



# Rights of Way Improvement Plan

**2023-2033**



## Foreword

Welcome to the Milton Keynes "Rights of Way Improvement Plan", a document designed to set out and guide the Council's priorities, objectives and delivery of the rights of way service and access to the countryside over the next ten years.

The Plan will ensure that our network, consisting of 550 km of public rights of way, meets the present and future needs of all who use it or are affected by it, including residents, visitors and landowners. You have told us what you feel is important, and this has helped us to identify the aims and objectives for the service.

Milton Keynes City Council is a co-operative Council, which means we have a collaborative approach of working together with our partners, local businesses, volunteers, and the local community. This ethos is embedded in the Plan, ensuring the rights of way network contributes to Milton Keynes being a great place to live, work and visit.

The Plan supports Milton Keynes's aim to be the world's greenest and most sustainable city. By encouraging people to replace car journeys with walking or cycling where possible, this will make for a healthy and active place to live.

I look forward to seeing the benefits of this Plan realised within our community.

Councillor Lauren Townsend

## A Dedication to Mike Mellor



To the memory of Michael James Mellor – [1944 – 2001] Rights of Way Officer

The right of the public to access the countryside is well understood, as is the expectation that the network of paths which enable access is appropriately managed by the local authority. Perhaps less well understood is the access we enjoy today is the culmination of many years work and although many have contributed to the service, the pioneering work of the late Mike Mellor is commended for its originality, enduring success and starting when the service was in its infancy.

Milton Keynes City Council became the highways authority in 1997 with the granting of unitary status. Prior to that time statutory rights of way work was undertaken through an agency agreement with Buckinghamshire County Council. The rapidly expanding new town of Milton Keynes had, understandably, a different range of needs and priorities to those of the county council and that formed the basis of Mike Mellor's approach. A clear need was to gain trust and understanding through working with local landowners.

The Rights of Way Headland Maintenance scheme, established in 1992, contracted local farmers and landowners to maintain the paths on their own land. The scheme, which still has over 60 participants, not only proved highly successful in maintaining paths but also engaged the farmers with rights of way and the local community. Since being adopted elsewhere, the scheme is believed to be the first of its kind in England. It continues to engender cooperation and respect to this day and we express gratitude to Mike Mellor for his enduring legacy to Milton Keynes.

Steve Crowther  
Chair of Milton Keynes Local Access Forum

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## 1. Introduction

### Why have a Rights of Way Improvement Plan?

Every local highway authority has a duty under Section 60 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to prepare a 'Rights of Way Improvement Plan' (RoWIP). The RoWIP is the council's strategic document that will evaluate what the priorities are for the rights of way network, what users would like from the service, and how we can improve walking, equestrian and cycling opportunities for all. The Plan, which will be updated every ten years, must assess the extent to which the rights of way network in Milton Keynes meets the present and the future needs of users. It will produce a Delivery and Action Plan setting out how improvements will be managed and delivered.

### The Milton Keynes RoWIP

Our aim is to maximise community use and enjoyment of Milton Keynes's rights of way network and encourage involvement in its ongoing protection and management. We strive to have a network that is well sign posted and maintained, offers easy access to all user types, and provides a safe, sustainable means of travel with good linkages. The RoWIP will help us to ensure that the network is improved, promoted, and valued as a key public asset, capable of meeting the current and future needs of Milton Keynes's communities.



Figure 1. Bridleway travelling through open space

## The process:

The chart below shows the process for formulating the Rights of Way Improvement Plan.

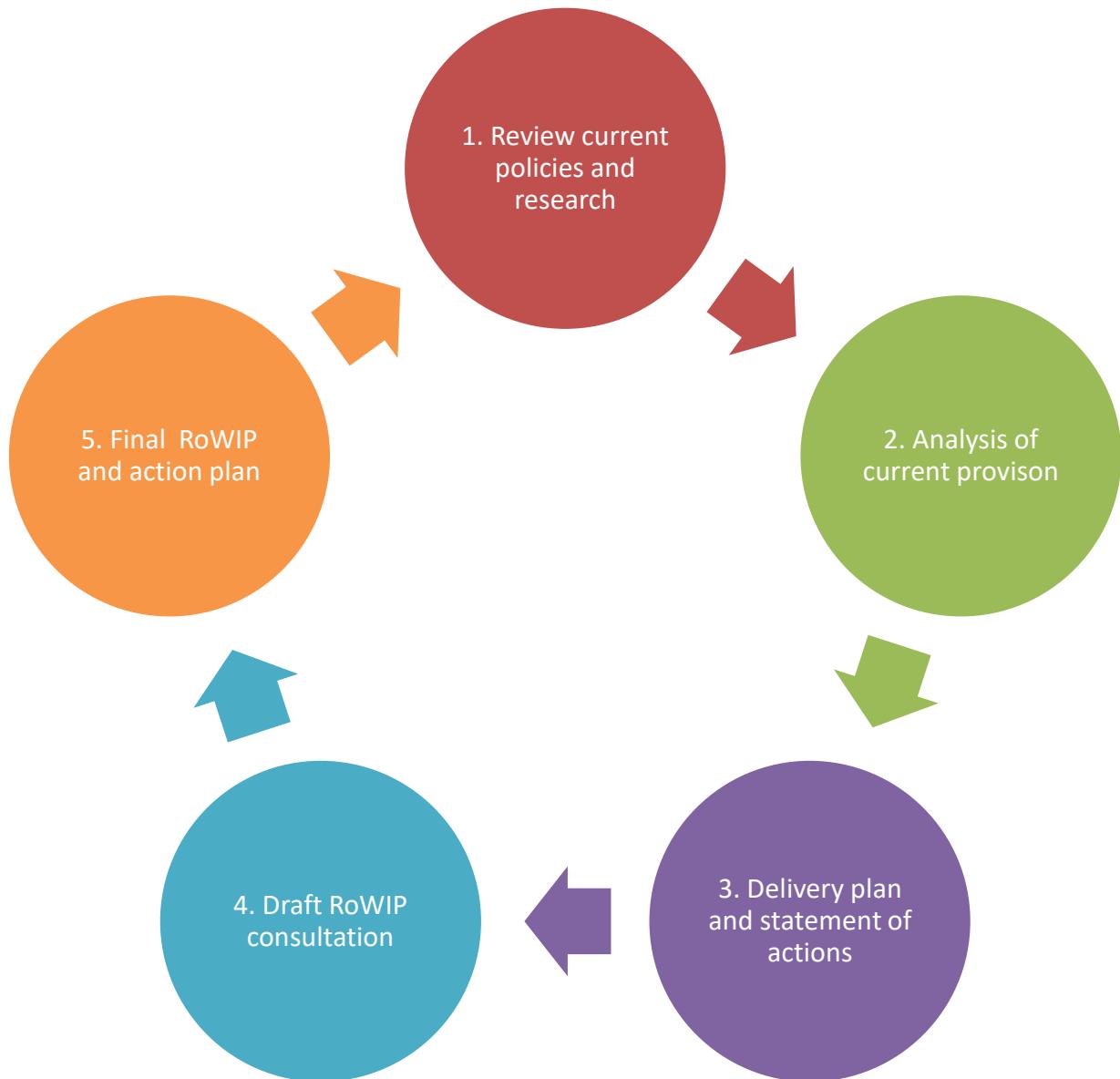


Figure 2. RoWIP process flow

To formulate this Plan, we have reviewed current policies and research, analysed the extent and quality of the existing rights of way network, and considered its future needs.

We have undertaken a consultation with the public, landowners, Town and Parish councils, and stakeholder groups to better understand your views, usage of the public rights of way in Milton Keynes, what is important to you, and how we can improve our network of paths. The results help support the decisions, actions and priorities of the Plan. Detailed public and landowner survey results are in Appendix 2 and 3, and an assessment and summary are below in sections 3 and 6.

We've reviewed and considered the results of our research, analysis, and consultation feedback to produce an Action Plan. This sets out the actions to be taken, by whom, when, and the resources necessary to address the issues identified.

The Action Plan has been produced based on the following three themes, which emerged during analysis:

- **Management**: Addressing accessibility and encouraging access for all, offering a network that is well maintained and fit for purpose.
- **People**: Increasing community use, encouraging healthy lifestyles and wellbeing by providing active travel options, and opportunities for exercise and open-air recreation.
- **Connectivity**: Extending and enhancing the network, and contributing towards more sustainable development.

## Vision

Milton Keynes City Council aims to provide a high quality, well-maintained Public Rights of Way network that is accessible for all, encourages active lifestyles, promotes active travel choices, and supports the local economy, helping make Milton Keynes a great place to work, live and visit.

## What are Public Rights of Way

Milton Keynes has a plentiful network of walking, riding and cycling routes for everybody to enjoy, these are known as public rights of way. A public right of way is a path that anyone has the legal right to use to pass and repass. Although the land may be owned by a private individual, the public have a legal right across that land along a specific route. There are several categories of rights of way:

- Public Footpath: For use on foot.
- Public Bridleway: For use on foot, with a horse, or bicycle
- Restricted Byway: For use on foot, with a horse, a bicycle, or non-mechanically propelled vehicle
- Byway Open to All Traffic: For use on foot, with a horse, a bicycle, or to drive a vehicle

## The Definitive Map

All rights of way are recorded on the Definitive Map, which shows the position of the route, and the Definitive Statement, which describes where the route goes. Together they form the legal record of all rights of way.

The Definitive Map and Statement originated when the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 required all county councils in England and Wales to survey and map all rights of way in their area. This involved researching historic routes that may have been shown on maps for hundreds of years. When the Definitive Map was created there was a national shortage of resources allocated to the task, meaning that some parts of maps were not compiled in appropriate detail, as a result there maybe gaps in the map. The map is used to inform planners, landowners, developers, walkers and riders or anyone interested in access to the countryside.

## Recording historical rights of way

If it is believed a right of way exists; but is not recorded on the Definitive Map, it may be modified if proof can be demonstrated. This may be established by either:

- The analysis of historic maps and other documentary evidence.
- The collation of evidence that a route has been used by the public for an uninterrupted period of 20 years 'as of right' i.e., without force, secrecy or permission.

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 sets a cut-off date of 2031 (originally set at 1 January 2026) for recording historic rights of way on the Definitive Map. This cut-off date only applies to 'historical' rights of way which are claimed to have existed before 1949; the year the first Definitive Map was made, this does not affect claims via the 20 years rule. The intention of this is to provide more certainty to landowners about rights of way crossing their land. Also to the public, about the position and status of routes, and the reliability of the Definitive Map as a true record of rights. The cut-off date has led to an influx in applications for the recording of historic ways being received, and these must be investigated.

We'll produce a Statement of Priorities for keeping the map up to date, offering guidance to those applying to modify the definitive map.

## 2. Review of current policies and research

### Policy and legislation

Access to the natural environment is supported in many national and local strategies, including Milton Keynes' aspiration to be the greenest city in the world. Actions within this Plan will support outcomes of many of Milton Keynes' strategies and plans, including those outlined in Appendix 1.

The importance of the rights of way network is recognised through strong protection in law. An estimated 4000 individual statutes, regulations and judgements have a direct relevance to its protection, use and development. There are also many national and local policies and strategies relevant to the wide-reaching work of the Public Rights of Way service. Some of the most prevalent to this plan are:

### National Policies

- National Planning Policy Framework (July 2021)<sup>1</sup> para. 100: Planning policies and decisions should protect and enhance public rights of way and access, including taking opportunities to provide better facilities for users, for example by adding links to existing rights of way networks including National Trails.
- Rights of Way Circular 1/09 Version 2 Guidance for Local Authorities (Defra, October 2009)<sup>2</sup>: The effect of development on a public right of way is a material consideration in the determination of applications for planning permission and local planning authorities should ensure that the potential consequences are taken into account.

### Local Policies

- MK Sustainability Strategy 2019-2050<sup>3</sup>: a vision for Milton Keynes to be the world's greenest and most sustainable city, achieved in part through replacing car journeys with active travel.
- Plan:MK 2016-2031<sup>4</sup>: Forms part of the Council's Development Plan. Policy CT2 Movement and Access states that development proposals are required to minimise the need to travel, promote opportunities for sustainable transport modes, improve accessibility to services and support the transition to a low carbon future. Policy CT3 supports walking and cycling within Milton Keynes.

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<sup>1</sup> [National Planning Policy Framework - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework)

<sup>2</sup> [Corporate cover and copyright page for consultations \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/)

<sup>3</sup> [2019 01 15 sustainability strategy v4.pdf](https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/assets/documents/2019-01-15-sustainability-strategy-v4.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [Plan:MK 2016-2031 \(milton-keynes.gov.uk\)](https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/plan-mk-2016-2031)

- Milton Keynes Green Infrastructure Strategy 2018<sup>5</sup>: The Plan seeks to connect and enhance the open and green space network of Milton Keynes. (Presently under review for 2023).
- Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) 2021<sup>6</sup>: Sets out how enhancements and connectivity to the walking and cycling provision in Milton Keynes can be achieved.

## Research

### Active Travel - Healthy and active lifestyle choices

There is a growing body of evidence linking access to green and blue spaces and benefits to health and wellbeing. Green spaces are places such as parks, countryside, and woodland, whilst blue spaces include canals, rivers and lakes. The rights of way in Milton Keynes travels through and along all these areas providing essential connections, but the paths themselves also take us right alongside nature, whether it be wild animals amongst hedgerows, singing birds, or wildflowers edging paths. It is a valuable resource available to anybody wishing to use it regardless of age, race or gender. Such places offer the opportunity, now and in the future, to make significant contribution to the health and wellbeing of individuals, communities, and the natural environment.

The RoWIP aims to encourage use of the network through the promotion of these important benefits.

Milton Keynes offers a range of organised walking groups including Nordic walking, dog walks, Rambler walks and the annual Parks Trust Walking Festival, giving people the opportunity to get out and explore. Horse and carriage driving is even a way that people with limited mobility can enjoy the open air and local green space through use of our Byways Open to All Traffic (BOATS). It is acknowledged that the current BOAT provision within Milton Keynes is limited, and therefore shall be considered in future proposals.

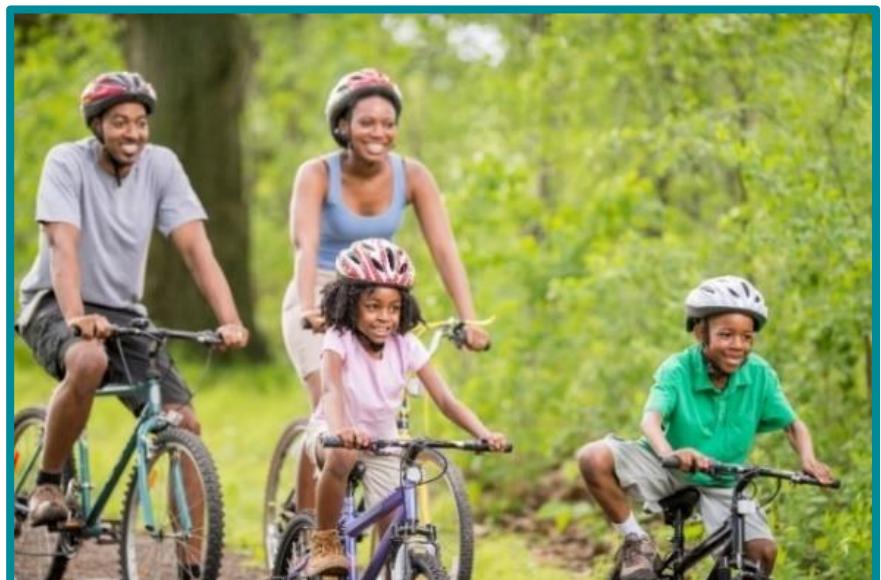


Figure 3. Family enjoying time in the natural environment with a bike ride

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/planning-and-building/planning-policy/green-infrastructure-strategy>

<sup>6</sup> [MKCC LCWIP Report.pdf \(milton-keynes.gov.uk\)](https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/sites/milton-keynes.gov.uk/files/2021-07/MKCC_LCWIP_Report.pdf)

External influences on a large scale can have an effect on the countryside and its use, be it extreme weather patterns, or global or local health matters, there can be massive fluctuations to how we use the countryside and rights of way. Walking, riding, and cycling provide opportunities for many people to improve their health by making physical activity part of everyday life. This is known as Active Travel and refers to the making of everyday journeys in a physically active way.

The Council Plan 2022-2026<sup>7</sup> seeks to ensure Milton Keynes is a place where people can lead healthy, active lifestyles.

Being physically active can reduce risk of major illnesses such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and cancer by up to 50%.

Research shows that physical activity, especially in the natural environment, can also:

- Boost self-esteem, mood, sleep quality and energy,
- Reduce the risk of stress, depression, dementia, and Alzheimer's disease<sup>8</sup>.

Public Health England's strategy 'Health Matters: getting every adult active every day' recommends 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity every week<sup>9</sup>. A community with improved physical and mental wellbeing can reduce pressures on government and local NHS services.

To support the vision of the Council Plan 2022-2026 we will encourage healthy lifestyle choices and active travel by assessing the condition and extent of existing, and potential new, rights of way. We will also work with colleagues in Public Health, Leisure Services, and Health Centres to promote walking and riding for health.

## Active Travel – Investments into the quality of the network

Consideration will be given to home to school initiatives that encourage children to walk or cycle to school where possible. The Milton Keynes Open Space Assessment 2022 reviews the correlation between quality and accessible green spaces for residents, with increased overall levels of physical activity and community wellbeing. It also sets out how the most economically deprived areas often have less available good quality public greenspaces, and how both of these factors impact on child obesity.

We can take these findings and apply them to access to public rights of way. Using spatial data we can map the proximity of schools to public rights of way and identify improvements that would link schools to the wider network, so that children are encouraged to travel to school in a physically active way where possible. The provision and improvement of such links has the potential to offer health benefits to areas currently suffering from poor health.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Council%20plan%202022-2022.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> NHS, 2021, <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/exercise-health-benefits/>

<sup>9</sup> Public Health England. 19/07/2016. [Health matters: getting every adult active every day - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-getting-every-adult-active-every-day)

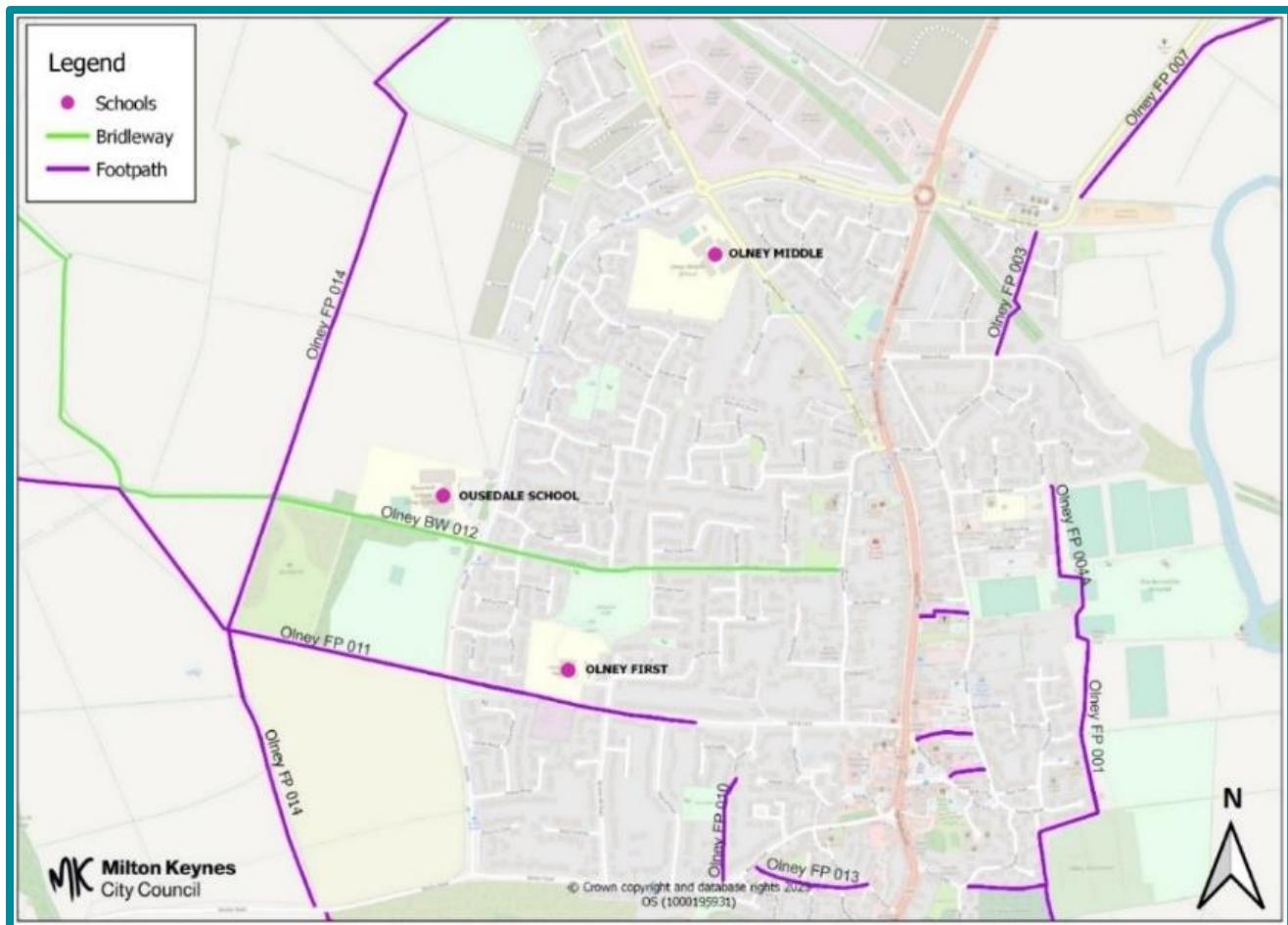


Figure 4. Proximity of rights of way to schools in Olney to help identify routes that may be used for walking or cycling

Investment in rights of way through surface improvements and connectivity are likely to lead to increased usage by a wider range of the community and offer active travel opportunities for journeys such as travelling to work, school or local amenities. This principle has been successfully demonstrated through recent towpath improvement projects by the Canal and River Trust, who were able to prove significant increase in usage compared to the pre-intervention baseline.

The redway network is also often used for active travel. Since many public bridleways travel adjacent to them, we are provided with the opportunity to work closely with the redway team in joint projects to improve the condition, way finding and connectivity of the network, and in turn, contribute to the reduction of carbon emissions in Milton Keynes through sustainable travel.

## Sustainable Travel

Climate change and government goals for significantly reducing emissions means that we must look forward to more sustainable means of transport. The rights of way network can play an important role in being able to provide this through the replacement of vehicular journeys for recreation, work and school with those made on foot, bicycle or horse.

Active travel like this offers significant environmental and health benefits. The replacement of even a small proportion of car journeys by walking or cycling will contribute to a reduction in the levels of congestion and emissions and help us tackle climate change, whilst also improving our health and wellbeing, thus also making this type of travel 'sustainable travel'.

Transport networks need to support and serve new developments and provide good access to other land uses for all residents. If the highway network is to continue to provide and facilitate efficient and safe movement of people and goods, a larger proportion of journeys must be made by more sustainable forms of transport to reduce congestion in a growing city. The 2011 Census identified that 74% of Milton Keynes residents live and work within the Borough. 15% travel less than 2km to work, a reasonable walking distance, and 40% travel less than 5km, a reasonable cycling distance. This suggests a high level of internal local trips and significant potential for modal change to more sustainable modes of travel<sup>10</sup>.

The MK Sustainability Strategy 2019-2050 sets out a vision for Milton Keynes to be the world's greenest and most sustainable city, and the council's Mobility Strategy 2018-2036<sup>11</sup> aims to protect the environment through the maintenance, or improvement of, air quality. The RoWIP supports these visions by working towards providing a rights of way network that is suitable for walkers and cyclists replacing car journeys with active travel.

## Academic research

Exeter University have developed the ORVAL tool<sup>12</sup> for measuring recreational and welfare value of public rights of way, expected yearly visitor numbers and use by social-economic group. Using this tool for Milton Keynes will help identify routes that are predicted to have higher use and therefore investment in these will benefit a larger proportion of the community. It could also help identify who is and who is not using particular paths, so that we can identify and redress any imbalances.

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<sup>10</sup> Mobility Strategy for Milton Keynes 2018-2036 (LTP4) - Transport Infrastructure Delivery Plan October 2019 [Transport Infrastructure Delivery Plan - October 2019.pdf \(milton-keynes.gov.uk\)](https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/documents/10180/10181/Mobility+Strategy+2018-2036+(LTP4)+-+Transport+Infrastructure+Delivery+Plan+-+October+2019.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> [Transport Policy | Milton Keynes City Council \(milton-keynes.gov.uk\)](https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/documents/10180/10181/Mobility+Strategy+2018-2036+(LTP4)+-+Transport+Infrastructure+Delivery+Plan+-+October+2019.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.leep.exeter.ac.uk/orval/>

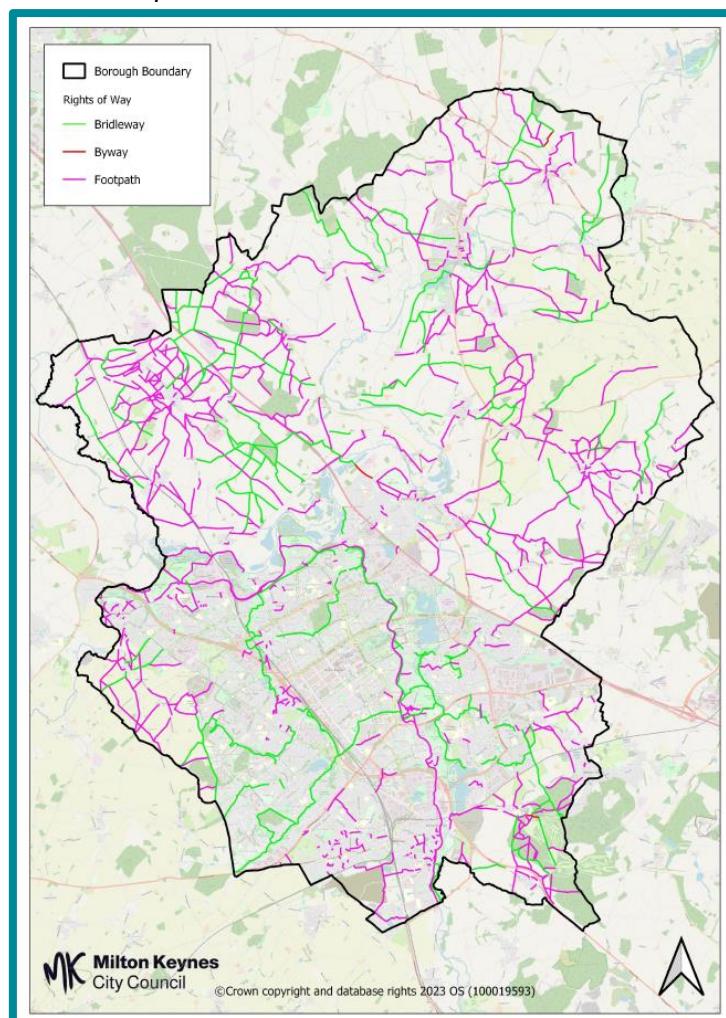
### 3. Analysis of current provision

Rights of way form an important part of the extensive network of green space in Milton Keynes. These spaces provide a wealth of health, social, economic and environmental benefits to our borough. Milton Keynes has 776 public rights of way covering 550km, providing connections across the countryside and city alike. These routes form part of the Highways network that the Council is responsible for maintaining and are made up as follows:

**Public Footpaths:** 356km **Public Bridleways:** 192km **Byways Open to All Traffic:** 2km

The town of Milton Keynes was founded in 1967 with an aim to relieve the housing pressure in London and received 'city' status in 2022. The city was designed on a grid layout, built around 13 existing villages, one of which was the 11<sup>th</sup> century village of Milton Keynes, or 'Middeltone' as it was known at the time.<sup>13</sup>

One of the main reasons for Milton Keynes' success lies in its modern design and integrated open space which offers inter-connections between communities and is central to how Milton Keynes works as a place.



The urban area of Milton Keynes is growing and dynamic, and presently occupies 30% of the borough. The rest is countryside with small towns and villages, offering a mixture of grazing and arable fields, a scattering of woodlands and some open access and common land.

Even within urban Milton Keynes huge land areas are devoted to parks, open spaces, and grazed pasture land, referred to locally as 'the countryside within the city'. There are also 12 lakes and over 50 paddocks, as well as three large ancient woodlands and many smaller woods. They are integrated into the very fabric of the city and this is a key characteristic of Milton Keynes, meaning it does not conform to the classic model of separated urban and open space areas.

Figure 5. Map of Public Rights of Way in Milton Keynes

<sup>13</sup> [About Milton Keynes \(mkinspire.org.uk\)](http://mkinspire.org.uk)

## National Trails, Long Distance paths and promoted routes

There are several local and national trails and promoted routes that travel through Milton Keynes. These offer a way of exploring beyond our own borough to other parts of the UK. These include:

- Midshires Way: 362km of bridleway and quiet lanes, with alternative footpath routes for walkers, travelling from the Ridgeway National Trail through to Stockport.
- Swan's Way: 106km bridleway from Salcey Forest, Northamptonshire to Goring-on-Thames, Oxfordshire.
- North Bucks Way: set up by the Ramblers in 1972, this 55km footpath travels from the Ridgeway, through Aylesbury Vale, to Old Wolverton, Milton Keynes.
- Grafton Way: 21km footpath from Old Wolverton to join the Knightley Way at Greens Norton, Northamptonshire.
- Grand Union Canal Walk: 222km towpath walk from London to Birmingham.
- Milton Keynes Boundary Walk: A 101km circular walk route around the edges of the Milton Keynes borough boundary, travelling through the valleys of the Rivers Tove and Ouse and linking with the Swan's Way at Salcey Forest.

These routes form an important element to the provision of Public Rights of Way in Milton Keynes, bringing people from across the UK to use our network. We'll make sure they remain well sign posted, waymarked and maintained to ensure continued enjoyment to the public.

## Towpaths

The Grand Union Canal winds some 20 kilometres through Milton Keynes. Most of the towpath in the borough is also designated public right of way, and parts have a National Cycle Network along it. Managed by Canal and River Trust, and incorporated as a key feature in the city's distinctive linear park network, they provide visual interest and links to sites of historical and cultural significance. These waterways create attractive environments and contribute to the health and wellbeing of local communities and economies in their uses for active travel and recreation.

As a natural and cultural asset, the towpaths form part of the strategic and local green-blue infrastructure network, linking urban and rural communities as well as habitats. There is a plan to connect up the Grand Union canal to the River Ouse in Bedford, the resultant water way park will provide further access into the countryside<sup>14</sup>.

The towpath offers a flat, accessible type of path, but there are still improvements that can be made to its condition, which we shall work collaboratively with Canal and Rivers Trust to address.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.bmkwaterway.org/>

## Additional types of Access

As well as the Rights of Way network, there are many ways of getting around Milton Keynes. There are other types of route that are not marked on the Definitive Map, but offer further accessibility through the borough and often connect up with public rights of way. Such routes include:

### Horse Trails

The inclusion of horse trails was conceived in the planning of Milton Keynes, these are in addition to the bridleways recorded on the Definitive Map, and cross the city predominantly through Parks Trust land, linking paddocks and large open spaces. The inclusion of such a provision is often cited as an exemplary model of effective urban planning.

### Leisure Routes

There are many leisure routes within the strategic parks network, provided by the Parks Trust, which form part of the overall access enjoyed by the public. Many have a metalled surface, often distinguished by their characteristic golden gravel top coat, whilst others are turf or woodchip paths that travel through grasslands and woodlands, or surfaced paths travelling round lakes.

### Permissive Rights of Way

Permissive routes are paths that hold no legal status other than that the landowner is happy to allow the public to use them. They often link directly to the Public Rights of Way network and access can more readily and flexibly be changed at the landowner's discretion.

### Cycle Tracks

Cycle tracks provide a right of use for pedestrians and cyclists. The National Cycle Network<sup>15</sup> is a network of traffic-free paths, connecting cities, towns and countryside and two of its routes travel through Milton Keynes. Route 6 runs north-south, linking The Peak District, to Northampton, Luton and Outer London, and Route 51 runs east-west, linking Felixstowe, to Bedford and Oxford.

### Unclassified County Roads

These are minor public highways which tend not to be used by normal vehicular traffic and are most often quiet country lanes used by walkers, cyclists and horse riders.

All of the above, as well as extensive roadside footways, link into the wider rights of way network giving access to the city and countryside alike. This, along with good local road and rail systems, makes Milton Keynes an accessible place to visit and get around.

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<sup>15</sup> [The National Cycle Network - Sustrans.org.uk](http://The%20National%20Cycle%20Network%20-%20Sustrans.org.uk)

## Redways

Urban Milton Keynes has a 350km shared use network, known as redways, so called by the use of red tarmac. A redway is a leisure route on public land, separated from motor vehicles making them safer routes for all abilities. They travel through all the parks, and every estate, and into the city centre itself. These pathways are not the same as Public Rights of Way and are managed by their own specialist team and have their own Strategies and Plans. However, they contribute significantly to the walking and cycling provision of Milton Keynes, and are therefore integral to the extent of public access.

Redways currently mainly serve urban Milton Keynes, as shown by the Figure 6 map opposite. However, there are ambitious plans to extend the network to link to rural areas of the borough, mirroring plans set out in this RoWIP for the Rights of Way network.

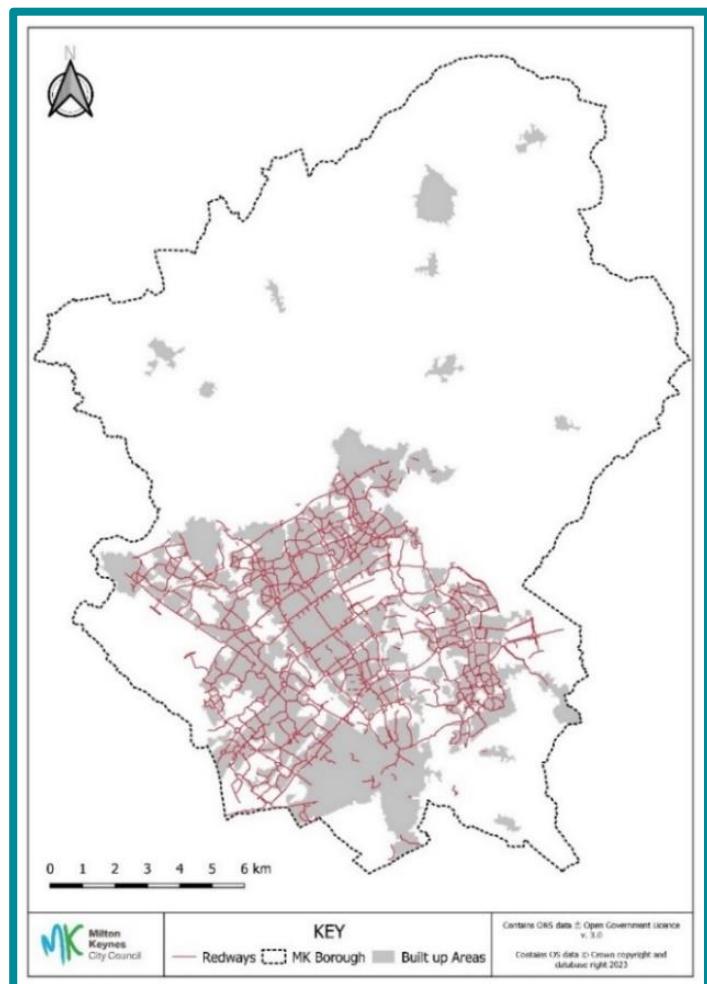


Figure 6. Map of Redways in Milton Keynes

## How do you use Rights of Way in Milton Keynes?

### User and stakeholder survey and research

Between 18th April and 22nd July 2022, we undertook a public and stakeholder consultation which included a user and landowner survey. This was promoted and made available on the council webpage alongside the Draft RoWIP. We received 70 responses to the public user survey, 8 from the landowner survey, and 19 detailed responses on the draft RoWIP from stakeholders including Town and Parish Councils and various user groups such as Ramblers and British Horse Society.

Through the survey and consultation, you told us how you use our rights of way, what is important to you, and what barriers you feel there are in preventing you from accessing the network more often. The results have helped form the Action Points of this Plan and the highlight results are shown below. A similar, smaller, survey was undertaken in 2010, and we can compare some of the results in our recent survey to that one to analyse changes in use.

## 1. How often you visit natural spaces, and barriers to visiting more often

1) When asked how often you visit the countryside, public rights of way or natural spaces we found that 29% visit every day (up from 13% in 2010), 44% visit several times a week (up from 31% in 2010), and only 8% visit once a month or less.

This shows that there has been an increase in usage of people visiting natural spaces on a regular basis, at least weekly, and for many it is part of their daily routine. Nationally, since the Covid pandemic, visits to the countryside and open space increased dramatically, and this appears to have led to a general lifestyle change for many.



29% visit every day



44% visit several times a week



19% visit once a week or several times a month

2) Of those surveyed, 3% never visited the countryside, public rights of way or natural spaces at all and gave reasons including: not feeling safe or confident, can't get there easily or don't have transport, limited mobility or health problems, condition of the path or overgrown vegetation, and too many routes include the need to travel upon a road.

3) 43% felt that they did not get out to natural spaces as much as they'd like. The main reason was being too busy (45%), followed by vegetation issues on paths, too many routes that included the need to walk, ride or cycle on roads, and also the condition of gates, stiles or bridges.

The RoWIP looks to address these issues and discusses how we can try to encourage visits to natural spaces as part of our daily routine. We'll continue to work with landowners, contractors, and volunteers to ensure routes are clear of vegetation. We're also investigating opportunities to provide safe, off-road travel by improving connectivity across the network that reduces the need to travel upon roads.

We are working towards improving the condition of physical structures on our paths, or even removing them entirely where possible. These improvements will lead to a network of paths with greater accessibility to all types of users.



## 2. Where you go and how you get there

1) 56% of respondents said that the place they visited most often was country and linear parks, with only 16% mainly visiting the countryside and even less visiting canal towpaths and woodland.

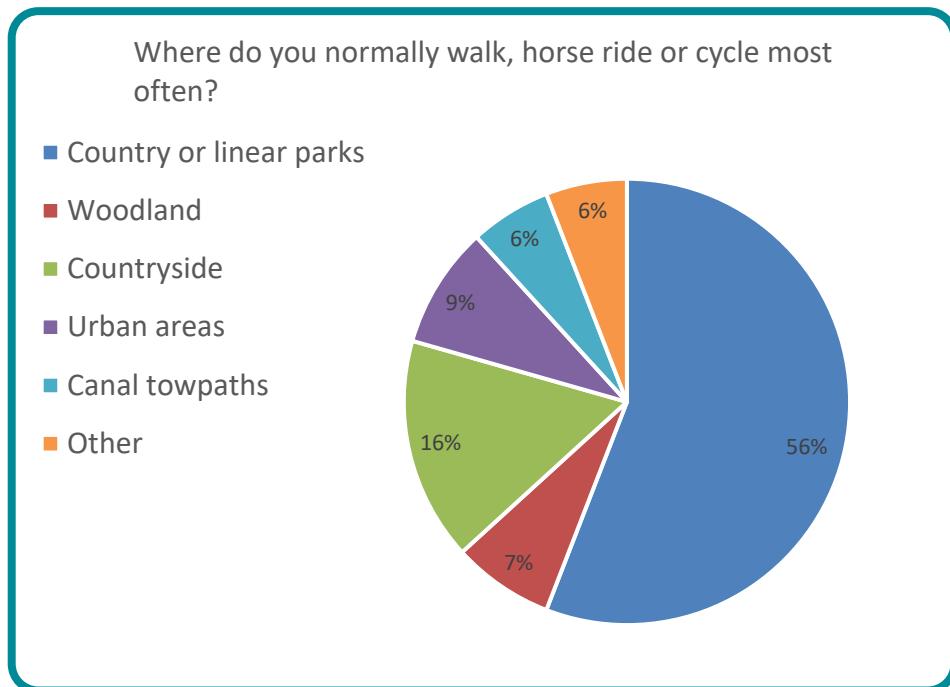


Figure 7. Pie chart to show the places you visit

2) Survey results showed that the distance you travel from home varies. An individual may often travel less than a mile to reach a green space destination, but would also travel over 30 miles. The most common journey length is 1-5 miles, with 51% of respondents travelling this distance to reach their natural space. This indicates people are most likely to visit areas local to them, though only 6% tend to travel within 1 mile and no further. The second most common distance travelled was 5-15 miles and the least common was over 30 miles, with only 10% of people travelling this far.

3) When asked how you usually get from home to the start point of your visit, 51% said you went by car, 28% walk or run, and 21% cycle. None of the respondents said they used public transport to get to the start point of their visit. There are likely to be a variety of reasons behind this including bus routes not travelling to the desired location, or infrequency of service. This could reflect a wider issue in terms of access to green spaces, particularly amongst non-car users. A local initiative which may offer a solution is the 'MK Connect' bus scheme, which is the biggest transport project of its type in the UK. MKCC introduced MK Connect as an affordable service for people who are not served by a bus route, or for when other choices like cycling are not an option.

Users book an MK Connect vehicle when they are ready to travel and share the journey with other people heading in the same direction. The scheme has great potential in offering flexible public transport to allow people access to green space.

### 3. Your knowledge and use of the PRoW network

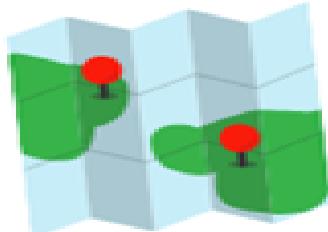
1) Our survey showed that users were not confident about where to find information about public rights of way or how path issues should be reported. We've recently made improvements to the rights of way information pages on the MKCC website and will continue to ensure relevant and up to date information is available, as well as clearly signposting how to report path issues. Historically the reporting of rights of way problems has not been integrated well into the councils 'Report It' system and we're working towards improvements in this area.



2) Our research found that different age groups are likely to visit different types of green and blue space. The 16-25 and 26-35 age groups are most likely to visit country and linear parks. This was also the most popular destination for the 35-54 age group, but this group were also likely to visit countryside and woodland, and the 55+ age group were likely to visit a mixture of country and linear parks, countryside and towpaths.

Since we've learnt that, of those surveyed, the majority mainly visit country and linear parks, with relatively few visiting the countryside, woodland, and canal towpaths it indicates that there is potential to encourage more exploring of our natural spaces and trying somewhere new. This highlights again the importance of well defined paths with clear signage to give people confidence they are on the right route.

3) Our research also found that different age groups use different methods to decide where to visit natural spaces. The 16-25 and 26-35 age groups were most likely to use a mobile app or GPS, or to follow a path and see where it went. Whereas the 55+ age group were far less likely to use these means, instead they would use a map, leaflet or join an organised walk.



We plan to produce on-line walking, riding and cycling guides and maps for free download on our website for our most popular routes. This will offer the opportunity to try out a selection of new routes without the need to purchase maps. In turn, the concept of exploring somewhere new may ignite the imagination to continue finding other new walks and rides in Milton Keynes. Every public footpath, bridleway and byway in Milton Keynes is digitally mapped and available to view via the MKCC website. This mapping can also be viewed using mobile phones meaning that you can check that you are on the right path when you are out and about using the public rights of way, or to explore what routes are nearby to you.

## 4. Your reasons for using the PRoW network and what's important to you

- 1) 91% of you told us that walking was one of the main reasons you gave for visiting green spaces. 46% included cycling in your visit and 18% included running. Other reasons given included encounters with nature and e-scooting.
- 2) We wanted to know what features are important to you during your visit. 71% of all respondents cited wildlife as being an important part of their visit (this was also the most important feature when asked in our 2010 survey), and 68% cited circular routes. Car parking, well signposted routes, sites of interest, and facilities such as seats and toilets were also included as being important features of your visit. Hard surfaces, information boards, access by public transport and special events were seen as having less importance. Whilst access for the disabled or those with mobility issues scored relatively low with those who undertook the public user survey, MKCC is dedicated to offering improved access for all across our rights of way and this is a prevalent theme throughout the RoWIP.



*Seeing wildlife is a very important aspect of your visit*

## 5. Your suggestions how rights of way could be made more accessible for all

Your feedback told us that some of you experience issues whilst walking your dogs and that adjustments to some structures would offer you more access opportunities. Suggestions also came forward about how to improve and advertise the accessibility of routes.

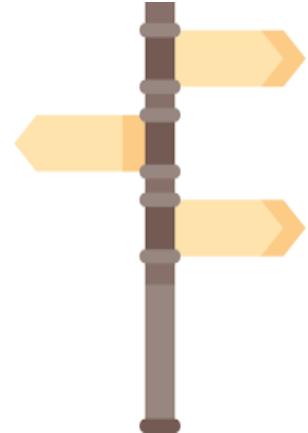
Below is a sample of what you said:

- Consider dog walkers by removing stiles where possible. *"When I walk the dog, I have to avoid some routes with high stiles as we can't get over them, more accessibility there would be useful"*
- More consideration to wheelchair users through provision of suitable surfaces, wider gates, parking spaces near PRoW entrances, more information on websites about accessible routes. *"More wheelchair friendly access gates. Parking spaces near entrances to RoW. More information on websites or social media about accessible routes."*
- Have a system for rating how accessible a route is. *"Suggestions on how hard the routes are I know not all are suitable to people with mobility issues maybe a rating system"*
- Opportunities to rest, sit down, or have a picnic. *"More seats for those who need to stop more"*
- Ensure paths are well maintained. *"Better maintained non concrete paths, keeping the paths natural but accessible during wetter weather"*

## 6. Improvements you think would be benefit our rights of way network

We received some useful suggestions for how our rights of way can be improved, a summary is shown below.

- To encourage more walking and cycling between rural villages and urban Milton Keynes, improved access is required that offers joined up routes which avoid roads. *"You need to consider access from places in MK that are further out, such as Hanslope and Castlethorpe. In order to encourage more walking and cycling, safer cycle routes need to be put into place from the villages. At the moment I would not consider cycling on the roads as it is too dangerous."*
- Cycle parking to be provided in villages to discourage the reliance on cars for journeys. *"Cycle parking in the villages to encourage people not to just drive to places, but walk or run."*
- Verges could be better utilised to provide safe links. *"Could cycling paths be put into place on the verges between the villages and Milton Keynes."*
- Better sharing of information with Parishes about how they can assist with local matters. *"Info on how to improve an overgrown right of way and whether the parishes can help"*
- Ensure signage is well maintained. *"Replacement of removal or fallen waymark posts in countryside areas".*
- More litter bins along footpaths. *"Littering is the main issue I have - the amount of rubbish people just throw on the ground is staggering"*
- More signage advising users of their responsibilities *"More signage advising all users of their responsibilities i.e. dog/horse fouling"*  
*"More information regarding the rules , maybe a GR code on a notice board so people can scan it and get more information on what is allowed in that specific area."*  
*"Clearer marking of which RoW or other paths can be used, or not used, by which category of user in rural areas - including more information on meaning of waymarks. This should include electric scooters."*



## How the Natural Environment is utilised in our region

Natural England's national survey 'Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment' (MENE)<sup>16</sup> provides trend data for how people use the natural environment in England.

The table below shows time spent in the natural environment in Milton Keynes compared to our neighbouring authorities. The survey shows that, in comparison to the areas immediately surrounding Milton Keynes, we have the lowest number of visits to the natural environment per person, and the lowest duration of visits, being 45 minutes below the national average.

	Visits to natural environment 2018-19	Average visits per person 2018-2019	Average duration (mins) 2018-2019
Milton Keynes	16,262,000	86	93
Northampton	49,786,000	90	112
Bedford	Data not available	Data not available	122
Central Beds	19,024,000	93	100
Buckinghamshire	42,670,000	108	114
National Average	Data not available	90	138

Table 1. Upper tier local authority results for visits to the natural environment

We'll investigate these findings further to understand why this may be. Is it possible that residents of Milton Keynes have a different perception of what or where the natural environment is? Open and green space in Milton Keynes is so embedded within the city and throughout the borough that we may take it for granted.

In the period 2009-2019 MENE<sup>17</sup> data for Milton Keynes also tells us that:

- Visits to the natural environment are split equally between town and countryside locations by those who live here. However, visits to the natural environment made by people from outside the borough are mainly to visit the town.
- There is an average spend of only £3.99 during a visit, mainly spent on food and drink.
- 73% of visits to are made on foot and most likely to be within a mile of home.
- A mixed age range visits the natural environment, but the predominant age is 35-54
- Visits by the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups only account for 11% of visits, though this is the highest value from our surrounding neighbouring authorities. (Bedfordshire 9%, Buckinghamshire 6%, Northamptonshire 3%).
- The top reason for visits is for health and exercise, and the main reasons for not visiting is being busy at work, followed by being busy at home and poor health.

We'll use the above as a benchmark for increasing the number and duration of visits year on year.

<sup>16</sup> Natural England (2018) Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment Headline Report [Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment: Headline report and technical reports 2018 to 2019 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/monitor-of-engagement-with-the-natural-environment-headline-report-and-technical-reports-2018-to-2019)

<sup>17</sup> [Monitoring Engagement in the Natural Environment Survey \(2009 - 2019\) \(arcgis.com\)](https://www.arcgis.com)

## 4. Challenges and solutions

It is clear that challenges exist that are preventing the public making full use of the access opportunities the rights of way network has to offer. We need to understand these challenges so that we can plan how they can be overcome or minimised.

### 1. Physical and perceived barriers to use

#### Challenge

The generally gentle nature of the landscape in Milton Keynes means the rights of way network is relatively easy to use for outdoor access and recreation. Despite this there are still large numbers of residents who do not take advantage of our footpaths and bridleways. Our user survey research and MENE data reveals that time limitations and poor health are among the main reasons in Milton Keynes for not visiting the natural environment. It is also clear that various physical features along routes can prevent or limit usage.

This Plan recognises that access to the countryside may be difficult for a range of different groups and individuals within our community due to:

- Physical barriers such as stiles, gates, steps, narrow or overgrown paths, or uneven surfacing.
- Absence of knowledge or lack of information about the countryside, including poor rights of way signage and 'waymarking'.
- Mobility issues, disabilities, being visually impaired, being an older person, or young child who may find difficulties in using some structures.
- Transport difficulties or lack of transport.
- Concerns over personal safety and security in an unknown environment.
- Health reasons
- Road and rail crossings which are perceived too hazardous to use with children or on horseback.

#### Solution

Barriers to use will be explored throughout this Plan. The RoWIP looks at how physical features can be upgraded or even removed where possible to improve accessibility and make routes more suitable for all abilities and ages. A programme to refresh damaged and faded signage will be undertaken to ensure waymarks and fingerposts are clearly visible on approach to give people confidence they're on the right route and to aid those that are visually impaired. Connectivity improvements are discussed along with new, innovative public transport options in Milton Keynes which make getting to, and using, the network easier. We also explore how rights of way can contribute to improved physical and mental health, and finally how our work with developers can achieve safer road and rail crossings.

## 2. Condition of the network

### Challenge

Bi-annual condition surveys are undertaken of 5% of the network every year to help us assess a route's 'ease of use'. These are known as Best Value Performance Indicators or BVPI's.

The surveys help us to monitor and measure the condition of the rights of way network on a regular basis and helps inform spending decisions. BVPI surveys are split between May and November to take account of different land use practices at different times of year. The pie chart below shows the percentage of each type of issue found during surveys over recent years.

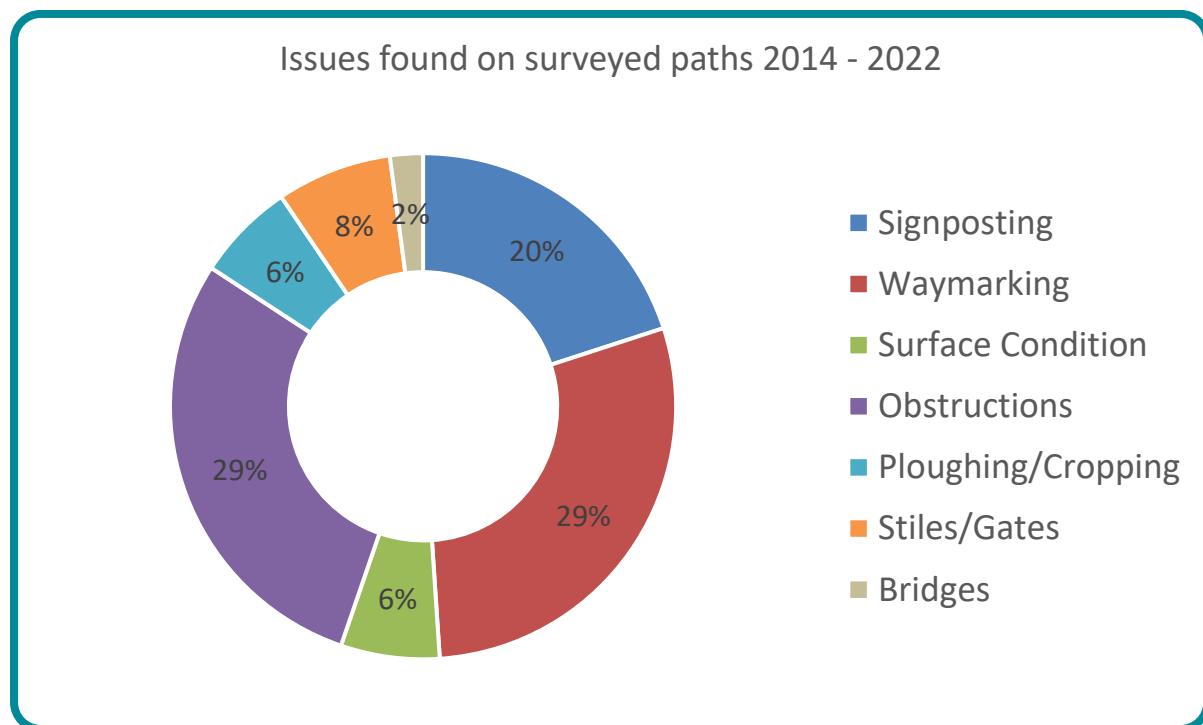


Figure 8. Percentage split of issues encountered

The results show us that in the period 2014-2022 the most common problems recorded on paths during the surveys were:

1. Missing or faded waymarkers; and obstructions (accounting for almost a third each of total problems)
2. Missing or faded roadside fingerposts
3. Condition of stiles and gates

## Solution

1. Ensure landowners understand their responsibilities regarding overhanging or encroaching vegetation
2. Work with landowners and volunteers to keep paths clear and usable
3. Undertake a programme to record and replace faded and missing waymarking and fingerposts across the network
4. Undertake a programme to replace stiles with gates where possible. Work towards this has already begun and in 2022 BVPI survey results showed that an average of 73% of the Milton Keynes rights of way network was deemed “easy to use”, which was the highest ever recorded and we’ll continue to strive to improve on this.
5. Develop Prioritisation Policy to assist us in prioritising reports and issues on the network. This will provide the public with estimated timeframes on when they can expect their reported issue to be investigated, and will assist the rights of way team with the management of reported problems.

## 3. Maps and guides

### Challenge

Access to maps and guides, whether paper based or electronic, is vital if people are to access the rights of way network. Ordnance Survey maps provide a great deal of information, but they require a certain level of skill and practice to use correctly and are not free.

### Solution

Consultation responses showed us that, in general, different age groups use different methods to access mapping. Guides to individual routes can be clearer to understand than O.S maps and can contain additional information about the walk or ride, adding historical or other points of interest. Information should be tailored for different user abilities and in a range of accessible formats, both in terms of cost and legibility.

We will carry out a review of all our promoted and circular walks and make maps and information about them available on our website for digital download. We’ll re-energise the boundary walk, a route which travels around the perimeter of the entire borough and so serves the whole community. We will recommend routes that offer greater accessibility, as well as those with access to facilities such as toilets, parking or good public transport links.

## 4. Fragmentation of the network

### Challenge

Unfortunately, we do not have a rights of way network that currently offers full off-road connectivity. This means that often roads or road verges must be used to connect one footpath or bridleway with another. There are some instances where this may be undesirable, inconvenient, or unsafe for the user. Our public survey told us that the need to walk, ride or cycle upon a road was the third top reason given for not visiting open spaces as often as you would like.

Equestrians would welcome more off-road provision because horses may spook when vehicles pass by them. There are estimated to be around 3 million horse riders in UK, and in 2019 the economic value of the equestrian sector was around £4.7 billion, up from £4.3 billion in 2015<sup>18</sup>. The horse-riding industry includes those that ride for relaxation, attend riding schools, cross country events, endurance rides and carriage driving. All these riders, as well as walkers and cyclists, require safe off-road routes to enjoy the countryside which in turn offers them the opportunity to contribute to the rural economy.

The British Horse Society collects data of road incidents involving horses. Nationally, between November 2010 and December 2021 there were 8,561 road incidents reported which involved horses, in which 44 people died, 1,453 were injured and 502 horses died and 1,311 injured. 85% of incidents occurred because a vehicle passed by too closely to the horse, 75% because a vehicle passed by too quickly.<sup>19</sup>

Fragmentation also occurs through a lack of interconnecting paths allowing the user to travel easily from one location to another, for example, to be able to walk, ride or cycle from central Milton Keynes out to rural villages.



Figure 9. It is important to provide safe, off-road travel for equestrians

### Solution

Improving connectivity of the network can lead to a reduction in the need to travel upon roads, thus providing a safer journey for users. We shall examine routes which rely on highways to link footpaths or bridleways, and work with colleagues and landowners to improve safety and accessibility where possible. Mapping analysis of the density of the rights of way network, as made available by Natural England<sup>20</sup>, can be used to assist

<sup>18</sup> BETA National Equestrian Survey 2019 [British Equestrian Trade Association - National Equestrian Survey 2019 provides optimistic view of industry \(beta-uk.org\)](https://beta-uk.org/)

<sup>19</sup> British Horse Society Safety Team, BHS RoWIP consultation response 15.09.2022

<sup>20</sup> Natural England Green Infrastructure Map [Green Infrastructure Map \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](https://naturalengland.org.uk/)

in identifying network fragmentation. The map below highlights areas in pale blue where there are no or very limited rights of way.

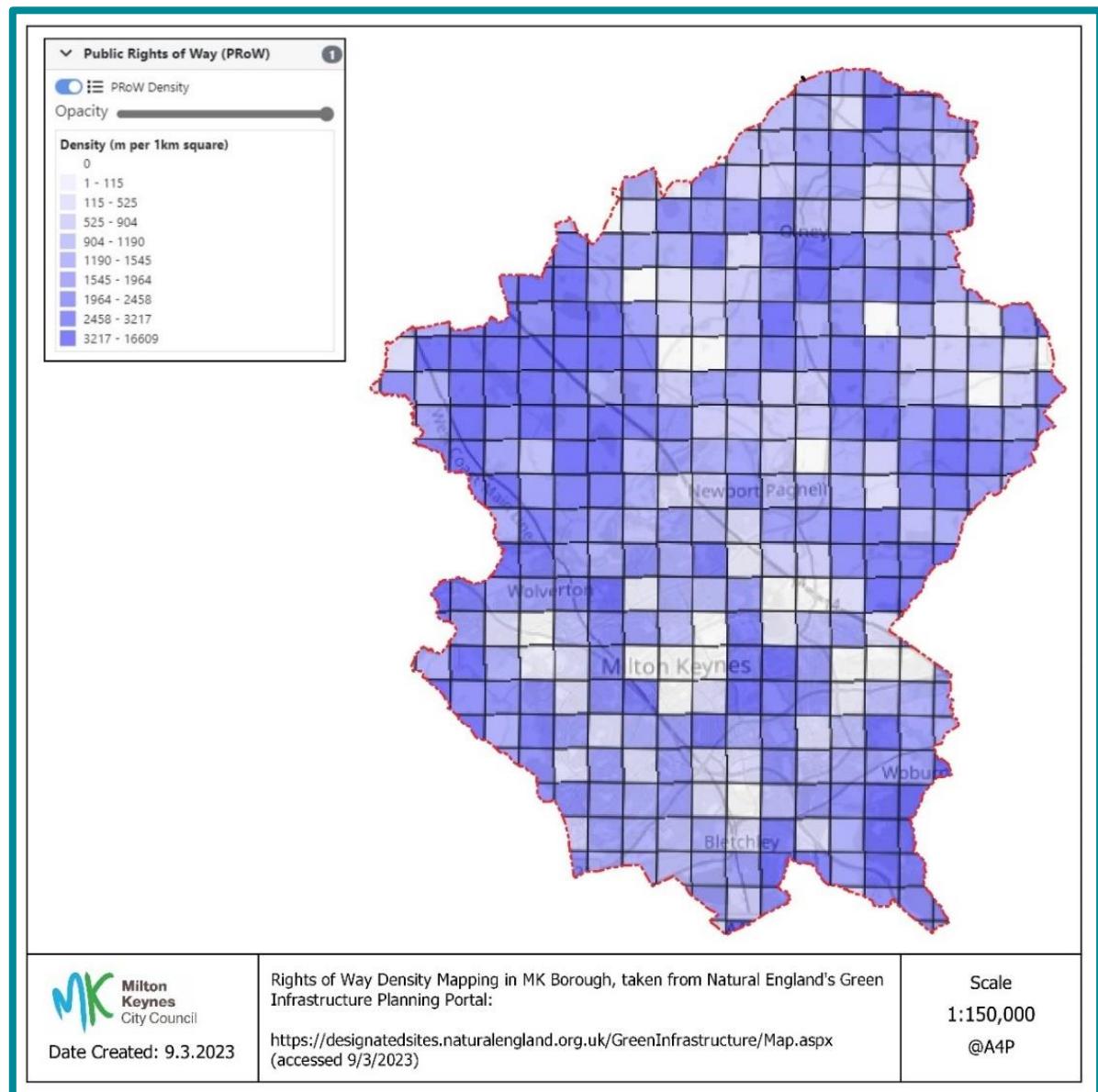


Figure 10. Map to show density of PRoW network in Milton Keynes

We'll seek opportunities to improve the network by using this map, the Definitive Map, and local knowledge to identify and fill critical missing links that will:

- Offer new connections between existing rights of way that will improve access for riders, cyclists, and pedestrians.
- Create links between urban and rural areas.
- Reduce the need to use roads currently acting as links between routes.
- Provide highway verge improvements where road connections are required.
- Better connect the rights of way network to the wider highway network and countryside.
- Provide multi-use routes that will allow access to all users where possible.

Spatial mapping data can also be used for cross-collaboration with neighbouring authorities and relevant landowners to identify missing links in the network across boundaries. The dashed black line on the map in figure 6 shows a dead-end public footpath within the Milton Keynes boundary which is approximately 100m away from a public bridleway within the Northamptonshire border.

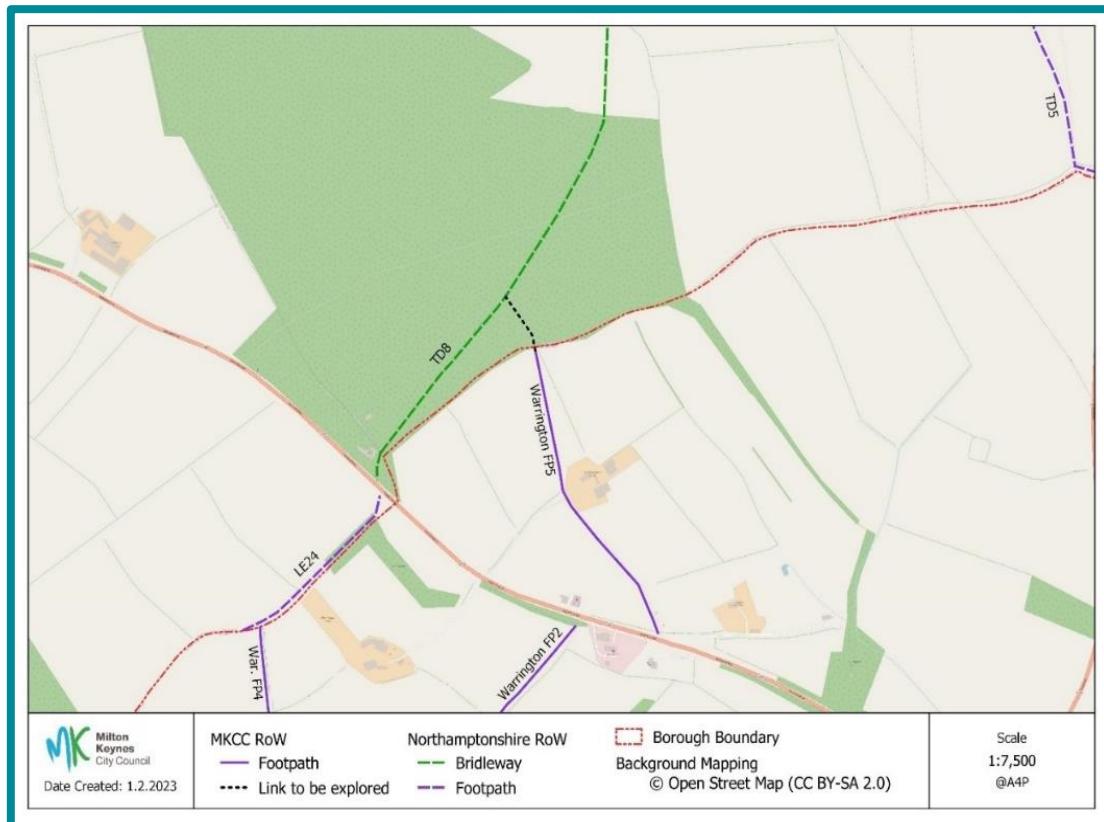


Figure 11. Map showing missing right of way link at the Milton Keynes and Northamptonshire border

The inclusion of a short missing link such as this would open up the network to offer better connectivity throughout and across the borders of the Borough. Such links could create circular routes and better facilities for path users, including dog walkers, runners, cyclist, and horse riders for leisure and health.

Additional network links can also be achieved and funded through the Planning process, by landowner dedication, permissive paths, diverted routes, verge improvements, and adding new paths to the Definitive Map. All these will all help towards a better connected rights of way network. There's scope to also give consideration to the 'horse trail' network (not public bridleways) that travel across the central Milton Keynes area, mainly upon Parks Trust land, to see if there would be benefit in adding these to the Definitive Map.

We'll also positively engage in the "Slow Ways" national project which is working towards creating an off-road walking network that links towns, cities and villages, essentially connecting up walking routes throughout the UK<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> <https://ravenellison.com/portfolio/slow-ways/>

## Other studies which assist the analysis of network accessibility

### Milton Keynes Green Infrastructure Strategy 2018

The RoWIP will seek to enhance connectivity to the network in line with aims set out in this strategy, which is to connect and enhance the open and green space network of Milton Keynes. Using spatial data, we can identify where areas of green infrastructure are, and where there are missing links.

### The Milton Keynes Open Space Assessment report

This document looks at current accessibility to open spaces through analysis of: general access to sites, pedestrian and cycle links, parking provision and disabled access. Maps have been produced to show the open space types and areas served by accessible routes within 400m of any of the open spaces in the borough. This study will assist us in further analysis of the accessibility of the rights of way network.

### The Local out Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) 2021

This plan sets out how redways across the borough can be upgraded, extended and created to fill in critical missing links throughout and between Milton Keynes's urban and rural areas. The concepts of the Plan mirror the ambitions of this RoWIP in providing improved connectivity for the areas that need it the most. Some Public Rights of Way routes have been identified as forming part of the plans in the LCWIP so we will work closely with the redway team to protect and enhance both of these path networks appropriately.

## 5. Conflict between users

### Challenge

Conflicts can occur when different users, with differing needs, share a route. One example is cyclists and horse riders who share paths but may travel at different speeds to each other, require different clearances past obstacles, or require different surface dressings. There can also be issues on towpaths, where the sharing of a narrow route between those on foot and those on bicycles can cause conflict.

### Solution

Knowledge sharing is key and we will work with local groups so that common goals can be achieved. We will promote codes of conduct to ensure walkers, equestrians and cyclists can share a route harmoniously and safely. The British Horse Society have produced guidance "Avoiding Conflict"<sup>22</sup> detailing how equestrians can co-exist with cyclists, motorists, and other users. They

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<sup>22</sup> Avoiding Conflict Oct 2019 [conflict-1122.pdf](http://conflict-1122.pdf) (bhs.org.uk)

have also teamed up with Cycling UK to promote the “Be Nice Say Hi” campaign<sup>23</sup> which provides advice on how cyclists and horse riders should pass each other safely both on and off road, both of which we will signpost users to. Advice on appropriate use, behaviours and types of use on towpaths will need to be promoted through collaboration with Canal and Rivers Trust.

We are currently trialling a new, innovative surface type, which is a bound rubber crumb. This product is suitable as a multi-use surface, meaning that equestrians, cyclists and walkers can each have their needs met by one surface type. Equestrians and cyclists can likewise be easily separated in Milton Keynes due to our redway cycling network, which often have bridleways travelling adjacently, on their own path. This means the two users are safely separated. We'll continue to work with the redways team to offer this facility for new routes where it is possible.

## 5. Opportunities

Milton Keynes City Council’s Rights of Way team are committed to working to deliver the positive outcomes identified in the RoWIP and have looked for innovative ways to improve the rights of way network in the face of financial challenges. We aim to seek opportunities to extend the network to provide a safe, sustainable means of travel. This in turn delivers the benefits that access to the countryside and green spaces can make to improve the quality of life for residents and visitors. The Plan will help us to ensure that the network is improved, promoted and valued as a key public asset, capable of meeting the current and future needs of Milton Keynes’s communities.

### Sustainable development and meeting present and future demand

The effect of a development on a right of way is a material planning consideration and the importance of working with developers and the MK Planning team is paramount to mitigate the effects of planned development. The rights of way in Milton Keynes make it an attractive place to live and visit. Though as it continues to grow due to development, so is the likelihood that the route and character of the rights of way network will be affected.

The significant pace of growth in Milton Keynes places pressure on the Rights of Way service, but it also provides opportunities to secure improvements to the network including connectivity, surface enhancements, and asset renewal.

Through Plan:MK, Milton Keynes City Council has set an ambitious growth target of at least 26,500 new homes by 2031. Land to accommodate the majority of this growth has already been identified through the completion of the city grid squares, the Eastern and Western Expansion Areas and land south east of Milton Keynes. Some of the public rights of way travelling through developed land will be historical, and form part of the heritage of an area. In the new area of MK East for example,

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<sup>23</sup> Cycling UK Be Nice Say Hi campaign ‘Be Nice, Say Hi’ Cycling UK and BHS guidance for cyclists and horses | Cycling UK

the once rural, agricultural paths between Newport Pagnell and Moulsoe are now incorporated into large new developments, as shown in Plan:MK's Strategic Development map in figure 12 below.

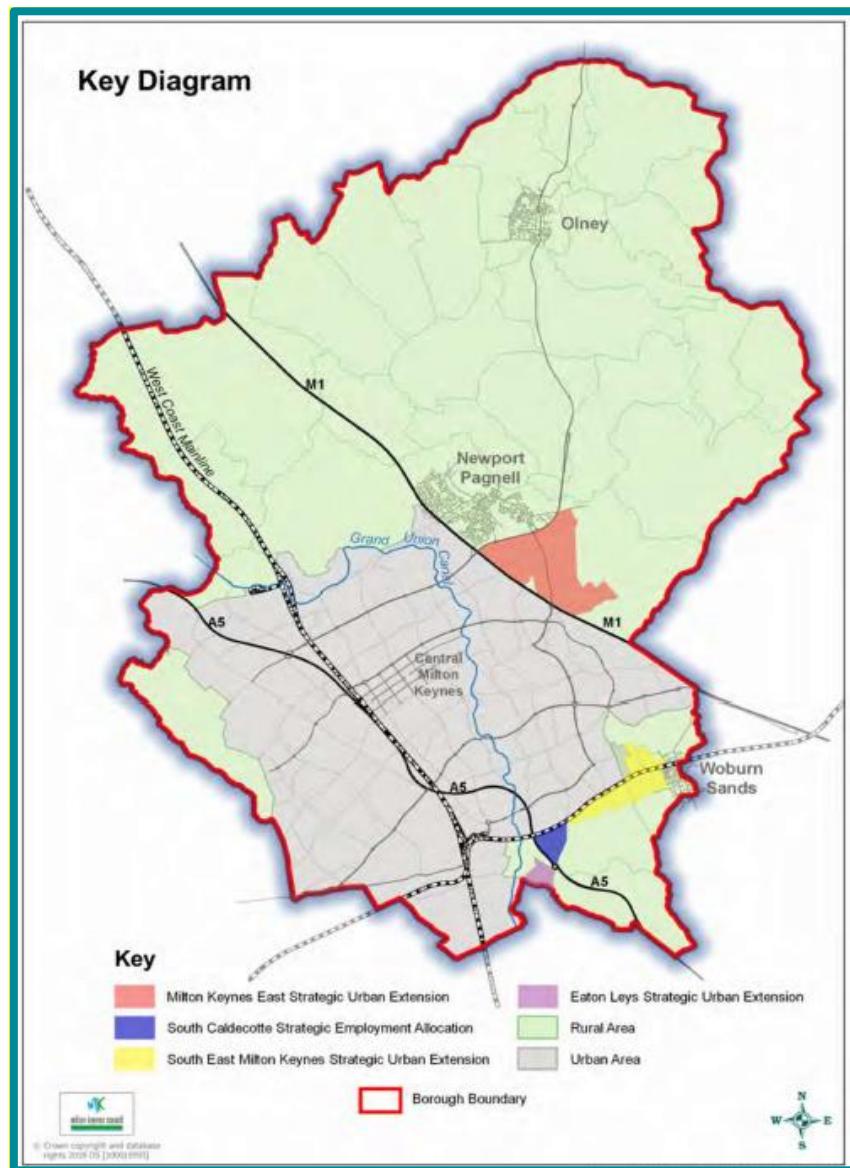


Figure 12. Strategic development map of Milton Keynes. Plan:MK 2016-2031

As Milton Keynes continues to expand, a growing trend is emerging; Communities that once lived on the urban fringe, with easy and quick access to the countryside, are now firmly surrounded by new development.

National and local policies set out how local authorities should protect and enhance the existing path network and take opportunities to add new linkages. It is important that existing good connections to the natural environment remain intact and that any named local or national promoted route in Milton Keynes, that may have historically travelled through open, natural space, are not adversely affected by planned development. An example is the North Bucks Way where the route travels in the new areas of Whitehouse and Fairfields and utilises a busy road that was once a quiet country lane. The Ramblers and Rights of Way team are working collaboratively with the developer on finding a solution to this.

The maps below show how the environmental setting of the rights of way within the new Parish of Whitehouse has changed over time. Public footpaths are shown in purple, they once travelled through grazed and arable fields and are now within a large developed area.



Figure 13. Rights of way adjacent to Crownhill and Two Mile Ash in a rural setting in 1990 (left) and within the built environment in 2020 (right)

We recognise that the nature of Milton Keynes expanding in this way means that the standards of new paths are improved over and above their historical context. Therefore, future maintenance costs should be secured through the Planning process.

Although the environment of a footpath may change over time, that is not to say it cannot benefit from these changes. With good design, historic routes can be maintained and cherished as part of planned development. A footpath or bridleway can enhance and give character to a new settlement by providing green corridors through the development and links to the countryside.

Developments should:

- At the early design stage, consider existing rights of way and how access can be retained, enhanced, and extended to mitigate for any loss resulting from development.
- Consider walkers, equestrians and cyclists through the provision of adequate natural or open spaces and safe road crossings.
- Seek to utilise new or existing natural features for routes such as parks, woodland, and rivers.
- Avoid simply routing a public footpath along an estate road footway.
- Consider the creation of new routes designed for multi-use where possible, allowing equal access for walkers, cyclists and equestrians with surfaces and widths suitable for sharing.
- Promote the rights of way network as a free natural resource available to all new residents.
- Adhere to Milton Keynes Rights of Way design standards for widths, surfaces, and structures for affected public rights of way.

It is important to consider the whole network from a multipurpose perspective that satisfies a wide range of local transport needs.

The network links communities together and is as important for those making journeys for recreation, as it is for those making them for school, work, visiting shops and other local amenities. Active travel opportunities replacing car journeys should come in the form of direct, and potentially surfaced, routes. But those using paths for recreation and exercise, or simply walking the dog, often like to use circular routes and may prefer quieter, more natural landscapes away from roads.

The importance of these different purposes is recognised and both broad types of usage - paths for daily journeys or paths for pleasure and recreation, also require connectivity to provide useful and attractive walking and riding opportunities. The network is no longer regarded as simple leisure routes; it has evolved over time and must cater for those who use the links for all types of journey.

Large, national infrastructure projects can impact on rights of way. One such local example is the East West Rail scheme, which will re-establish a rail link between Cambridge and Oxford to improve connections between East Anglia and central, southern and western England. Some public rights of way in Milton Keynes crossing the rail track will be affected by the project, and we will continue to engage positively with Network Rail on this.

## **Supporting the rural economy and safe off-road travel**

Good rural leisure facilities contribute to the rural and visitor economy of Milton Keynes.

Important linkages between urban and rural areas will be investigated in conjunction with strategic transport plans to allow easy access to and from the countryside, helping people to explore without the need to travel. These types of routes can be used regularly for exercise whilst also offering access to rural businesses, pubs and shops. We will identify and promote priority routes with consideration to areas of high density and well-used rights of way, as well as their proximity to populated areas. The priority of a route will help to inform funding and improvement decisions.

## **Remove physical barriers to use**

It is sometimes necessary to have a structure such as a stile or gate across a right of way for stock-proofing purposes. However, structures can be a large barrier to access. In our public user survey, we found that limited mobility and the condition of gates and stiles contributed to you not visiting green spaces as often as you'd like.

People with mobility issues, disabilities, visually impaired, older people, or young children may find difficulties in using some structures. But the presence of a stile or certain gates can also inhibit the most agile of users. A stile is likely to be a barrier for those accompanied by a dog, making paths inaccessible to some of our most regular walkers. Likewise, for those taking a child out in a

pushchair, a stile is impossible to negotiate, but so are small kissing gates. Bridleway gates which close too fast, have inadequate opening mechanisms, or insufficient width may deter horse riders and cyclists.

Adjusting their design, or removing them altogether, will result in improved access for all. This is described as offering the 'least restrictive access' option. The location of a structure needs to be considered when deciding what is most suitable. It will be most beneficial to focus on offering least restrictive access at the edges of populated areas. We'll consider the local usage of routes, engage with disability groups, and audit and promote the rights of way which are suitable for use by those with restricted mobility or additional access needs.



Figure 14. Large accessible kissing gates can be used by those with some mobility scooters, and pushchairs

The RoWIP sets out to reduce the number of structures across rights of way where possible with consideration to the following:

- At field boundaries a gap is the preferred option if no livestock are present.
- Where stock-proofing is required, negotiations will be entered into with the landowner to replace wooden stiles with steel self-closing gates. Large kissing gates can be fitted with RADAR key locks that enable the gate to open fully, providing a straight line path through the gateway, which helps wheelchair and mobility scooter users.
- Gates alone are preferable, but if kissing gates (which have added hoops for additional stock-proofing) are required then this can be considered. This approach will benefit the public in terms of better access for all types of user and landowners will also benefit from reduced maintenance requirements.
- Ensure all new gates conform to BS5709 (2018) or any standard which supersedes.

Recent site inspection data tells us that of a 25% survey of the Milton Keynes network, only 56% of stiles were in a good or acceptable condition, whereas 98% of steel gates were in a good or acceptable condition. This information further supports the transition of stiles to gates where possible. Other physical barriers may include uneven or poorly maintained surfaces and overgrown vegetation, both of which will also be considered when making accessibility improvements.

## Removing other barriers to use

Natural England's MENE data tells us that time limitations and poor health are the main reasons in Milton Keynes for not visiting the natural environment<sup>24</sup>. This is supported by our own research which told us being 'too busy' was the top reason for not visiting open spaces as often as you would like. This shows that visits to the natural environment need to become part of people's everyday lives, so that being 'too busy' is not perceived as an obstacle. This could mean encouraging use by combining visits with other outcomes such as walking to school, outside activities with children, or cycling to work, as explored in section 2. 'Review of current policies and research, Active Travel - Healthy and active lifestyle choices.'

We'll provide information about routes with least restrictive access and develop on-line mapping to demonstrate what type of features to expect along each route, such as stiles, gates and bridges.

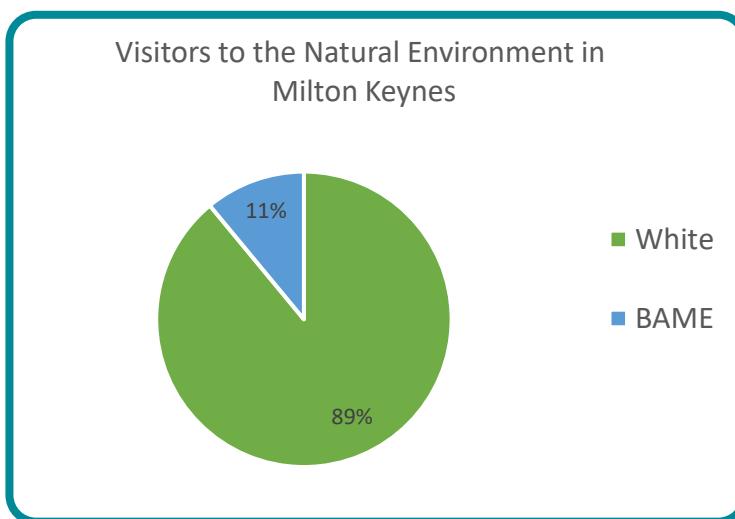


Figure 15. Pie chart to show ethnicity of visitors to the natural environment in Milton Keynes

In Milton Keynes only 11% of visits to the natural environment are taken by those in BAME groups.

The Council is committed to addressing these issues so that everyone can benefit from rights of way and outdoor access. By engaging with people and communities we can better understand any barriers to use that exist. This will assist us in making decisions about how we can increase inclusivity for all to use our rights of way network.

Natural England is working with a range of partners through the 'Outdoors for All' programme to deliver projects which seek to ensure that people living in deprived areas, the elderly, those with physical disabilities, mental health illness, learning difficulties and people from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities all have opportunities to access high quality natural environments<sup>25</sup>. They have produced a series of publications related to these matters including how nature-based interventions could be part of a new solution for mental health care, and how partnership projects can address barriers and enable more people living with dementia to enjoy the benefits of the natural environment.

<sup>24</sup> Natural England (2018) Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment [Monitoring Engagement in the Natural Environment Survey \(2009 - 2019\) \(arcgis.com\)](https://www.arcgis.com)

<sup>25</sup> [Natural England Access to Evidence - Outdoors for all](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/natural-england-access-to-evidence-outdoors-for-all)

## Monitoring the condition of the network

Using digital mapping and asset collection technology, a condition survey of all rights of way gates, stiles and signage along the network is currently underway. We will use the data gathered to help prioritise works required and support a funding bid for improvements. Once the survey reached over 100 kilometres, which equates to almost 20% of the network, we were able to analyse trends and create a prediction of costs for improving and updating the entire network.

The costs associated with individual feature types across the network have been predicted to:

- Replace all existing stiles with gates (subject to agreement with landowner)
- Bring all existing bridle and field gates up to a good standard
- Bring all existing fingerpost signage up to a good standard
- Bring all existing waymarker posts up to a good standard

This information has helped to inform budgetary decisions and capital funding bids. If we are able to secure funding to carry out such a large programme of works then this will contribute significantly to the RoWIPs aims to offer increased accessibility to all types of user including the disabled, less abled and visually impaired.

## Bridges

There are approximately 581 bridges that serve the Milton Keynes rights of way network. These range from simple ditch crossings created from timber sleepers, to major structures spanning roads, rivers or railways. Many are the responsibility of Milton Keynes City Council, whilst others fall to landowners, Network Rail or Canal and River Trust. Some bridges span across borough boundaries and we'll work with neighbouring authority colleagues for these.



Figure 16. A newly installed bridge and approach (left) on Newport Pagnell Footpath 15 with improved accessibility to the original narrow structure (right)

A survey of the network is underway to record the location and type of each bridge. An appropriate inspection regime can then be identified to assess condition, and from this maintenance can be identified, prioritised and accounted for in the available budget, or through capital funding application.

When replacing existing ditch crossings, we'll take the opportunity to improve accessibility where appropriate.

## Volunteer opportunities

As a co-operative Council we will positively engage with volunteer organisations including youth services, community groups and individuals to help monitor and improve the condition of our routes. Volunteering offers great opportunities to both the community and to the individuals contributing their time and skills.

During our Draft RoWIP consultation a quarter of you said you were willing to volunteer on the rights of way network.

Volunteering can offer important social benefits to those involved through

personal development, engagement with the local community, the learning of new skills and achieving a sense of purpose and satisfaction. We will continue work with other partners to engage with volunteers and build on the important work we have already developed with them.



Figure 17. Rambler volunteers improving waymarking in Moulsoe Parish

## Partners

We work with many partners in the day to day running of the rights of way service including:

- Local Access Forum - an independent group which offers specialist access advice and guidance to Milton Keynes City Council. As a co-operative Council, we have worked collaboratively with them in the development of the RoWIP.
- Ramblers - We work closely with the Ramblers regarding inspections of the network through their Parish path checkers scheme, access advice, and maintenance projects, as well as engagement with formal consultations on proposed Public Path Orders.
- MK Cycle Forum- an independent group made up of citizens and local cycle groups which promote more cycling around Milton Keynes. They offer advice and a perspective related to cycling and cycling policy.
- British Horse Society – we work with individuals from this user group regarding access advice and guidance, structure and surface specifications, and local reported issues.
- Neighbouring authorities - We work with other local authorities in Northamptonshire, Buckinghamshire and Central Bedfordshire to make improvements to the network, and access opportunities which connect across the Borough boundaries.
- Town and Parish Councils – these organisations have a wealth of local knowledge. We work alongside them to best understand how rights of way are used locally, and what issues and requirements are important to local residents.
- Parks Trust – this organisation manages many of the parks and open spaces throughout central Milton Keynes through which many bridleways and footpaths travel.
- Landowners and land managers - have an important role to play in protecting and improving access and enjoyment of the countryside. Developing a close and positive relationship with the landowners in Milton Keynes has always been very important to us and we will continue to listen to their feedback on the rights of way that cross their land.

## 6. Landowners – an analysis of findings from survey and research

### The landowner community of Milton Keynes

During the ROWIP draft consultation a landowner questionnaire was created and promoted. We asked a series of questions and asked for feedback to help us better understand the issues that they face, what matters are important to them, how the rights of way team could support them more, and their ideas of improvements for our path network. We received approximately a 16% response from this survey and below is a summary of some of the main points.

However, the questionnaire is only one way that we have received feedback from landowners. We are also in regular contact with over 50 landowners as part of our Headland Maintenance grass cutting scheme, which enables for regular two-way dialogue, and we welcome conversations with all landowners throughout the borough regarding any issues or advice needed. An aim to understand issues faced by them, and open two-way conversation, has helped us build good relations with the landowners of Milton Keynes.

Our Local Access Forum also has two representatives from the landowner community, which offers valuable insight and advice about local and national issues faced.

There are also many individuals or businesses who have public rights of way travelling across land that they own. Some landowners own large areas of farmland or developed land, and others may just have a single footpath travelling through a corner of a private garden. All will have a different experience of the Milton Keynes rights of way network.

#### 1. Problems landowners experience on rights of way crossing their land

Results have shown as there is a wide spectrum of issues faced by landowners who have rights of way travelling across their land. Some are perceived as being a ‘serious problem’ and others are a ‘problem, but not serious’. The table below summarises the responses received.

- People exceeding their rights e.g., horse on footpath, motors on bridleways, was given as the top issue faced by landowners with 38% describing it as a ‘serious problem’ and a further 50% saying it was a ‘problem – but not too serious’.

We’ll speak to the landowner community to drill down into these findings further to better understand the exact nature of the issues experienced.

- 38% of landowners also found that gates being left open was a serious problem.

We are happy to assist landowners with the supply of self-closing gates where a stile or field-gate is currently present. However, we have also received reports that even self-closing gates are sometimes propped open by the public. We will look to assist landowners

with the supply of appropriate signage at gates to help reduce this problem as well as promotion of the countryside code to educate path users on appropriate behaviour.

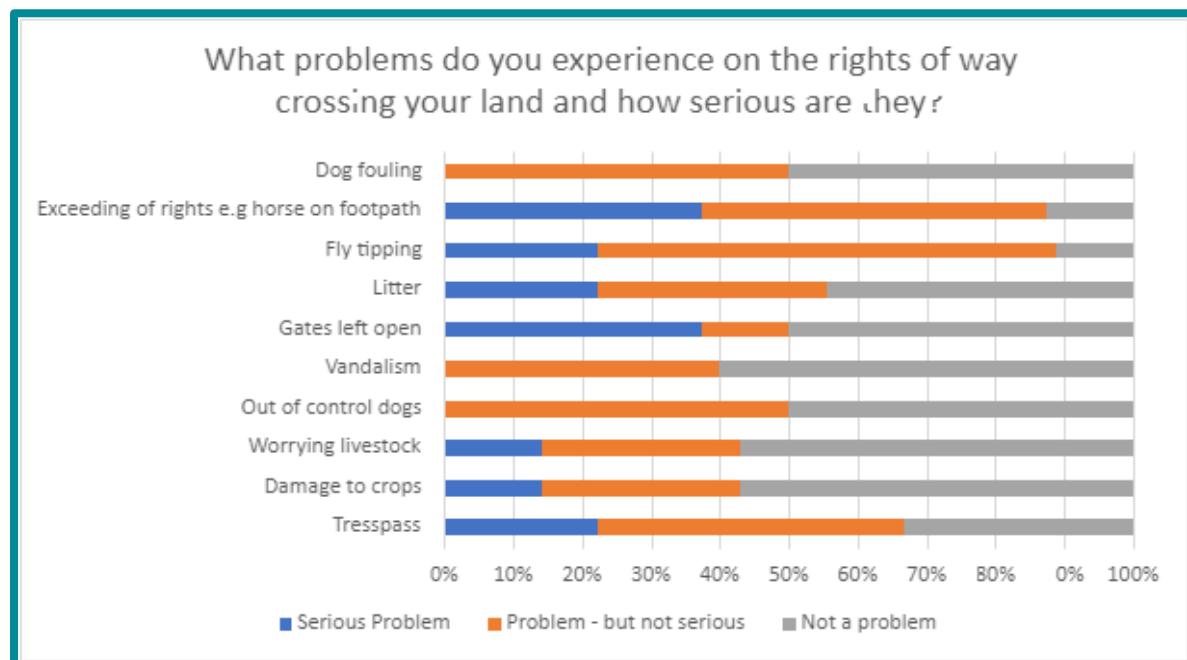


Figure 18. Table to show problems experienced on the rights of way crossing private land

- Trespass, litter and fly tipping came in as the second highest 'serious' problem.
- 50% of respondents reported that both out of control dogs and dog fouling was a problem-but not too serious.

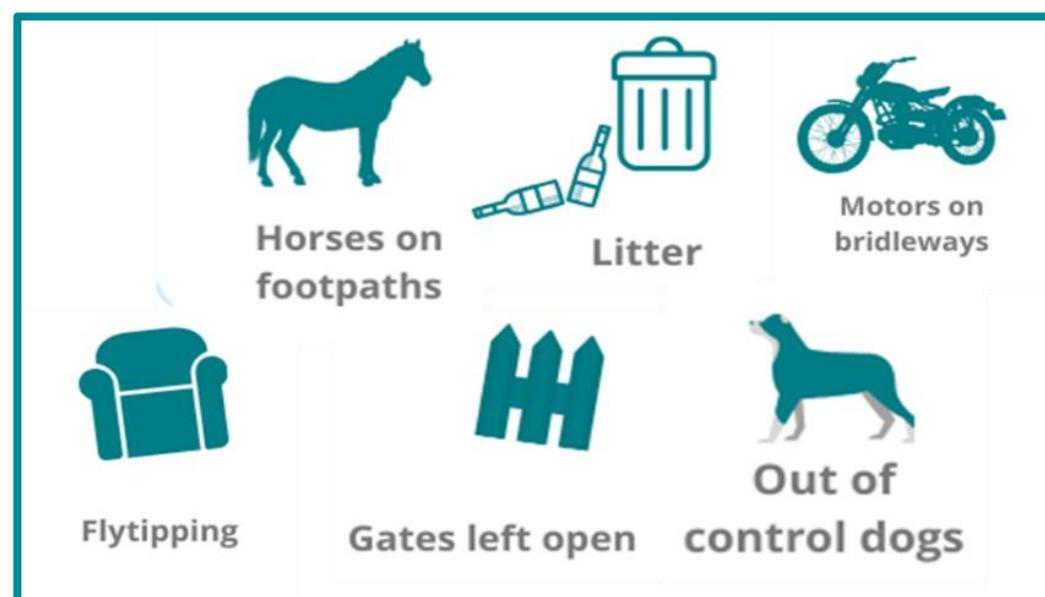


Figure 19. Some of the issues landowners experience on public rights of way

## 2. Views on Public Access matters

The majority of respondents don't mind people coming onto their land as long as they act responsibly. It is positive that the landowner community in general welcome people crossing their land, but it is clear that appropriate behaviour is key to this attitude.

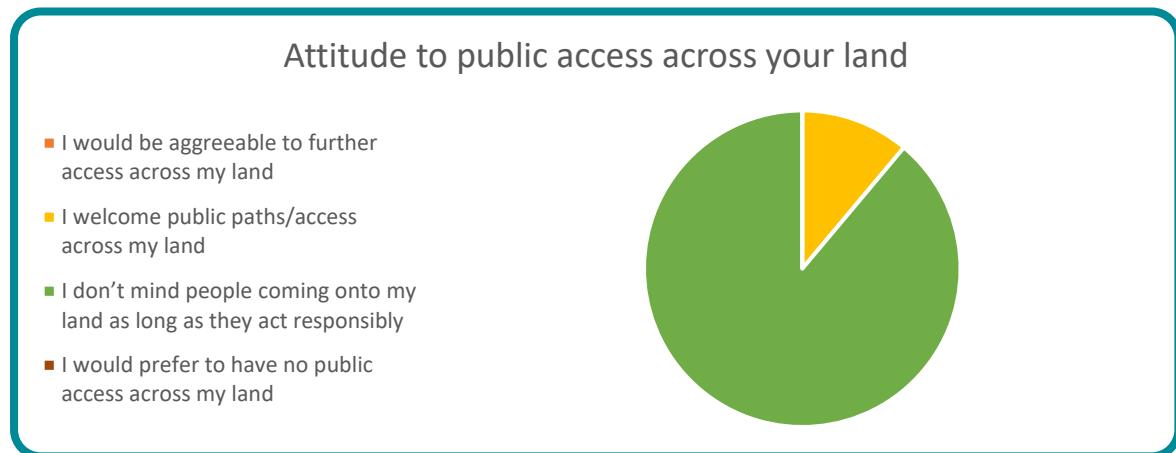


Figure 20. Pie chart to show attitude to public access across landowners' land

All respondents understood their responsibilities regarding reinstating paths crossing cultivated land but it was less clear where responsibilities lay for the maintenance of stiles and gates. We'll provide clarity about where responsibilities lie between both landowners and MKCC for various matters.



The majority of respondents would support having stiles replaced by stock-proof gates to improve access for those with mobility issues, but less than half would be happy to remove the structure altogether and have just a gap instead (in instances where livestock were not present).

When asked whether they would support additional routes across their land in order to improve the rights of way network e.g to create circular routes or to avoid busy roads, a third said 'yes' and two thirds said 'no'.

## 3. Biodiversity

MKCC is currently investigating opportunities relating to biodiversity off-setting by making landowners aware of funding they can receive for offering up parts of their land for improvements to wildlife habitat. 63% of respondents said they would be interested in such a scheme so this will be followed up.

## 4. How can Public Rights of Way help to support the rural economy?

Responses included:

- Early adoption of new highways and intersecting rights of way that have been constructed within developments would encourage more growth and direct people to these facilities.
- Develop routes to support dog walkers and other residents around new housing areas to reduce 'crowding' on those PROWs already in existence.
- Making sure all rights of way are clearly marked and accessible. Developing longer paths/routes and circular trails that avoid walking along main roads, but take in villages and places of interest.
- Where walking/riding beside a main road is unavoidable keep the verge well cut so that users stay off the road as much as possible.

## 5. You told us how we can better support landowners

Responses included:

- Continue to supply waymarking and assist with the supply of gates. "*Continue supplying plenty of signage to landowners when needed. Continue replacing gates when needed.*" "*Regularly check on PRoW signage and provide replacements where missing.*"
- Offer more information signage. "*Perhaps more information type signs on what access is allowed and where, to improve knowledge for network users i.e no cycling on footpaths.*"
- Improved communication with every type of landowner. "*Improved communication with residents who have network access through their gardens which has impacts on neighbouring landowners' networks as this is sometimes problematic.*"
- More education and promotion regarding appropriate behaviour in the countryside/on PRoW. "*We are a rural farm and estate and have suffered due to urban sprawl and a significant increase in people using the rural area in recent lockdowns. There needs to be more done to encourage people to enjoy the rural areas sensibly and responsibly.*"
- Ensure good communication is kept up with landowners. "*Why not give all your landowners a call once a year, just to see if they are facing any new issues or have questions or suggestions.*"

Additional feedback tells us that the landowner community would appreciate further promotion of the Countryside Code to existing and potential users. This will go some way to address some of the issues identified in table 18 above including unintentional trespass and the importance of closing gates.

Working together we can help to reduce conflict between landowner and path users. We will continue to take opportunities to open up conversations with our landowners, and discuss their issues and concerns, whilst also taking into account the useful suggestions listed above. Our findings are being used to help form this Plan and its accompanying Action Points.

## 7. Future Trends

Milton Keynes is growing. Some towns and villages that were once rural now form part of the urban fringe. It was a founding principle of Milton Keynes' design that open spaces and parkland would form a 'countryside within the city'. As the city continues to grow it is important that this concept remains so that newcomers and existing residents alike continue to have access to plentiful, enjoyable green space.

Milton Keynes has a younger age profile than England as a whole. It has a larger proportion of the population in the younger age groups; 22.3% are aged under 16 compared with 18.9% in England. It has a smaller proportion in the older age groups; just 11.1% of the Milton Keynes population are aged over 65 compared with 16.3% in England.<sup>26</sup>

Whilst a relatively young borough, with a lower national and regional average age, the number of residents over 65 years of age will have grown by 102% between 2011 and 2031, which is an increase from 28,400 to 57,300 (compared to overall growth of 24%).

The transport network must accommodate the changing needs of all its residents, as well as changes in needs resulting from all other socio-demographic trends.

The Plan recognises the challenges of demographic change and that there are many new outdoor activities emerging which are often made possible with new technologies and materials. We embrace increased usage of our network but will also have to consider how these types of activities will best fit in with use of rights of way. National legislation may need to be updated to maintain a balance between established uses of paths and new uses, and local authorities may well need to update local regulations.

Emerging activities include geo caching, all terrain skate boards, off road mobility scooters, and electrically assisted bicycles and e-scooters. A very new addition to the local activities you can undertake in Milton Keynes is 'Love Exploring'<sup>27</sup>. This is a free to play smartphone App, available across Milton Keynes to encourage all residents and visitors to get active and explore the parks, redways and open spaces. The App has games, trails and an interactive map full of useful information and locations and is popular with children and adults alike.



Figure 21. Electric scooters have been trialled in Milton Keynes as an alternative mode of transport

<sup>26</sup> Milton Keynes 2011 Census data [Microsoft Word - Borough-Profile.doc \(mkinsight.org\)](https://mkinsight.org)

<sup>27</sup> [Love Exploring - Love Exploring](https://loveexploring.com)

## 8. Delivery and Action Plan

The above sections have explored the review, research and analysis elements of this RoWIP. The Delivery and Action Plan section now sets out what we are going to do, how it will be achieved, and what costs can be expected.

The consultation on the draft RoWIP, the user, stakeholder and landowner survey, along with all analysis of local and national policy, research, and analysis of the current provision have helped support the decisions, actions and priorities for this Plan, and to ultimately allow us to create our Delivery and Action Plan.

The following three themes have emerged during all analysis of consultation and research data:

- **Management:** Addressing accessibility and encouraging access for all, offering a network that is well maintained and fit for purpose.
- **People:** Increasing community use, encouraging healthy lifestyles and well-being by providing active travel options, and opportunities for exercise and open-air recreation.
- **Connectivity:** Extending and enhancing the network and contributing towards more sustainable development.

Each theme is discussed, with consideration to all previous research and analysis in this RoWIP. At the end of each theme is a table, our Action Plan, which details the SMART approach to achieving our goals – the **Specific** area for improvement, **Measure** of progress, **Achievable** outcomes, **Realistic** resource to achieve and finally, **Time-frame** this can be achieved in.

## 8.1 Management

We work with many different people to make sure the Public Rights of Way (PRoW) network is kept in a condition fit for purpose. Partnership working in this way offers the opportunity to engage with the community and stakeholders including Parks Trust, Canal and River Trust, landowners, user groups, Town and Parish Councils, neighbouring authorities and volunteers. Working together collaboratively offers those involved a sense of community and a sense of place, and pride in the quality of the network.

In order to maintain the rights of way network and carry out its statutory duties the Council is required to:

- Ensure the surface and infrastructure is in a suitable condition
- Signpost and waymark routes
- Take enforcement action where the right of way is interfered with e.g. obstruction
- Ensure routes are correctly mapped



Figure 22. A cross-field arable path

Landowners also have responsibilities regarding rights of way, including keeping the route visible and not obstructing or endangering users.

As part of this Plan, we will focus on creating and promoting paths suitable for use by all. Funding will be sought for improvements to routes that have been identified and prioritised as offering the most benefit to communities. We'll work to give people confidence to explore our network by making paths more attractive through the removal of physical barriers and improvements to path condition. For example, a difficult stile, overgrown vegetation, poor surface, or missing or faded signage.

## What will we do?

1. Work towards providing routes that are suitable for all and reduce and remove physical barriers to access.
2. Improve signage of routes to give people confidence they are in the right place.
3. Record all assets and associated condition data to aid maintenance decisions and budget allocation on a priority basis.
4. Produce a design guide for surfaces, widths and infrastructure.
5. Keep the Definitive Map and Statement up to date.

## How will we do it?

### **1.1 Work towards providing routes that are suitable for all and reduce and remove physical barriers to access.**

We will work with landowners towards providing a network that is accessible for all types of user by removing those structures that some may find difficult or impossible to use, and where appropriate, replacing with more accessible alternatives. Information about routes that have reduced or limited physical barriers on them will be shared and promoted through on-line mapping to demonstrate what type of features to expect, such as stiles, gates and bridges.

The physical condition of a route may also act as a barrier to use. We will continue to monitor all features of rights of way including surface condition, structures, and vegetation up-growth or side encroachment. We'll support landowners by offering help and guidance regarding their responsibilities with path maintenance, and work with them and volunteers to keep paths clear and usable.

We also aim to provide an improved process for the public to report and track problems online, and develop a Prioritisation Policy to assist analysis of the issue reported against factors such as health and safety to the public.

Our research revealed that seating along routes would be occasionally welcomed, for rest or to have a picnic, and we'll explore the feasibility of providing this in certain locations.

### **1.2 Improve signage of routes to give people confidence they are in the right place.**

Issues associated with waymarking have emerged as one of the reasons a route may be difficult to navigate. The Plan resolves to improve waymarking across Milton Keynes through identification of missing, damaged or faded signage through our borough wide survey. This will benefit the public by giving them confidence that they are on the right route, the visually impaired by offering clearer signage, as well as the landowner by helping to prevent people unintentionally trespassing and

walking, riding or cycling where they shouldn't. We'll also offer clear guidance on our web page and at the gateways to certain routes about which users can travel upon which type of path.

### **1.3 Record all assets and associated condition data to aid maintenance decisions and budget allocation on a priority basis.**

The Council will record all assets, such as gates, signage and bridges on the network, so that maintenance works can be identified and attended to on a priority basis. A project to survey and record all assets upon rights of way throughout Milton Keynes is underway and will take several years to complete. However, if resources were available, this could be completed sooner. The survey will offer us valuable information on where improvements, repairs and replacements are needed and which of those are a priority by reviewing against British Standard 5709 (2018) for Gates, Gaps and Stiles (or superseded standards as appropriate), and for any new structures to meet these standards. This will help us to make spending decisions throughout the year.

The survey will include the collation of data on our bridges and will help us to understand whether a structure is a simple sleeper bridge ditch crossing, or a more substantial construction that would require specialist inspections and maintenance.

### **1.4 Produce a design guide for surfaces, widths and infrastructure.**

We will produce a design and standards guide detailing approved designs and products, and minimum requirements for structures and surfacing details for different types of right of way. This can be shared with contractors, developers and landowners and will ensure consistency across the network.

### **1.5 Keep the Definitive Map and Statement up to date.**

Alongside our borough-wide asset condition survey, a survey is being undertaken to check the positional accuracy of all routes. We will compare what is available on the ground with what is recorded on the Definitive Map and Statement. This will highlight any inaccuracies that need amending and any missing links in the network that need exploring.

It is important to have a Definitive Map and Statement that is correct and up to date so that landowners understand where their responsibilities lie, and so users are sure of where they can and cannot go whilst travelling over private land. We will ensure positive communication with landowners should any modifications to the Map be required.

### **Key to table below of costs for RoWIP Objectives:**

£ - Achievable within existing resources

££ - Under £50,000. Additional resources required (Small scale project)

£££ - Above £50,000. Additional resources required (Large scale project)

<b>Management Action Plan</b>					
	<b>Objective and Action</b>	<b>Time scale</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Resource</b>	<b>Measure of success</b>
<b>1.1</b>	<b>Work towards providing routes that are suitable for all and reduce and remove physical barriers to access</b>				
<b>A</b>	Improve accessibility of routes through structures (least restrictive access), surface improvements, and explore seating opportunities	2023-2033	£££	MKCC, Landowners	Increase accessible features over 2023 baseline
<b>B</b>	Mapping of routes with good accessibility to be made available	2026-2033	££	MKCC	Availability of information on-line
<b>C</b>	Seek internal and external funding opportunities for improvements	2023-2033	£	MKCC, LAF, stakeholders	Secure funding for flagship projects
<b>D</b>	Support landowners with guidance on maintenance responsibilities. Work together to keep paths clear	2023-2033	£	MKCC, Landowners, volunteers	Paths maintained to a good standard
<b>E</b>	Customer Reporting improvements and Prioritisation Policy.	2023-2026	£	MKCC	Improved customer service experience
<b>1.2</b>	<b>Improve signage of routes to give people confidence they are in the right place</b>				
<b>A</b>	Improve accessibility through signage, guidance and waymarking	2023-2033	££	MKCC	Programme for signage improvement
<b>1.3</b>	<b>Record all assets and associated condition data to aid maintenance decisions and budget allocation on a priority basis</b>				
<b>A</b>	Survey network	2023-2028	£/££	MKCC	Systematic survey of borough
<b>B</b>	Digital mapping of asset location, condition and route information	2023-2028	£	MKCC	Mapped assets
<b>C</b>	Integrate asset management systems across departments inc. structures and highways teams	2023-2028	££	MKCC	Responsive integrated management
<b>1.4</b>	<b>Produce a design guide for surfaces, widths and infrastructure</b>				
<b>A</b>	Work to ensure consistency across the network regarding standards and design of assets and surfaces	2023-2033	£	MKCC, user groups.	Produce and refer to up to date design guidelines
<b>1.5</b>	<b>Keep the Definitive Map and Statement up to date</b>				
<b>A</b>	Survey network to verify accurateness of Definitive Map	2023-2028	£/££	MKCC	Systematic approach to borough survey
<b>B</b>	Review and update Definitive Map and Statement	2023-2033	££	MKCC	Review map, publish orders, update map.
<b>C</b>	Ensure landowners are aware of Definitive Map review outcomes	2028-2033	£	MKCC	Positive engagement and publicity

Table 2. Management Action Plan

## 8.2 People

The rights of way network is a significant cultural asset. It offers free access for everybody to enjoy the local countryside and heritage through a wide variety of experiences and pursuits. At a time when public finances are under increasing pressure, the rights of way network offers a low cost, sustainable option to tackle a wide range of social, economic and environmental issues and provide real public benefit.

Milton Keynes's countryside is a dynamic workplace, and it is important that MKCC engages with its landowners and land managers. Its character is the result of the activities of many different farmers and landowners who have an important role to play in protecting and improving access and enjoyment of the countryside. We work collaboratively with our landowners, and will ensure positive engagement takes place regarding any legislative changes that may affect rights of way. Their continued goodwill, understanding and contribution is essential in enabling us to realise the Plan's vision, aims and objectives and to deliver our Action Plan.

The Rights of Way network offers the people of Milton Keynes, and beyond, many benefits regarding health and wellbeing through physical activity and access to open space. It can form an intrinsic part of people's everyday way of living a healthy and active lifestyle. Social benefits can also be achieved through taking group walks or rides, volunteering, or using the network to connect to local business such as cafes and pubs.

By replacing car journeys with active travel where possible you not only get the benefits from physical activity and the reduction in emissions, you are also more likely to encounter other users similarly out walking, riding or cycling.



Figure 23. A social walk in the countryside is a great way to enjoy time with friends and get outdoors

There are barriers that still exist to people making use of the network which include being too busy, the condition of a path or structures upon it, not being confident where a route leads, or even not understanding what a right of way is and where they can be found. The Plan aims to overcome these barriers by making active travel part of everyday life for example by combining a walk with an activity that needs to be performed such as taking a child to school, visiting shops, or getting to work. Inclusivity to all parts of the community, including under-represented groups, is important and will be addressed.

## What will we do?

1. Promote responsible use of rights of way
2. Encourage healthy lifestyle choices
3. Promote rights of way network to sustain existing and attract new users
4. Develop volunteer opportunities
5. Continue to support the Local Access Forum

## How will we do it?

### **2.1 Promote responsible use of rights of way**

The Countryside Code<sup>28</sup> is important in promoting a sense of shared respect and responsibility between the public who visit the countryside, and the people who own and manage it. It is available to download in 19 languages and we will support and promote its responsible use.



Figure 24. The Countryside code will be promoted to help support responsible behaviour in the countryside

To further promote responsible behaviours, we'll share published guidance from specialist groups including the British Horse Society, Ramblers, and Cycling UK, about how different users can successfully share use of paths. Advice will be published regarding safe behaviour whilst in the countryside including encounters with livestock, keeping dogs on leads during lambing season, or what to do if you are considering organising a public event that will utilise public rights of way.

Engagement with Town and Parish councils will help to share information and advice amongst local residents. If certain issues are prevalent in particular areas, we can work with those councils to publish helpful information or articles in their local magazines or newsletters to help educate about appropriate and respectful use of the network.

We'll also support and empower Town and Parish councils should they wish to assist with resolving local issues through a programme of Parish Partnerships. By working collaboratively with these councils we can utilise local knowledge and contacts to help monitor and resolve issues, as well as building good relations with the local landowner and path user communities.

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<sup>28</sup> [The Countryside Code - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

## **2.2 Encourage healthy lifestyle choices**

To support the various council strategies linked with public health, wellbeing and active travel, the Plan will encourage healthy lifestyle choices through use of the rights of way network.

A mapping analysis of walking routes to school that utilise public rights of way will be undertaken to ensure those paths are in a suitable condition for daily use. We'll work with schools and council teams in promoting their use for active travel and to encourage walking, riding and cycling for health.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of being outdoors to people's mental and physical health. Green social prescribing is part of the NHS's Long Term Plan and is a scheme which enables GPs and healthcare practitioners to refer people to nature-based interventions and activities. The government funds a project which tests how green social prescribing can: improve mental health outcomes, reduce health inequalities, reduce demand on the health and social care system, and develop best practice in making green social activities more resilient and accessible.

Where opportunities occur, we'll work alongside health professionals and local GPs surgeries to explore how the council can be involved in patient referrals of green social prescribing<sup>29</sup>

## **2.3 Promote rights of way network to sustain existing and attract new users**

We'll carry out a review of promoted and circular walks and rides and produce leaflets of the routes for our website that can be downloaded and printed. We'll also include details of which routes offer greater accessibility and whether any public amenities such as toilets, parking or seating are close by.

We recognise the importance of working closely with Town and Parish Councils, so we'll engage with them to promote local routes and advertise the network to the local community as a natural resource available to them. Local engagement will help towards ensuring people are confident in knowing where the rights of way are, and where they lead to, so that they can plan their journey.

There are portions of the community who are not aware of, or do not make use of, our footpaths and bridleways. Natural England's 'Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment' survey data tells us that physical ability, age and ethnicity can impact on the likelihood of a person making use of the rights of way network<sup>30</sup>. Special emphasis will be made to identify, and reach out, to under-represented groups. This could include having promotional material available in a range of languages, working in partnership with groups and organisations, and offering volunteer

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/personalisedcare/social-prescribing/green-social-prescribing/>

<sup>30</sup> Natural England Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment [Monitoring Engagement in the Natural Environment Survey \(2009 - 2019\) \(arcgis.com\)](https://www.arcgis.com)

opportunities to a diverse range of the community. This, together with better promotion and sharing of information, will increase knowledge and confidence and encourage use by all.

## **2.4 Develop volunteer opportunities**

Volunteers are an important resource to the rights of way team. The benefits are two-fold in that they can help the council to save precious resource, whilst also offering opportunities to the community for social engagement, physical activity and a sense of pride in their local paths. Volunteers can assist with the delivery of this Plan through work to review our promoted and circular routes and help with maintenance and improvement works on paths.

## **2.5 Continue to offer support**

We'll continue to support the Local Access Forum, who are made up of local volunteers offering specialist advice from a variety of backgrounds including various user groups and landowners. We'll continue to work closely with them to enable them to offer valuable advice on access matters to us.

Our landowner community is important to us and we welcome positive communication with them. In addition to day-to-day communications, we'll offer specific opportunities to come and speak to us to share any issues, comments or concerns they may have. This may link in with our work with the LAF and their quarterly meetings.

<b>People Action Plan</b>					
<b>Ref</b>	<b>Objective and Action</b>	<b>Time scale</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Resource</b>	<b>Measure of success</b>
<b>2.1 Promote responsible use of rights of way</b>					
<b>A</b>	Support landowners and path users by publicising Countryside Code, safety and livestock advice, and organised events on rights of way on our webpage	2023-2024	£	MKCC, landowners	Update PRoW webpage. Share communications with external partners. Work collaboratively with landowners.
<b>B</b>	Disseminate knowledge and advice about sharing of routes amongst different users	2023-2024	£	MKCC, BHS, Town/Parish Councils, LAF	Share information on website and in Parish publications
<b>C</b>	Support and work with Town and Parish Councils in tackling local access issues	2023-2033	£	MKCC, Town/Parish Councils	Share advice and work collaboratively
<b>2.2 Encourage healthy lifestyle choices</b>					
<b>A</b>	Analyse proximity of rights of way to schools	2024-2025	£	MKCC, Schools	Mapping analysis and site inspections
<b>B</b>	Promote active travel choices	2024-2026	£	MKCC	Engagement with schools and Health team
<b>C</b>	Work with Public Health professionals to promote walking, riding and cycling	2025-2033	£	MKCC	Health Centre engagement for green social prescribing
<b>2.3 Promote rights of way network to sustain existing and attract new users</b>					
<b>A</b>	Carry out review of existing promoted walks and rides	2023-2026	£	MKCC	Survey condition of routes
<b>B</b>	Create maps of promoted routes available for download and print on PRoW webpage	2024-2028	££	MKCC	Annotated maps available on PRoW webpage
<b>C</b>	Engage with Town and Parish Councils to promote local routes	2023-2033	£	MKCC, Town/Parish Councils	Promotes routes in Parish magazines, newsletters
<b>D</b>	Reach out to under-represented groups	2024-2033	£	MKCC	Liaise with diverse range of groups/organisations.
<b>2.4 Develop volunteer opportunities</b>					
<b>A</b>	Utilise volunteers to assist review of promoted routes	2023-2026	£	MKCC, volunteers	Volunteer engagement
<b>B</b>	Utilise volunteers and wider council resources for maintenance works	2023-2033	£	MKCC, volunteers	Positive outcomes for individuals, community and path users
<b>2.5 Continue to offer support</b>					
<b>A</b>	Support LAF to enable them to offer advice on access matters	2023-2033	£	MKCC, LAF	Organise and oversee LAF meetings
<b>B</b>	Offer in-person meetings with landowners to discuss issues	2023-2033	£	MKCC, landowners	Individual or group events offering support

Table 3. People Action Plan

## 8.3 Connectivity

Milton Keynes is a destination for leisure and recreation, and the rights of way network offers an opportunity to develop and explore an appreciation of the character of the wider area at no cost to the user. The network should offer good linkages and circular routes with quality signage that

allows the public to follow the route with confidence. This in turn offers great opportunities for exercise, leisure, and recreation in the natural environment.



Figure 25. A clearly waymarked and defined Bridleway

Community links – Many rights of way link communities together, including linkages between urban areas and the countryside and vice versa. This provides people with access to open space without the need for vehicular travel, and rural communities access to urban areas and facilities, thus creating active and sustainable travel opportunities. There is a degree of fragmentation throughout the rights of way network in Milton Keynes which means that there are instances of 'dead-ends' or where there's a need to travel upon roads or highways verges to link up with other paths. This Plan seeks to address this issue.

Economic – Rights of way link people to many local tourist and visitor attractions, rural businesses, pubs and shops, therefore

supporting community services and employment. The continuing outward growth of Milton Keynes means that the proximity of communities to the countryside is ever changing. Planned development and its effects on public rights of way must be considered, it is essential that good linkages to the network and other open spaces is maintained, enhanced and included in the planning process. This in turn contributes towards sustainable economic growth and social wellbeing.

Biodiversity and the natural world - The rights of way network provides wildlife corridors through a variety of landscapes including woodland, grassland and agricultural land, giving people contact with the natural world. As well as contributing to our mental wellbeing this resource also offers an important learning and educational resource concerning the local flora and fauna around us.

## What will we do?

1. Integrate rights of way principles, policies and guidance into strategic plans and mitigate effects of planned development
2. Work with neighbouring authorities to improve connectivity and share best practice
3. Seek opportunities to improve connectivity and reduce fragmentation of the network through Definitive Map analyses and improvement

## How will we do it?

### **3.1 Integrate rights of way principles, policies and guidance into strategic plans and mitigate effects of planned development**

Rights of Way are a material consideration in the Planning process. It is important that both our Planning colleagues and developers have a good understanding of how development can affect rights of way, and the benefits of early consultation with us. We'll link our responses to council Plans and Strategies to ensure effective protection and enhancement of the network, and encourage provision for affected rights of way to travel through pleasant, open space. We'll work with developers to provide multi-use routes that are suitable for all types of user wherever possible. We will provide training and guidance for planners and developers on managing and improving rights of way including guidance to accompany applications to divert routes.

The detailed nature of making any alteration to the Definitive Map, whether it be via an application to permanently divert a right of way, or to submit a claim that a previously unrecorded route should be added to the Definitive Map, means that we are not always able to process applications as soon as they are submitted. We will produce and publish an approved Statement of Priorities which will help us manage the queue of applications as well as manage expectations of applicants.

### **3.2 Work with neighbouring authorities to improve connectivity and share best practice**

We'll continue to engage and share information and best practice approaches with rights of way teams in neighbouring authorities. We'll be looking closely at how paths travel across boundary borders and whether there is any historical fragmentation of the network that needs addressing, or if there are opportunities to improve connectivity across authority boundaries. We can work collaboratively with colleagues across the border regarding the promotion or shared long distance or promoted routes such as the Swans Way, Midshires Way and North Bucks Way.

### **3.3 Seek opportunities to improve connectivity and reduce fragmentation of the network through Definitive Map analyses and improvement**

We'll seek opportunities to improve the connectivity of the network so that routes better link communities and places together and reduce the reliance on roads for connections. We are in the process of analysing the network to identify where there is fragmentation or missing links. We'll consider how missing links can be addressed, for example by improvements to highway verges that link rights of way together, and working with landowners, developers, and other MKCC teams with related strategies and plans. Such improvements will reduce the need to walk, ride or cycle on the road, improve public safety and improve connectivity of the network. We'll reach out to user groups to help identify and prioritise locations.

We'll also be working collaboratively with Town and Parish councils to explore which routes and areas would benefit most from connectivity and maintenance improvements. Working with the Town and Parish councils and user groups in this way will also help us identify and investigate previously unrecorded rights of way.

We will identify and promote priority routes with consideration to areas of high density and well-used rights of way, as well as their proximity to populated areas. The priority of a route will then be able to help inform funding and improvement decisions.

<b>Connectivity Action Plan</b>					
<b>Ref</b>	<b>Objective and Action</b>	<b>Time scale</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Resource</b>	<b>Measure of success</b>
<b>3.1 Integrate rights of way principles, policies and guidance into strategic plans and mitigate effects of planned development</b>					
<b>A</b>	Link RoWIP to Strategies/Plans in Appendix 1 to protect, enhance and promote rights of way.	2023-2033	£	MKCC	Link Planning Application responses to RoWIP, SPD and Council plans.
<b>B</b>	Link RoWIP with newly emerging Plan:MK 2032	2024-2033	£	MKCC	Cross-departmental engagement
<b>C</b>	Produce training/guidance for planners and developers on managing and improving PRoW	2023-2026	£	MKCC	Include guidance in diversion application packs and on website
<b>D</b>	Publish Statement of Priorities for Public Path Orders and Definitive Map Modification Orders	2024-2025	£	MKCC	Information available in application packs and on website
<b>3.2 Work with neighbouring authorities to improve connectivity and share best practice</b>					
<b>A</b>	Establish cross authority Officer connections and promote shared long distance and promoted routes	2023-2033	£	MKCC	Communicate and share advice and information
<b>B</b>	Identify and map connectivity issues as part of Definitive Map review	2023-2028	£	MKCC, neighbouring authorities	Communicate with neighbouring authorities
<b>3.3 Seek opportunities to improve connectivity and reduce fragmentation of the network through Definitive Map analyses and improvement</b>					
<b>A</b>	Analyse the network and seek opportunities to improve linkages between urban and rural areas. Offer multi-user routes where possible	2025-2033	£££	MKCC, user groups, neighbouring authorities, landowners, developers	Engagement with user groups, neighbouring authorities, landowners and developers. Engage with slow-ways national project.
<b>B</b>	Identify opportunities to improve connectivity such as additional off-road routes or verge improvements	2023-2033	££	MKCC, neighbouring authorities, landowners, developers	Positive engagement with landowners, developers, and neighbouring authorities
<b>C</b>	Identify and promote priority routes	2024-2026	££	MKCC, Town/Parish Councils, landowners	Analysis of data. Positive engagement with Parish Councils and landowners
<b>D</b>	Work with Parishes and user groups to identify and investigate unrecorded rights of way	2023-2033	£	Landowners, user groups, Town/Parish Councils	Positive engagement with Ramblers, BHS Cycling UK, MK Cycle Forum

Table 4. Connectivity Action Plan

Rights of Way

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[www.milton-keynes.gov.uk](http://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk)

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