

# **West Berkshire Council Draft Right of Way Improvement Plan**

## **Comments by Thatcham Town Council**

### **1 Introduction**

Thatcham Town Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on West Berkshire Council's draft Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) for 2023-2033, which supersedes the ROWIP for 2010-2020.

The parish of Thatcham comprises the town of Thatcham and surrounding rural areas - especially to the east and south. From the perspective of outdoor access and leisure, it includes:

- Public rights of way that are used exclusively for leisure (for example THAT/16 and THAT/27 between Crookham Common Road and the River Enborne)
- Public Rights of way that are used exclusively for access by local residents (for example THAT/9 parallel and to the north of Westfield Road)
- A section of National Cycle Route NC4, part of which uses part of the towpath of the Kennet and Avon Canal towpath - which is also a public footpath.
- Crookham Common (as defined by the Greenham and Crookham Commons Act 2002), with its network of paths
- Commons and access land, including Crookham Common (the boundary is slightly different to GCCA), Marsh Meadows, and the former refuse disposal site to the south of Lower Way.
- Open spaces, such as Dunston Green (managed by the Town Council)
- Permissive paths

The Town Council supports the content of the draft ROWIP. However, we feel that it focuses rather too narrowly on public rights of way (and especially rural ones), and is lacking in measurable objectives.

Many routes on public rights of way used by Thatcham residents extend into neighbouring parishes. Our comments therefore address this broader perspective.

### **2 The scope of a Rights of Way Improvement Plan**

Section 60 of the Countryside and Right of Way Act 2000 states<sup>1</sup>:

Every local highway authority (i.e. West Berkshire Council) shall prepare and publish a plan, to be known as a rights of way improvement plan (and review it at intervals of not more than ten years), containing:

- The following matters
  - (a) the extent to which local rights of way meet the present and likely future needs of the public
  - (b) the opportunities provided by local rights of way (and cycle tracks) for exercise and other forms of open-air recreation and the enjoyment of the authority's area,
  - (c) the accessibility of local rights of way to blind or partially sighted persons and others with mobility problems.
- a statement of the action they propose to take for the management of local rights of way, and for securing an improved network of local rights of way, with particular regard to the matters dealt with in the assessment.

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<sup>1</sup> The wording of the Act has been edited for clarity.

The Town Council notes that a ROWIP is not limited to addressing these matters. In particular, many opportunities for Thatcham residents for their open-air recreation rely on both public rights of way and other types of open space – such as Greenham Common and permissive paths.

### 3 Partnerships with Town and Parish Councils

Thatcham Town Council welcomes the Actions in the draft ROWIP to develop partnerships with parish and town councils:

Action 5: Develop partnerships with parish and town councils and other stakeholders to implement and improve maintenance and identify local priorities.

Action 53: Develop partnerships with parish and town councils to resolve public rights of way issues, improve standards, implement maintenance, seek improvements, develop joint priorities and communicate with the community.

However, Action 53 almost completely duplicates Action 5. We therefore suggest that they are merged into one, or that they are re-worded to remove the duplication.

### 4 Permissive paths

#### Case Study 1

A permissive path connects the junction of footpaths THAT/10 and THAT/11 (at Lower Henwick Farm) with Waller Drive in Manor Park. This is used both for leisure (especially dog walking) and utility journeys (e.g. by pupils of Trinity School who live in Thatcham).

A permissive path runs to the north of Crookham Common Road, westwards from the end of THAT/16 (near the former Traveller's Rest). This enables leisure walkers to avoid walking along the road.

A permissive path connects the southern end of footpath GREE/6 (at Burys Bank Road) with the Bowdown Woods Car Park. This avoids walkers needing to cross the road on a dangerous blind bend.

These permissive paths all have West Berkshire Council finger posts, so must be recognised in some way.

Permissive paths have an important role in improving the connectivity of the network of local rights of way. Most landlords are reluctant to dedicate new public rights of way (because of the permanent implications), but are often more supportive of permissive paths. However, permissive paths are only mentioned twice in the ROWIP; Action 21 appears only to address new paths and is rather equivocal.

**PROPOSAL:** Replace the wording of Action 21 with “Promote the use of permissive access as a means of delivering network improvements.

**PROPOSAL:** Permissive paths are only useful if users know of their existence. Therefore, The Council should request the Ordnance Survey to show them on its maps (there are specific symbols for permissive footpaths and bridleways, and these are used quite widely on OS maps covering other Local Authority areas).

## 5 Improving accessibility

### Case Study 2

Footpath COLD/4/3 passes over the bund of the Tull Way flood attenuation scheme. Before this was constructed, there were around five steps down from the road to the footpath and a single five bar gate. Following construction, there are two sets of around ten steps over the bund, with two wooden kissing gates, which are too small for a buggy to get through.

This scheme was managed by West Berkshire Council, and constructed to designs commissioned by it. The lack of accessibility was highlighted by the PROW team during the planning application process.

We are pleased that a ‘Tramper’ mobility vehicle is now available for loan at Thatcham Nature Discovery Centre. This enables people with physical disabilities to venture further in the countryside. This complements the measures to improve the accessibility.

The current wording of Actions 33 and 34 only mention the target for the numbers of removals and improvements. Without knowing the total number of removals and improvements required, we cannot tell how long they would take to complete.

**PROPOSAL:** Actions 33 and 34 should be strengthened. There should be a target within the ten-year period of this ROWIP to remove of restrictive infrastructure and improve existing infrastructure on all busy routes and those close to urban area (unless they have natural features that would prevent accessibility).

## 6 Greenham Common and open spaces

### Case study 3

Bridleway THAT/18 and Footpath GREE/6 end at Burys Bank Road, opposite access gates onto Greenham and Crookham Common. The opportunities provided by rights of way rely on the paths on the Common completing the network<sup>2</sup>.

Footpath THAT/6 starts opposite the access land of Marsh Meadow, just north of Dunston Green. Paths across Marsh Meadow and Dunston Green complete a circular route in the network of rights of way starting in the centre of Thatcham<sup>3</sup>.

The text of the draft ROWIP focusses almost exclusively on rights of way, and does not sufficiently address other types of access that complement and complete the rights of way network. We note that Section 60 of CROW specifies matters that a ROWIP must ‘contain’; it does not limit the ROWIP to those matters.

The Town Council welcomed the experimental traffic regulation order for Lawrences Lane, which provides a safer route for walkers and cyclists from the town to Bucklebury Common and its rights of way network. We hope that this will be made permanent (although that decision is outside the remit of the ROWIP).

**PROPOSAL:** The ROWIP should address access on Commons and access land that complements and completes the rights of way network (in the area of Thatcham, primarily Greenham and Crookham Common) – and this should be mentioned in at least one of the Actions.

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<sup>2</sup> See (with a slight variation): <https://www.visorando.com/en/walk-living-landscape-wild-walk-one/>

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.visorando.com/en/walk-bucklebury-common-circular-walk-from-tha/>

**PROPOSAL:** West Berkshire Council should have an integrated approach for promotion of routes for walking and cycling, encompassing routes on rights of way, routes partly on rights of way and partly relying on other types of access<sup>4</sup>, routes using other types of access (such as walks on Greenham and Crookham Common) and urban routes (such as history trails) and accessible access (such as the tramper at the Nature Discovery Centre).

## 7 Particular considerations for urban paths

### Case Study 4

Footpaths THAT/8/3 and THAT/20 and bridleway THAT/18 have been subsumed into the street structure of housing developments – often following a convoluted path across the heads of closes. These routes are not well waymarked at all of the ‘decision points’ for users.

Thatcham Town Council has twice bid from a grant from a GWR scheme for waymarking of a walking route from Thatcham Station to The Broadway – but has so far been unsuccessful. This route would use THAT/20. Due to the limited time that applications were open, we were not able to provide detailed costings. This would mainly use stickers on street furniture (as is used for National Cycle Route NC4), rather than finger posts.

**PROPOSAL:** The waymarking of urban rights of way should be improved where they have been subsumed into the road network.

**PROPOSAL:** West Berkshire Council (Highways and Rights of Way Teams) should work with the Town Council to prepare a stronger bid for the anticipated next round of the GWR grant scheme.

### Case Study 5

Footpath THAT/9 runs to the north of Westfield Road, providing rear garden access to its residents and a route from the ‘Rivers Estate’ to bus stops on Westfield Road and the convenience store on Northfield Road. However, it has no lighting and dark (it is surrounded by fences). It is now isolated from the rights of way network and has little utility for leisure and recreation.

The ROWIP focuses largely on paths in rural areas and on the urban fringes, and does not address the particular needs for urban paths – particularly those that are now used primarily for utility journeys.

**PROPOSAL:** The ROWIP should address the needs of urban paths, particularly lighting.

## 8 References

Many of the references consist only of a web link. These change frequently, due to restructuring of websites or revision of documents. The ROWIP has a ‘life’ of more than ten years, and the references need to be identifiable for this duration.

**PROPOSAL:** All of the references should include the title, author/publisher and date of publication (if known), as is already the case for references without a web link.

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<sup>4</sup> We note that some promoted routes elsewhere in West Berkshire rely to some extent on permissive paths.