

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
15 JANUARY 2025

RIGHTS OF WAY IMPROVEMENT PLAN

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. This report sets out the requirements and timeline for implementing a Rights of Way Improvement Plan.

Summary

2. A Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) is a statutory requirement under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. It is necessary to seek views of stakeholders and the public as part of the implementation process; therefore, this report also sets out the process and programme for this.

Recommendation

3. It is recommended that:
 - (a) The contents of the report are noted.
 - (b) It is noted that a future draft version of the ROWIP will be presented to Members of the Communities and Local Service Scrutiny Committee.

Anthony Hewitt
Assistant Director – Highway and Capital Projects

Background Papers

None

Joanne Roberts: Extension 3187
LC

Council Plan	This report contributes to the Council Plan through the involvement of Members in contributing to the development of operational policy.
Addressing inequalities	This report has no implications for addressing inequalities.
Tackling Climate Change	This report has no implications for tackling climate change.
Efficient and effective use of resources	The outcome of this report does not impact on the efficient and effective use of resources.
Health and Wellbeing	This report has implications on the health and wellbeing of residents of Darlington and could encourage walking and activity in outdoor spaces.
S17 Crime and Disorder	This report has no implications for crime and disorder.
Wards Affected	All
Groups Affected	The impact of the report on any individual group is considered minimal.
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not represent a change to the budget and policy framework.
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	No
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers.

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

- Darlington's public rights of way network covers a wide variety of landscapes and are both rural and urban in nature. Some paths are surfaced and many are tracks across countryside that are owned by farmers and landowners. There are 216 miles (346 kilometres) of rights of way in the borough that also includes the Teesdale Way passing through the southern part of the borough that is a long-distance route.
- Under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 the Council is required to implement a Rights of Way Improvement Plan every ten years and the current plan is now out of date. In order to update the plan with new priorities, it is suggested that the following process and programme is followed to ensure maximum opportunity for stakeholder engagement to obtain meaningful feedback to help inform the updated plan:

Date	Progress
15 January 2026	Initial report presented to Members of Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee for information.
Late Jan 2026	Letter to be sent to landowners, Parish Councils, Ramblers, Darlington Association on Disability, Friends of Stockton & Darlington Railway and equestrian groups with online link to the consultation questionnaire. Wider public consultation will be undertaken by press release, social media and member updates. There will be an opportunity for those who do not have

	access to the internet to complete a paper version with copies available and a telephone number will be available for queries. Timescale for initial consultation will be approximately six weeks.
February to April 2026	Analyse responses and draft initial version of Rights of Way Improvement Plan.
End of April until July 2026	Publish draft ROWIP and invite comments using the same method as the initial consultation, including informing members. Statutory guidance suggests the draft plan should be published for 12 weeks.
August 2026	Final comments reviewed and responded to, ROWIP finalised.
October 2026	ROWIP presented at Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee for final comments.
December 2026	ROWIP presented at Cabinet.

6. The process will commence with the initial consultation in January 2026 that will take the form of a questionnaire, a draft is included at Appendix 1 that will commence the process.
7. The Rights of Way Improvement Plan is intended to publish priorities for improvement and maintenance of both existing and potential new routes. Undertaking consultation will help inform this process.

Rights of Way Improvement Plan – Community & Stakeholder Questionnaire

Section 1: About You and your interest in Public Rights of Way

- 1. Would you describe yourself as: (tick all that apply)
 - Resident
 - Work in the Borough
 - Visitor

- 2. Are you answering this questionnaire on behalf of:
 - Yourself
 - An Organisation
 - Please tell us the name of the organisation (optional)

- 3. What is your interest in Public Rights of Way
 - Landowner
 - Other stakeholder
 - (please specify) (optional)
 - Member of the public

- 4. How often do you use public rights of way?
 - Daily
 - Weekly
 - Monthly
 - Rarely
 - Never

- 5. Which public right of way area do you use the most?
Please specify if applicable (optional)

- 6. What is your primary reason for using rights of way?
 - Walking for leisure
 - Dog walking
 - Cycling
 - Horse riding
 - Commuting
 - Other (please specify).....

Section 2: Current Experience of Public Rights of Way

- 7. How would you rate the overall condition of rights of way in your area?
 - Excellent
 - Good
 - Fair
 - Poor

8. What issues have you encountered? (Select all that apply)

- Overgrown vegetation
- Poor signage/wayfinding
- Blocked paths or unable to access a route
- Poor surface condition
- Lack of accessibility for wheelchairs/pushchairs
- Anti social behaviour
- Other (please specify).....

Please provide further details if needed

.....

Section 3: Accessibility and Safety of Public Rights of Way

9. Do you feel rights of way are safe and accessible for all users?

- Yes
- No
- Partially

10. Do you have a disability that reduces mobility?

- Walk with aids
- Wheelchair user
- Motorised scooter
- Visual impairment
- Other (please specify).....

11. What improvements would make them more accessible?

- Better surfacing
- Improved signage/wayfinding
- Removal of access control barriers eg. gates or stiles
- More lighting
- Other (please specify).....

Please provide further details if required

.....

Section 4: Priorities for Improvement

12. Which of the following should be the top priority?

- Maintenance of existing paths
- Creating new routes
- Improving signage and wayfinding
- Enhancing accessibility for disabled users
- Promoting awareness and usage
- Other (please specify).....

Please provide additional comments if required

.....

13. Are there specific routes or areas you think need urgent attention?

- Yes (please specify)
- No

Section 5: Additional Comments

14. Do you have any other suggestions or comments to help improve rights of way in your area?

.....