

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

Countryside Access Improvement Plan

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

VISION

“The purpose of the Countryside Access Improvement Plan is to increase the usage and enjoyment of public rights of way and open green space in Kent. The network of paths should be a gateway for visitors and residents to explore Kent’s heritage, wildlife and iconic landscapes. The Plan supports the regeneration of Kent by delivering improvements which contribute to reducing congestion, support rural business and economy, education, health and, most importantly, the quality of life of the people of Kent”

Introduction

Kent people are rightly proud of the county in which they live. The 4200 miles (6700 kilometres) of Public Rights of Way (PROW) are essential for gaining access to its glorious countryside. This historic network of paths, consisting of footpaths, bridleways, restricted byways, and byways is legally protected public highway. The routes form an integral part of the county's transport network, allowing residents and visitors to move around on foot, on bicycle, on horseback and by vehicle. The network provides vital access to services, links between settlements, access from towns and villages into the countryside and opportunities for quiet recreation, exercise and sport.

Kent has 5,276 miles (8,491 kilometres) of public roads and 4,164 miles (6,705 kilometres) of public rights of way. The rights of way network within Kent constitutes a significant amount (42%) of available public highway.

When compared to national averages, Kent's rights of way network has a higher percentage of paths with footpath status. Consequently, a lower than average percentage of the network is available to cyclists and horse riders. Kent's bridleway network is 7% less than the national average.

In addition to the rights of way network there are many permissive paths and trails, quiet roads and accessible green space that add significant opportunities for outdoor recreational access.

Under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000), highway authorities are required to prepare a Rights of Way Improvement Plan by November 2007. This is a new duty placed on local highway authorities and aims to transform a purely reactive service into a visionary, forward-thinking, proactive one, whilst enhancing the value of local rights of way. Improved management, combined with better information provision and the creation of new routes in carefully chosen locations, will make a significant difference to local people. In areas where rights of way are fragmented, new short links between existing routes would provide a wider, more useful local network.

Kent County Council's Countryside Access Improvement Plan is written in accordance with the guidance issued to Local Authorities by DEFRA and is Kent's Rights of Way Improvement Plan.

The Plan sets out a 10-year strategy for improving access to the countryside based on local and national research. It will provide direction for the future management of public rights of way and access to public green space. In doing so, will achieve positive results for a wide range of key strategic objectives at national, regional, county and local levels, including those contained within the Vision for Kent and Towards 2010 strategies. To enable a coherent approach to traffic management the Countryside Access Improvement Plan will be incorporated in to the next Local Transport Plan for Kent and the objectives within each document are closely aligned.

Traffic in Kent is increasing at a rate nearly one third higher than the national average and poses a real problem for the future. Integrated public transport services need to be developed, to provide a viable alternative for commuters and those people socially isolated in rural communities. Both central government and the Local Transport Plan identify an increased use of public rights of way as an essential sustainable option. Improved public rights of way will be vital in minimising the social and environmental impact of shorter journeys.

The need to encourage more people to take regular exercise is currently a high priority in public sector policy. A range of strategies focus on the benefits of walking and cycling, which are easy, relatively cheap and can counteract problems such as obesity, coronary heart disease and type II diabetes, as well as improving psychological well-being.

Outdoor recreation and rural tourism also bring a wide range of social and economic benefits to local communities.

Two of the primary growth areas for future development are in Kent. Part of the Thames Gateway from Dartford to Faversham, and Ashford. The delivery of such vast development will impact greatly on the existing public rights of way network and open green space. The County Council's Countryside Access Service has already created a full-time post, to work with developers and planners to safeguard and enhance public rights of way and public green space. Development of Kent's two growth areas must be seen as an opportunity to improve sustainable transport and recreational facilities.

THE MAIN OBJECTIVES

Our research and evaluation of use and demand has given us a clear indication of what the people of Kent would like from its network of public rights of way. From this research we have identified seven key themes to guide the process of improving opportunities for walking, cycling and horse riding. This provides a framework for delivery through the Statement of Action. The main issues and details of the how the Service will address them are broken down into the seven themes listed below.

Well Maintained Countryside Access

A large percentage of people questioned thought that a higher standard of path furniture (gates, bridges etc) should be a priority. This would encourage people to explore the countryside and encourage wider use of public rights of way for their everyday journeys. Currently about 66% of the network is considered easy to use.

Objectives M1 to M10 will focus activity on raising the standard of furniture on paths and deliver a dramatic reduction in the number of stiles. Together with the installation of more gaps and gates a more accessible countryside access network will be created. Better signposting and waymarking, together with the installation of more informative destination signs in appropriate locations, will increase people's confidence in using the rights of way network for everyday journeys. Promoted walks and rides will be maintained to a high standard making Kent an attractive destination for recreational tourism. The up-keep of popular paths will be noticeably improved ensuring people have an enjoyable experience in the Kent countryside.

Growth And Development:

The Issue

Planned development in Kent both poses threats and provides opportunities to the existing public rights of way network and public access to green space. Within the two Kent growth areas there are proposals for 80,000 new homes and the creation of over 100,000 jobs over the next 30 years. The location for these new homes will primarily be in The Thames Gateway, East Kent and Ashford. It is essential that rights of way in these areas are protected and opportunities to enhance the network for all users are taken. By demonstrating the opportunities that public rights of way and open space offer, we will be contributing to the sustainability of new development and regeneration of these areas.

Objectives D1 to D5 focus on the provision of sustainable transport systems and high quality green space within new developments. Opportunities will be taken to include facilities which reduce traffic congestion, improve safety and provide community recreational facilities. The existing rights of way network and provision of open green space will be enhanced as a consequence of new development reducing the impact of the growing population, traffic and loss of land.

A More Sensible Network

The Issue

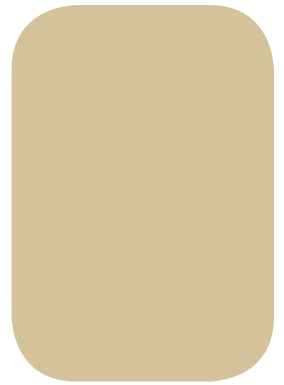
Research from the Kent Residents' Panel identified a number of reasons why people are not using the public rights of way network for their daily journeys. The reasons included the fact that paths are not always in the right place, or do not always take the most direct route.

Kent's public rights of way network is fragmented and poorly connected in certain parts of the county. This results in a heavy reliance on a relatively small percentage of the network. Carefully considered local and strategic changes would give greater opportunity for using the public rights of way network for recreation and leisure, and for linking residential areas to local schools and services and the surrounding countryside.

Compared with other counties, the network also has a lower than average accessibility for horse riders and cyclists. By creating new or 'upgraded' paths this problem could be addressed.

We must develop the public rights of way network for future generations to enjoy and ensure that walking and cycling routes provide real and sustainable alternatives to the private motor vehicle.

There are three objectives within this theme. They aim to work with partners to secure new routes in areas of high demand. Horse riders and cyclists will have access to new



paths supporting their recreational needs whilst at the same time supporting the needs of rural businesses. Kent will have a less fragmented network with routes going where people want them to. The public rights of way network will give people the opportunity for healthier transport options, helping reduce the reliance on the private motor vehicle for short journeys.

Knowing What's Out There.

The Issue

When asked, most people like “the great outdoors” and would like to spend more time exploring the Kent countryside. Surprisingly though, the majority of these people assume that the countryside is inaccessible and lack the confidence to go out walking, cycling or riding. Why is this? The main reason is quite simply that people don't know where to go. People need and want clear information about where to go to make the most of the countryside. An important way of giving people confidence, raising awareness and increasing use of public rights of way is to provide them with the clear information they need to help them take that step. Better access on the ground must go hand in hand with good, easy-to-use information for everyone.

The eight objectives within this theme are set out to increase the availability of information regarding countryside recreation in Kent. The objectives will increase the participation of healthy outdoor recreation, and people's understanding of what can be discovered in Kent. This increased understanding will add value to rural economies and add to the enjoyment of living in Kent. The awareness of Kent's recreational resource will be known at local, national and international levels.

Improving Safety

The Issue

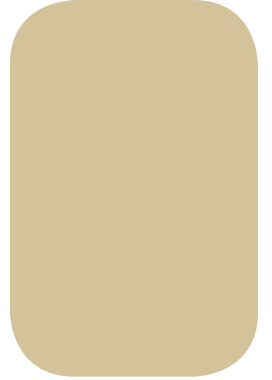
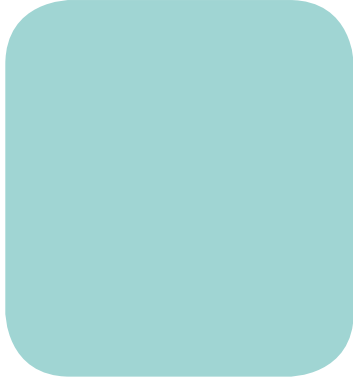
Throughout our research, general concerns were raised about feelings of personal security and safety when using the rights of way network. The County Council takes its responsibility towards the health, safety and welfare of Kent residents very seriously. Although the majority of rights of way offer few safety concerns, there are areas, particularly where they meet roads or railways, which can. The Local Transport Plan already sets out a strategy for improving safety, but the following aims are in addition to those, and specifically relate to public footpaths, bridleways, byways and restricted byways.

The Plan includes four objectives for this theme to increase the feeling of safety and security on the network. Paths which had previously not been used due to safety concerns will see increased usage as people gain confidence in the safer environments. A greater availability of safe walking and cycling routes around schools will reduce car congestion and safety concerns associated with the “school run”.

Education And Respect For The Countryside

The Issue

The natural environment is under increasing pressures from human activity. Our research has highlighted an apparent lack of understanding of the public's rights and responsibilities associated with exploring the countryside on public rights of way. Public bodies should make this information available to help protect the environment and the interests of land owners.



Land owners, tenants and land managers should also ensure that they fulfil their responsibilities for protecting public rights of way through responsible land management. KCC is committed to working closely with these groups to ensure that they have the information they need in order to achieve this.

Objectives E1 to E4 will deliver appropriately located information panels and signage that will lead to a greater understanding and appreciation of the Kent countryside. This will lead to the protection of land owner interests and the habitats and landscapes that make the Kent countryside so unique and popular.

Working Smarter and Improving Our Customer Service

The Issue

In order to realise the identified Improvement Plan objectives, and continually improve service to the public we must be prepared to explore use of new technology and react to meet our customer's changing demands.

Our customer focus can be improved by involving and listening to user groups and individuals, and having a flexible attitude to the way in which we work. Emerging technology and best practice guidelines can all contribute to improving this service further.

There are eight objectives to deliver increased efficiency and quality customer service. The service provided by the County Council will continue to improve resulting in greater customer satisfaction whilst improving efficiency. This will be achieved through continued investment in staff training and new technology.

FUNDING AND IMPLEMENTATION

The actions contained within this Plan are aspirational and not limited to what can be achieved with existing staff, financial resources and current partnerships. The Plan identifies new and ambitious activity necessary to improve access to the countryside, as well as areas of activity where the County Council and its partners may need to re-focus existing resources.

The overall management of implementing and reviewing the Improvement Plan will be the responsibility of the County Council's Countryside Access Improvement Plan Officer. The Countryside Access Forum will also be involved through providing support and guidance. An Executive Steering Group will be established to oversee the ongoing management of the Improvement Plan process.

Included within the Statement of Action is a set of measurable targets that will be monitored to and provide a framework for delivery of the Plan. A bi-annual progress report will be produced, which will include project highlights and successes to enable the service to demonstrate the overall effectiveness of the Countryside Access Improvement Plan process.

