rights of way improvement work and seek fundraising opportunities. The Council will seek to maximize the benefits through developer contributions, such as, CIL funding and on-site development plans.

The Heritage Lottery Fund has placed greater emphasis on access to our heritage and Sport England on encouraging physical activity. Both still present potential funding opportunities in the future albeit ones which require significant Partnership working.

The Borough Council and its partners have benefited greatly from Central Government funding such as ‘Growth Area Fund’ (GAF), which has included funding for green spaces and will bid into any successor for this fund should any future rounds be announced, using this plan and the Green Infrastructure Plan as part of the evidence base.

8.2 Annual Reports, Monitoring and Evaluation

Progress on the plan will be monitored by the Council and there will be regular updates on our progress to the Local Access Forum.

The RoWIP statement of action (action plan) will be central to the annual work planning process for the service where individual officer work programme targets and accountability will be recorded. The Council will inform and involve our other partners through our regular monitoring meetings.

The Council recognises that good quality information about levels of outdoor access and the public benefits from the rights of way network will be important as an evidence base to support future plans and funding bids.

Notes

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How can you get involved?

We are looking for volunteers (individuals or groups) to help to protect and improve the rights of way network in accordance with this plan. If you want to get involved in helping to make improvements to the rights of way network where you live, consider joining your local ROW volunteer group.

In particular we are looking for volunteers to:

1. Keep an eye on local paths and report problems.
2. Undertake basic maintenance work, trimming back overhanging vegetation, putting up way marker discs.
3. Undertake practical improvement tasks, such as installing kissing gates and way marker posts.
4. Basic surveys of the condition of the rights of way network.

Full training, support and equipment will be provided. For further information use the contact details below.



Countryside & Public Access Team

Bedford Borough Council
Borough Hall
Cauldwell Street
Bedford
MK42 9AP



rightsofway@bedford.gov.uk



www.bedford.gov.uk