

CABINET MEMBER FOR TRANSPORT - 22 MARCH 2012

RIGHTS OF WAY IMPROVEMENT PLAN EXTENSION

Report by Deputy Director for Environment & Economy (Growth & Infrastructure)

Introduction

1. A Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP) sets out the assessment of the adequacy of the rights of way network and provides the strategy framework for rights of way management, maintenance and development. The present plan runs out in April 2012. Oxfordshire County Council as the highway authority has the statutory duty to prepare and publish a RoWIP and review it to keep it valid.
2. This report sets out options for the future and recommends that the authority extends the life of the plan to 2014 and sets in train work for its review.

Background

3. The present RoWIP was adopted by the County Council on 21 February 2006. The Plan's vision is:

To improve the existing public rights of way network for all users and would-be users, and improve the extent, use and understanding of the network, so that public rights of way fulfil their role as a vital part of life in the County.

4. The four aims of the RoWIP are:
 - I. *Public rights of way are protected and well maintained.*
 - II. *A better joined-up network that meets the needs and demands of users whilst accommodating the interests of land managers, the natural environment and our cultural heritage.*
 - III. *A public rights of way network which enables access for all.*
 - IV. *A thriving countryside where residents and visitors are able to understand and enjoy their rights, in a responsible way.*
5. The ROWIP has provided an important tool for countryside access work over the last six years and has enabled the Countryside Service to target its own work and also the significant amounts of work undertaken by communities, other organisations and volunteer groups. It has provided the basis to bring in external funding from charities and other sources, and has secured access provision from commercial developments. It has also influenced the development and delivery of strategies and policies. Annex 1 summarises

achievements over and above the day to day work of protecting and managing the network.

6. The plan is complementary to the Council's third Local Transport Plan (LTP3), adopted 18 March 2011, and there is partial integration through the development of LTP cycling and walking policies CW1 to CW5 and each of the area strategies.

Potential ways forward

7. Although integrated with LTP policies, the management and development of public rights of way is separate to the management of roads, and the preparation and review of the RoWIP remains a statutory duty for the authority to develop under s60 and s61 Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (Annex 2). The plan and its annual delivery business plan are a valuable tool to steer, manage and report on Oxfordshire's work in public rights of way and countryside access management.
8. Officers feel that there are number of options to take for its review, particularly:
 - Option A. extending the date of the existing RoWIP to 2014
 - Option B. review and produce a 'light touch' amended plan
 - Option C. review and produce a fully revised plan
9. **Option A** would entail extending the validity date to 2014, keeping the RoWIP aims, objectives and most of the document unchanged in its current form. Annual delivery action plans would be produced and reported on. The RoWIP would need assessment and review and possibly the production of an amended plan by 2014, or another 'as is' extension to 2016.
10. *Benefits*– minimal short term impact and easiest to undertake. Gives time for the Infrastructure Framework for Oxfordshire to be developed as well the Local Development Frameworks and Green Infrastructure strategies. This option still allows and enables innovation and development depending on team capacity and available resources.
11. *Disbenefits*- the ROWIP as a whole risks becoming more out of date and less relevant. Research undertaken over the last few years is not able to be fully integrated within the document. Plan may not reflect the changes in priorities, capacity and resources of the authority.
12. **Option B** would entail the assessment and review of the current RoWIP with the intention of producing a 'light touch' amended plan - keeping the RoWIP more or less in its current form and layout but with revised research and legislation updates including changes in the Growth & Infrastructure service and the economic climate. This RoWIP could be valid for up to 10 years from publication.
13. *Benefits* - could bring the research and document up to date quickly as a lighter touch approach without major changes needed to research, format and

content which would minimise officer time. Annual delivery action plans could still guide the work and allow reporting on work undertaken

14. *Disbenefits* - RoWIP1 would still be invalid by April 2012 and a light touch review could not be undertaken before year end. This is because even an intention to undertake a light touch amended plan creates a requirement to assess the current plan and consult with all parish councils, district councils, interest groups, prescribed individuals and organisations and neighbouring authorities with the results of the assessment and before the review of the RoWIP takes place, as well as the consultation on the revised version. The results of the consultation may indicate a need to produce a fully amended RoWIP as per option C.
15. **Option C** would entail the assessment and review of the current RoWIP with the intention of producing a fully revised plan that reflected changes in the economic climate and the results of recent research as well as changes within the Growth & Infrastructure service and the current economic climate. It may be possible to add policies to strengthen the role of the RoWIP and the document could also form more of a basis for all Oxfordshire County Council's countryside access functions. This RoWIP could be valid for up to 10 years from publication.
16. *Benefits* - could bring the research and document up to date and also make a RoWIP that more fully reflected the current economic and operational limitations. If the full assessment and consultation process has to take place for any type of review then it may make sense for the RoWIP to be comprehensively overhauled.
17. *Disbenefits* - RoWIP1 would still be invalid by April 2012 and a full review could not be undertaken before year end. A full revision may involve more staff and stakeholder time in its production.

Proposal

18. The preferred approach is to extend the timeframe of the existing plan to 2014 instead of the maximum allowed validity date of 2016. This will keep the RoWIP valid and able to be used to inform developments and emerging strategies. In tandem we can commence a wider consultation review of the plan toward adoption of a new/updated strategy by 2014, which will provide a better plan for the longer term.
19. This approach is supported by two key Oxfordshire countryside access advisory groups. Officers sought the advice of the Oxfordshire Countryside Access Forum and the Oxfordshire Rights of Way Monitoring Group in October 2011 to see which of the three possible options was preferred. The general view was that in light of the economic climate a short and simple time extension to the current RoWIP might be best - but also that there were real benefits in investing in undertaking a full review as things had changed so much since the plan was adopted in 2006. Officers agreed with this and this is why the proposed approach is being put forward that combines options A and C.

20. An extension to the validity date will simply mean the electronic version of the plan has its date changed on its front cover and at points throughout the document, plus making some changes to the text without amending the overall structure, meaning or aims of the plan. The RoWIP website pages will be updated too.

Financial and Staff Implications

21. Countryside Access now forms part of the new Planning & Regulation Service. Whilst staff capacity has been reduced, extending the timeframe of the plan can be done relatively quickly and allows a review to be carried out over longer time within current staff capacity.

Recommendation

22. The Cabinet Member for Transport is RECOMMENDED to authorise commencement of a process to:
- (a) extend the validity date of the current Rights of Way Improvement Plan to March 2014; and
 - (b) undertake a review in the longer term with a view to submission of a new Plan by March 2014.

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Background papers: Nil