

Report on the results of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan initial survey undertaken in spring 2025 (text-only version)

Summary

- A reasonable survey size, not fully representative but gives a good indication of perspectives
- In the agree/disagree (with a number of statements) section only vegetation management has more negative i.e. dissatisfied scoring
- All council actions and activities on PRow are ranked as important or very important by a greater proportion of respondents
- More people think the current RoWIP is OK (neutral) or meets expectations and needs, but over a quarter express negative views
- Slightly more people think PRow condition has stayed the same or improved over the last 10 years
- Useful free text comments about Rights of Way aspects – see thematic breakdowns

A. Survey data

- Survey promoted via Let's Talk Oxfordshire from end March to May 2025. Links to survey made via direct emails, meeting and Facebook groups. Follow up emails and posts made at the start of May.
- 1,200 aware, 600 views, **331** participants
- Nearly all (c88%) were residents of Oxfordshire replying as individuals, next largest group were residents from outside of Oxfordshire (4.5%) and organisations (3.6%) responses rather than groups like local councils

B. Key themes* - comments on the current RoWIP

1. Accessibility and Inclusivity

- Many comments highlight barriers for specific user groups: wheelchair users, people with limited mobility, horse riders, carriage drivers, and cyclists. Issues include inaccessible gates, overgrown or muddy paths, lack of joined-up routes, and insufficient parking for horseboxes or accessible vehicles.
- There are repeated calls for more accessible bridleways, better surfaces, and routes that accommodate a wider range of users, including those with disabilities and less common forms of transport (e.g., driven ponies, cargo bikes).

2. User Group Conflicts and Safety

- Concerns about conflicts between cyclists, horse riders, dog owners, and walkers are frequent. High-speed cycling, uncontrolled dogs, and lack of consideration for vulnerable users are cited as safety issues.

- Suggestions include better education for cyclists and dog owners, clearer rules, and more considerate sharing of paths.

3. Motorised Users and Byways

- Several comments note that motorised users (motorcyclists, 4x4s) feel excluded or underrepresented in the plan. There are complaints about the lack of legal byways, TROs (Traffic Regulation Orders) restricting access, and the absence of images or references to motorised vehicles in the document.
- Some respondents argue that motorised users contribute economically and should be considered in future planning.

4. Maintenance, Funding, and Implementation

- Many respondents express frustration with the lack of maintenance, slow response to issues, and insufficient funding. Overgrown paths, blocked routes, poor surfaces, and lack of enforcement against landowners who block or neglect rights of way are common themes.
- There is scepticism about whether plans translate into real improvements on the ground, with some calling for more outcome-based actions and reliable funding sources.

5. Document Length, Communication, and Usability

- The RoWIP is widely described as too long, wordy, and difficult to digest. Respondents request executive summaries, clearer maps, and more concise communication.
- Some mention that the maps are hard to use, lack reference points, or are too small to be practical.

6. Network Connectivity and Expansion

- There is strong support for expanding and linking up the rights of way network, especially to connect communities, new developments, and provide alternatives to road use.
- Calls for more bridleways, safer crossings over major roads, and better integration with cycling and walking networks are frequent.

7. Urban vs. Rural Balance

- Some feel the plan focuses too much on urban areas and neglects rural communities, where local roads are often unsafe for walking or cycling due to traffic and lack of infrastructure.
- There are requests for more attention to rural needs and the challenges faced by those living outside towns.

8. Policy, Strategy, and Ambition

- Comments range from praise for the plan's progressive aims to criticism that it lacks ambition, is out of date, or is too general.
- Some want clearer links between the RoWIP and other strategic plans (e.g., Local Transport Plan), more measurable outcomes, and regular consultation with local stakeholders.

9. Environmental and Biodiversity Considerations

- Positive feedback is given for the plan's attention to environmental factors, biodiversity, and climate adaptation, but some want more detail on how these will be delivered and integrated into maintenance and improvement schemes.

*From 136 responses.

C. Key themes* - comments on the condition of PRow

1. Surface Condition and Maintenance

- Many responses highlight poor path surfaces: potholes, mud, ruts, waterlogging, and overgrown vegetation.
- Comments mention lack of regular maintenance, delayed repairs, and surfaces unsuitable for walking, cycling, or horse riding.
- Examples: “Paths are riddled with potholes...”, “Paths get very overgrown...”, “Surfaces are generally poor, and unsuitable for cycling for much of the year...”.

2. Accessibility and Inclusivity

- Issues with stiles, gates, and narrow or obstructed paths that limit access for wheelchair users, families with buggies, and people with disabilities.
- Comments about lack of dropped kerbs, inaccessible bridges, and paths not suitable for mobility scooters.
- Examples: “Few paths are fully navigable in my wheelchair...”, “Gates can be very difficult or dangerous to use...”, “Stiles are a menace to many...”.

3. Bridleways and Equestrian Access

- Concerns about insufficient bridleways, poor maintenance, and unsafe or impassable routes for horse riders and carriage drivers.
- Issues with gates, overhanging branches, and surfaces unsuitable for horses.
- Examples: “We have too few bridleways/rights of way for horse riding...”, “Bridleways are often left too narrow and with barbed wire too close...”, “Bridleways commonly have obstructions and are unable to be ridden on...”.

4. Cycling Infrastructure and Safety

- Comments about cycle paths being impassable, unsafe, or poorly surfaced.
- Concerns about conflicts between cyclists and other users, and the need for better education and signage.
- Examples: “Cycle path...is very poor, doesn't meet National guidance...”, “Cyclists are becoming a more and more dangerous factor for pedestrians...”, “They are not really suitable for cycling...”.

5. Signage, Waymarking, and Information

- Many mention unclear, missing, or broken signs, making navigation difficult.
- Requests for better waymarking and information, especially at path junctions and crossings.
- Examples: “Waymarking often unclear or overgrown...”, “Better signage is needed where paths are used for walking and cycling...”, “I regularly find signposts on the ground or overgrown and invisible...”.

6. Landowner and Farmer Responsibilities

- Issues with landowners not maintaining paths, obstructing access, or discouraging use.
- Comments about ploughed-over paths, blocked routes, and lack of cooperation.

- Examples: “Landowners in my area generally do not maintain footpaths...”, “Some landowners actively discourage the public from using rights of way...”, “Farmers plough over rights of way...”.

7. Connectivity and Network Gaps

- Concerns about paths not linking up, dead ends, and lack of continuous or circular routes.
- Requests for new paths or restoration of lost connections.
- Examples: “They are not linked together well...”, “There is a real lack of paths connecting to each other...”, “Very frustrating that some paths are still either difficult to find or have lapsed completely...”.

8. Enforcement, Reporting, and Council Response

- Frustration with slow or inadequate responses to reported issues.
- Comments about ignored complaints, lack of enforcement, and unclear responsibilities between councils.
- Examples: “Reports to relevant authorities are ignored...”, “There needs to be better communication and collaboration between district authorities...”, “I have reported several issues...some have been very well fixed but with a huge long wait...”.

9. Environmental and Seasonal Factors

- Comments on seasonal mud, flooding, overgrowth, and climate change impacts.
- Concerns about wildlife, biodiversity, and the need for sensitive management.
- Examples: “Paths become unusable in winter...”, “Prolonged wet periods have led to the widening of paths...”, “There is lots of opportunity for improvements to the biodiversity value of public rights of way...”.

10. User Conflicts and Safety

- Issues with conflicts between different user groups (walkers, cyclists, horse riders, motor vehicles).
- Safety concerns due to fast cyclists, 4x4 vehicles, and lack of safe crossings.
- Examples: “Cyclists are becoming a more and more dangerous factor...”, “The byways in our parish are abused by drivers of 4x4 vehicles...”, “Older children can’t safely navigate the rights of way without supervision...”.

*From 205 responses

D. Key themes* - comments on the impact of COVID lockdowns on use of PRoWs

1. Increased Use and Discovery of Public Rights of Way

Many respondents reported using local footpaths, bridleways, and countryside routes much more during lockdown. People discovered new paths, explored their local areas, and appreciated the opportunity to connect with nature.

- “Explored a lot more of the paths accessible from my house without having to drive, made much more use of OS maps to find new routes, generally enjoyed all the rights of way and the escape that comes with walking.”
- “I used public ways more frequently and discovered that many of them weren’t accessible to individuals who weren’t completely agile/mobile.”

- “I explored every single one of the PROWs in my parish and discovered some marvellous routes I wouldn't have considered before.”

2. Positive Impact on Wellbeing and Community

Access to open spaces and rights of way was described as a lifeline for physical and mental health. Walking, cycling, and riding provided safe ways to exercise and interact with others at a distance, helping to maintain a sense of community.

- “It was paradise! I got out more, and heard birdsong and the breeze, instead of endless traffic and planes.”
- “It helped to keep the community alive so I feel very strongly that more of these routes need to be passable and accessible for ALL users.”
- “The Oxfordshire public rights of way network was immensely valuable during the pandemic. Lots of people who rarely go into the countryside were doing so during lockdowns.”

3. Accessibility and Maintenance Issues

While usage increased, many noted problems with accessibility, maintenance, and signage. Overgrown paths, lack of upkeep, and obstacles made it difficult for less mobile users, families with children, and those with wheelchairs or buggies.

- “There was a lack of signposting, together with lack of maintenance, making it difficult for elderly/infirm or those with young children to access.”
- “The paths were used more but the maintenance was less. Where I am is very rural and what little maintenance we had, went to and has stayed at nothing.”
- “I needed to use them more with a double buggy and kid in a sling which highlighted some of the accessibility issues I hadn't encountered before.”

4. Negative Impacts: Litter, Damage, and Crowding

Some respondents expressed concern about increased litter, dog mess, and damage to crops and footpaths due to higher footfall and lack of respect from some users. Crowding was also mentioned as a challenge.

- “There was increased littering. Also the footpaths especially across the fields were wrecked from being overused by the sheer volume of people. Crops were damaged severely.”
- “They became super crowded with people not respecting the countryside way of life. There were more dogs off leads and more litter and dog poo.”
- “The local paths got crowded and new trespassing paths were created which people think are paths now.”

5. Changes in Traffic and Road Safety

Lockdowns led to quieter roads, which made walking, cycling, and horse riding safer and more enjoyable for many. However, as restrictions eased, increased traffic and delivery vehicles created new safety concerns.

- “Chilton Road from Upton up Hagbourne Hill was temporarily closed to traffic... When the closure was made permanent, it was a dream!”
- “The lack of traffic actually made it easier for horses and wheelchairs users as we are able to access more bridleways. Since then it has become extremely dangerous to attempt to cross roads as there is more traffic.”
- “It was great to be able to cycle on traffic-free roads and enjoy the silence and clean air that resulted from the lockdowns.”

6. Impact on Specific User Groups

Different groups experienced the lockdowns in unique ways: horse riders, cyclists, wheelchair users, families, and vulnerable adults all had distinct challenges and opportunities.

- “As a horse rider, I found the general public walked wherever they pleased, regardless of whether it was a right of way.”
- “I went out on my mobility scooter into the countryside when we were allowed out.”
- “The lockdown affected equestrian users differently depending on whether they rode out singly or with others.”

7. No Significant Change for Some

A minority of respondents reported little or no change in their use of rights of way, either due to personal circumstances, location, or pre-existing habits.

- “No change. I still had to exercise my horses.”
- “Not much. I walk a lot anyway.”
- “It didn’t affect my use.”

*From 247 responses.

E. Key themes* - comments on the next RoWIP

1. Accessibility and Inclusion

- **Description:** Comments about making rights of way accessible for all users, including walkers, cyclists, horse riders, motorcyclists, wheelchair users, and those with disabilities.
- **Examples:**
 - Requests for more bridleways and conversion of footpaths to bridleways.
 - Calls for improved wheelchair and mobility scooter access, better gates, and removal of stiles.
 - Emphasis on inclusive planning for all user groups, including motorized users and those with acquired disabilities.
 - Suggestions to involve disabled people and relevant organizations in development.

2. Connectivity and Network Improvements

- **Description:** Feedback on the need to link up existing paths, create continuous off-road networks, and address severed routes due to infrastructure or development.
- **Examples:**
 - Calls to join up bridleways, footpaths, and byways to avoid dangerous road crossings.
 - Requests for new paths in housing developments and better links between towns and villages.
 - Concerns about isolated communities due to lack of accessible crossings.

3. Maintenance and Upkeep

- **Description:** Comments about the condition of paths, need for regular and proactive maintenance, and issues with overgrown vegetation or poor surfaces.
- **Examples:**
 - Calls for predictable, seasonal maintenance rather than reactive clearing.
 - Requests for better surface quality for cycling and walking.
 - Suggestions for more frequent inspections and involvement of parish councils.

4. Safety and Infrastructure

- **Description:** Concerns about user safety, especially at road crossings, and the need for appropriate infrastructure such as crossings, signage, and lighting.
- **Examples:**
 - Requests for safer road crossings for horses, pedestrians, and cyclists.
 - Suggestions for improved signage, lighting, and speed reduction measures in urban areas.
 - Comments on the dangers posed by fast-moving traffic and poor infrastructure choices.

5. Communication, Reporting, and Engagement

- **Description:** Feedback on the need for better communication from the council, easier reporting of issues, and more engagement with users and volunteers.
- **Examples:**
 - Requests for more responsive action to reports and better follow-up.
 - Suggestions for live status updates, clearer maps, and accessible reporting tools.
 - Calls for recognition and support of volunteer groups.

6. Policy, Planning, and Strategic Vision

- **Description:** Comments on the strategic direction of the ROWIP, alignment with transport and active travel plans, and the need for clear objectives and prioritization.
- **Examples:**
 - Calls for the plan to reflect recent transport strategies and climate emergency.
 - Suggestions for prioritising upgrades based on strategic networks and local plans.
 - Requests for more ambitious goals and transparent progress reporting.

7. Landowner Responsibilities and Collaboration

- **Description:** Concerns about landowners' roles in maintaining paths and suggestions for better collaboration and enforcement.
- **Examples:**

- Calls for stricter enforcement against landowners who obstruct or neglect paths.
- Suggestions to incentivize landowners and encourage collaboration with farmers.

8. Economic and Community Impact

- **Description:** Comments on the economic value of the rights of way network and its impact on local communities.
- **Examples:**
 - Recognition of the economic contribution of equestrian activities and other user groups.
 - Suggestions to leverage community funds and developer contributions for improvements.

9. Environmental and Biodiversity Considerations

- **Description:** Feedback on balancing access with nature recovery, biodiversity, and sustainable transport.
- **Examples:**
 - Calls for a nuanced approach to vegetation clearance and habitat protection.
 - Suggestions to integrate green infrastructure and biodiversity into planning.

*From 172 responses.

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