

## **Division Affected – All**

# **DELEGATED DECISIONS BY CABINET MEMBER FOR PLACE, ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE ACTION**

**26 March 2026**

## **Right of Way Improvement Plan**

### **Report by Director of Environment & Highways**

## **RECOMMENDATION**

The Cabinet Member is **RECOMMENDED** to

- a) **Agree to retain the current Rights of Way Improvement Plan (2015-2025), at Annex 4, extending it until March 2029 for the reasons as set out in Annex 1.**

## **Executive Summary**

1. This report sets out the review undertaken of the PRow Improvement Plan and explains the rationale and reason for recommending that the current document remain current until March 2029.
2. On the basis of this work there are four reasons put forward as to why officers are of the view that the RoWIP does not need amending at this stage. These reasons are:
  - I. Continual review of the PRow network, user needs, strategy, policy and operations:
  - II. Public Survey of network, needs and perspectives undertaken Spring 2025
  - III. Adoption of PRow relevant policies since 2016
  - IV. Local Government Reorganisation (LGR)
3. By undertaking the assessment and review and not amending the RoWIP at this time it enables the authority to understand and manage the impact of LGR and other challenges ready for the next assessment, review and production of the RoWIP.

## **Background**

4. Section 60 and 61 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 set out the statutory duty for the highway authority to prepare and publish within five years of the commencement of the Act, and the duty to review its Rights of

Way Improvement Plan within 10 years of the plan's adoption. Cabinet adopted the second RoWIP in November 2014 and it came into effect in 2025.

5. Since then, policies covering the definitive map and statement, the management of motor vehicles and caseload prioritisation were adopted in 2018 and 2019. The council also adopted its Local Transport and Connectivity Plan (LTCP) in July 2022 and within that are updated public rights of way policies that built upon those in the RoWIP as the two strategies are directly linked.
6. The RoWIP sets out the strategy and direction for the management and improvement of public rights of way and its users. There is no alternative strategy that meets this statutory requirement. The authority is required to keep an up-to-date RoWIP.
7. Section 60(2) Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 contains the matters that shall be taken into account for the assessment and review. These include:
  - I. the extent to which local rights of way meet the present and likely future needs of the public,
  - II. the opportunities provided by local rights of way for exercise and other forms of open-air recreation and the enjoyment of the authority's area,
  - III. the accessibility of local rights of way to blind or partially sighted persons and others with mobility problems, and
  - IV. such other matters relating to local rights of way as the Secretary of State may direct.
8. Annex 2 to this report contains the summary of the RoWIP review survey carried out in Spring 2025 and, alongside work outlined below, meets s60(2) CROW 2000 requirements. This survey asked participants about PRow issues, areas they were satisfied/dissatisfied with, suggestions for a replacement RoWIP and some demographic information.
9. In addition to the feedback from the survey, the authority constantly reviews its operations for example through modifying the definitive map and statement and protecting and modernising the rights of way network through the planning process. In addition, officers feel that with policies that have been put in place since 2015 and impending changes to local government in the form of Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) not amending the plan at this time is a better option than writing a new plan. An options assessment is included that draws on these considerations.
10. The reasons put forward as to why the RoWIP does not need amending at this stage are:

**Reason 1: Continual review.** The County Council keeps its Rights of Way network, user needs, strategy, policy and operations under constant review. It does this by following processes for receiving and acting on reports, through its work modifying the definitive map and statement, through its engagement with the development planning process and through the work

of its professional team members, volunteers, user groups and community representatives.

**Reason 2: Public Survey of network, needs and perspectives.** A public survey was undertaken in spring 2025 in accordance with s60(2) Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 matters. This asked participants about PRow issues, areas they were satisfied/dissatisfied with, suggestions for a replacement RoWIP and some demographic information. The surveys highlighted areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. It is considered that the work outlined in Reason 1 together with the policies set out in Reasons 3 and 4 in this document will go some way towards addressing areas of dissatisfaction.

**Reason 3: policies adopted since the RoWIP was published.** As part of continual review a number of policies have been developed. Each policy has been through its own formal adoption process and so adds to or supersedes any previous policy wording. They do not conflict with the content, format or intention of the 2015 RoWIP and accordingly the policies implemented since 2015 fully align with this plan. This document sets out below a summary of these policies. A web reference link to the source file for each policy is provided.

**Reason 4: Local Government Reorganisation (LGR).** Local government in many areas is being changed by central government. There are three options for unitary authorities currently being promoted for Oxfordshire. The result and impact of this is expected to be known for certain in 2026/7 and may result in boundary changes. Devolution is also on the horizon, albeit on a longer timescale for Oxfordshire, and this may result in mayoral strategic authorities overseeing and coordinating some council strategies and plans but it is not known if public rights of way will fall under this strategic coverage. These strategic authorities may extend beyond the proposed unitary boundaries.

Having assessed the RoWIP in accordance with section 60(2) of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 officers concluded, in light of the four reasons set out above, that an amended plan is not required at this stage.

However when LGR has concluded and the new authority/ies formed officers anticipate that another review will be required at that time and the production of a new or amended RoWIP(s) may be required.

11. Annex 1 to this report sets out these reasons for not amending the current RoWIP at this time and includes the summaries of the relevant policies adopted since 2015. This Annex has the effect of keeping the current RoWIP valid and will sit alongside the current RoWIP on the council's website.
12. Annex 2 contains the summary of the RoWIP review survey carried out in Spring 2025.

13. Annex 3 contains a presentation of the review survey including graphics carried out in Spring 2025.

## **Current drivers, pressures and changes**

14. Local government is being changed with three options for unitary authorities currently being promoted for Oxfordshire. The result and impact of this is expected to be known for certain in 2026/7.
15. Devolution is also on the horizon, albeit on a longer timescale for Oxfordshire, and this may result in mayoral strategic authorities overseeing and coordinating some council strategies and plans but it is not known if public rights of way will fall under this strategic coverage. These strategic authorities may or may not extend beyond the proposed unitary boundaries.
16. The need for adaptation to climate breakdown impacts of extreme weather events is increasing, as are user needs, alongside the need to care for protected species and habitats across all areas of work. These needs are already included in the day to day work and planning of the team.
17. The adoption of the following policies demonstrate the council's commitment to continual review and improvement of rights of way:
  - Statement of Priorities for maintaining the Definitive Map and Statement of Public Rights of Way (December 2018)
  - Public Rights of Way - Management & Prioritisation of maintenance and access issues (November 2019)
  - Rights of Way Management Plan – Managing Motor Vehicles on Public Rights of Way Policy (November 2019)
  - Local Transport and Connectivity Plan Policies - July 2022

## **Summary**

18. There are three options available. Each option has advantages and disadvantages and differing levels of statutory requirements for consultation and assessment. These are discussed below.
19. Options Assessment Key Takeaway – Officers consider a report setting out the reasons for not amending the current RoWIP and incorporation of policies adopted since 2015 will provide the best balance within the current change environment. It keeps the validity of the plan, brings in adopted policies and enables officers to understand and manage the impact of known and unknown changes ready for the next full iteration of the plan post Local Government Reorganisation.

## **Options Assessment**

**Option 1 – Issue a report with the reasons why the RoWIP is not being amended and incorporate policy changes made since the RoWIP was adopted.**

20. Option 1 keeps the RoWIP unchanged but brings in policy and wording from the LTCP and other adopted rights of way policies. A draft statement of reasons for non-amendment of the current Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP) is attached as Annex 1. Policies adopted since the last RoWIP have been through their own public consultation process.
21. *Advantages* – minimal short-term impact based on staff capacity and easiest to undertake as no requirement for consultation with regards a new plan. Gives time to enable officers to understand how changes to structure and the authority or authorities could be best incorporated. This option still allows innovation and development depending on available resources. Annual delivery action plans could be developed to guide the work and allow reporting on work.
22. *Disadvantages* – Few, as the RoWIP and operations are being continually kept up to date. The two documents will have to be read together to get a full picture.

**Option 2 – undertake an in-depth review and republish as a light touch amended 5 or 10 year strategy by April 2026**

23. This would revise the RoWIP statement of action but with work to amend and update the assessment of need and evidence base. A full consultation would be required. This RoWIP could be valid for up to 10 years from publication.
24. *Advantages* – could bring the in-depth research and document up to date without major changes needed to research, format and content which would minimise officer time. Annual delivery action plans could be developed to guide the work and allow reporting on work.
25. *Disadvantages* – the existing RoWIP would be invalid, creating uncertainty and in depth assessments would take time because of other pressures and limited staff capacity. This is because a reviewed strategy triggers the requirement to consult with all parish councils, district councils, interest groups, prescribed individuals and organisations and neighbouring authorities on the revised version – after getting internal approval. There's a risk that local government changes could render the strategy obsolete fairly quickly, for example if Oxfordshire split into two or three unitary authorities.

**Option 3 – undertake an in-depth review and republish a completely new plan**

26. As per option 2 but this would produce a completely new plan that reflected changes in the economic and climate areas as well as changes within the council's structure. It could also include additional policies to strengthen the role of the RoWIP and the document could also form the basis for all Oxfordshire's countryside access functions in place or any strategy or workplans. Annual delivery action plans or similar could still guide the work and allow reporting on work undertaken. This RoWIP could be valid for up to 10 years from publication.

27. *Advantages* – could bring the in-depth research and document up to date and also make a RoWIP that fully reflected the current economic, environment and operational limitations, opportunities and aspirations. Time spent on a full rewrite may yield better long-term outcomes as everything is revised and rewritten.
28. *Disadvantages* – As per option 2 plus a completely new plan is likely to involve more resources in its production depending on its scope. There's a risk that local government changes could render the strategy obsolete fairly quickly, for example if Oxfordshire split into two or three unitary authorities.

## **Corporate Policies and Priorities**

29. The Rights of Way Improvement Plan contributes to the council's Strategic Plan 2025-2028 priorities for a greener, fairer and healthier Oxfordshire. For a greener Oxfordshire the RoWIP supports the wider objectives of greenways and the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan; for a fairer Oxfordshire the RoWIP supports the wider objective of access to local facilities; for a healthier Oxfordshire the RoWIP supports the wider objective of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy, especially the physical activity aspiration.

## **Financial Implications**

30. The RoWIP extension has been undertaken by an officer of the council. There is no additional cost to the council.

*Comments checked by:*

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## **Legal Implications**

31. s60(3) CROW requires that the Council makes a new assessment of the matters specified in s60(2) CROW in order to review the RoWIP and decide whether to amend it.
32. If the recommendation is followed the Council will be making a decision not to amend the RoWIP and, in accordance with s60(4), will need to publish this report of their decision and the reasons for it, as set out in Annex 1

*Comments checked by:*

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## **Staff Implications**

33. The RoWIP reasons report has been undertaken by an officer of the council. There is no additional cost to the council.



**Annex 4:** The current RoWIP

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