

By: Mr Adam Wilkinson, Managing Director, Environment and Regeneration
Mr Keith Ferrin, Cabinet Member, Environment, Highways and Waste.

To: Cabinet - 6th February 2008.

Subject: Endorsement of the Kent Countryside Access Improvement Plan

Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: The Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000 requires the County Council to prepare and publish a Rights of Way Improvement Plan. The Countryside Access Improvement Plan presented here meets this obligation.

This report seeks endorsement from Cabinet to adopt the Countryside Access Improvement Plan as a strategy for the management of public rights of way and countryside access for the period 2007-2017.

1. Introduction

The document evaluates the use and future likely demand on public rights of way and open green space and has been written in accordance with the prescribed process and guidance specified by DEFRA. Recommendations provided by Government are that a Rights of Way Improvement Plan should be a visionary document. This Plan has sought a balance between being visionary and pragmatic in delivering our statutory duties. The document is a Key Decision included in the Forward Plan.

2. Policy Framework

This document sits alongside the Local Transport Plan for Kent 2006-11. Government advice is that the Countryside Access Improvement Plan should be integrated into the next Local Transport Plan in 2012.

3. Implications

Approval of the Countryside Access Improvement Plan will amend the strategy and operational policy for the Countryside Access Service, previously approved by the Policy Overview Committee in July 05.

In delivering the Improvement Plan significant contributions will be made to the following 2010 targets:

Target 45. Protect and enhance Kent's ancient woodlands and improve access to countryside, coast and heritage.

Target 48. Increase opportunities for everyone to take physical exercise.

(2) Budget/Financial Impact –

The DEFRA recommendations are to produce a visionary document for enhanced countryside access. Any areas of the statement of action that would require additional funding are clearly marked in chapter 12 of the main report. Although Government placed a duty on highway authorities to produce a rights of way improvement plan, it has not committed to financing the recommendations they make. They have however, suggested that finance be sought through a variety of grant schemes and incorporated into the Local Transport Plan. Some improvements recognised by the Improvement Plan could be achieved by being designed into Development and Highway schemes.

(3) Equality and Diversity -

In line with DEFRA recommendations an evaluation of the use and demand of countryside access by ethnic minorities, blind, partially-sighted and those with mobility or learning difficulties has been completed. The report delivers a series of actions which will improve opportunities for minority groups.

(4) Customer Service and Delivery –

The implementation of the Countryside Access Improvement Plan will have a significant positive impact of the Service provided by the Countryside Access Service.

(5) Health –

The need to encourage people to take regular exercise is currently high on the political agenda. Studies have shown that walking and cycling can counteract problems such as obesity, coronary heart disease and type II diabetes, as well as improving psychological well-being. Increasingly recreational walking and cycling are being used as a preventative solution to medical conditions. Putting in place the facilities for people to be able to increase their physical exercise through lifestyle changes can make savings for NHS services as well as increasing personal well-being.

(6) Economy & Regeneration -

The benefit of recreational tourism to local economies was harshly demonstrated by the loss of earnings to rural business during the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001. The 2005 England Day Visits Survey revealed that 699 million leisure visits were taken in the English countryside, amounting to expenditure of £9.4 billion. Locally Kent attracted just over 44 million visitors in 2003, which, in turn, generated £1.8 billion, supporting the equivalent of nearly 49,555 jobs. Working with partners and utilising its own countryside assets, actions within the Improvement Plan are designed to recognise the importance of tourism and the rural economy, and support local business.

(7) Development -

An ever present theme of regional planning policy and the local development frameworks is a requirement for sufficient walking and cycling routes, linked to key services to relieve the pressures of increased traffic and support sustainable communities. The Countryside Access Service will work with developers and planners to safeguard and enhance public rights of way and public green space within the growth areas.

(8) Sustainability and Climate Change -

KCC has already signed up to the Nottingham Declaration on climate change that commits us to tackling the causes and effects of a changing climate on our county. Road transport counts for a fifth of the UK's entire national carbon emissions. The provision and promotion of routes that offer a more sustainable travel option for short journey's will help reduce the necessity for the use of the private car and help the County Council towards delivering its commitment.

4. Consultations

The Service has carried out a comprehensive and wide ranging research and consultation process which has gone through four key phases.

(1) Literature and policy review

Relevant National, Regional, Local research and policy has been fully reviewed. To name a few, reviewed documents have included the South East Plan, Local Transport Plan, District and Borough's walking and cycling strategies, Vision for Kent, DEFRA's rural strategy, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty management plans and the Strategy for the Horse Industry in England and Wales.

(2) Public consultation of current needs and demands

(a) Parish and District Councils

All parish councils and district councils have been consulted and many have made significant contributions to the Improvement Plan. Numerous local presentations and opportunities to engage in the preparation of the plan were held.

(b) KCC Staff

KCC managers and officers were heavily involved in the consultation process. This included members of the Environment and Regeneration leadership team, staff from the Communities and Kent Adult Social Services directorates.

(c) User Groups

All known local user groups including The British Horse Society and the Ramblers' Association, have helped the County Council in assessing the needs of their specific user type.

(d) General Public

Questionnaires were completed at a number of events at locations across the county, ranging from the Kent County Show, to eleven shopping centre surveys. Questions about the use and requirements of countryside access were put to the Kent Residents Panel between 8th November 2004 and 9th February 2005. Both the County Councils Internet site and Kent TV have been used to publicise the Plan and provide opportunities for engagement.

(3) Consultation on the plan's objectives

A consultation document on the objectives of the Improvement Plan was published and advertised during January and February 2007. Broad public consultation was considered to be a good way of prioritising the objectives to establish a top fifteen that were the most important to residents.

(4) Draft Countryside Access Improvement Plan Consultation

In accordance with statutory guidance issued by DEFRA, the Improvement Plan went through a three month public consultation having been advertised using local media and the County Council's website. All major land owners and other key stakeholders were notified of the consultation. Comments have all been recorded and where appropriate been incorporated into the final plan.

5. Local Members

Portfolio holders Keith Ferrin and Roger Manning have been engaged throughout the production of the Improvement Plan, and a number of presentations have been completed to Local Member Boards. During the three month draft consultation period, all members were directly contacted and the Draft Improvement Plan was deposited in the members lounge for review.

6. Conclusion

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 included in the main document. The main issues and details of the how the Service will address them are broken down into the seven themes listed below.

(1) Well Maintained Countryside Access

(2) Growth And Development

(3) A More Sensible Network

(4) Knowing What's Out There

(5) Improving Safety

(6) Education And Respect For The Countryside

(7) Working Smarter and Improving Our Customer Service

7. Recommendations

That Cabinet supports and adopts the Improvement Plan as a strategy to enhance the network of public rights of way network and open green space until 2017.

Background Documents:

1. Countryside Access Improvement Plan Executive Summary (KCC 2007)
2. Countryside Access Improvement Plan (KCC 2007)
3. Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000
4. Rights of Way Improvement Plans. Statutory Guidance to Local Highway Authorities in England. (DEFRA 2002.)

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