

Cheshire East Council Draft Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2026-36

Evidence base: network assessment

For consultation

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The Public Rights of Way Network

The Definitive Map and Statement together form the legal record of the public's rights to use Public Rights of Way (PROW). The Definitive Map shows where the routes run and which category of Public Right of Way a certain route is, whilst the Definitive Statement describes the route in text, normally its starting and finishing locations.

Cheshire East has a Public Rights of Way network totalling 1947 km or 1210 miles¹, equivalent to nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the length of its road network. The length of the PROW network has increased by 19km since the ROWIP of 2011. This will be due to a range of changes to the Definitive Map and Statement through Public Path Orders, such as diversions requested by landowners and creations of new PROW, and through Definitive Map Modification Orders, through which PROW are 'claimed' to be added to or deleted from the Definitive Map.

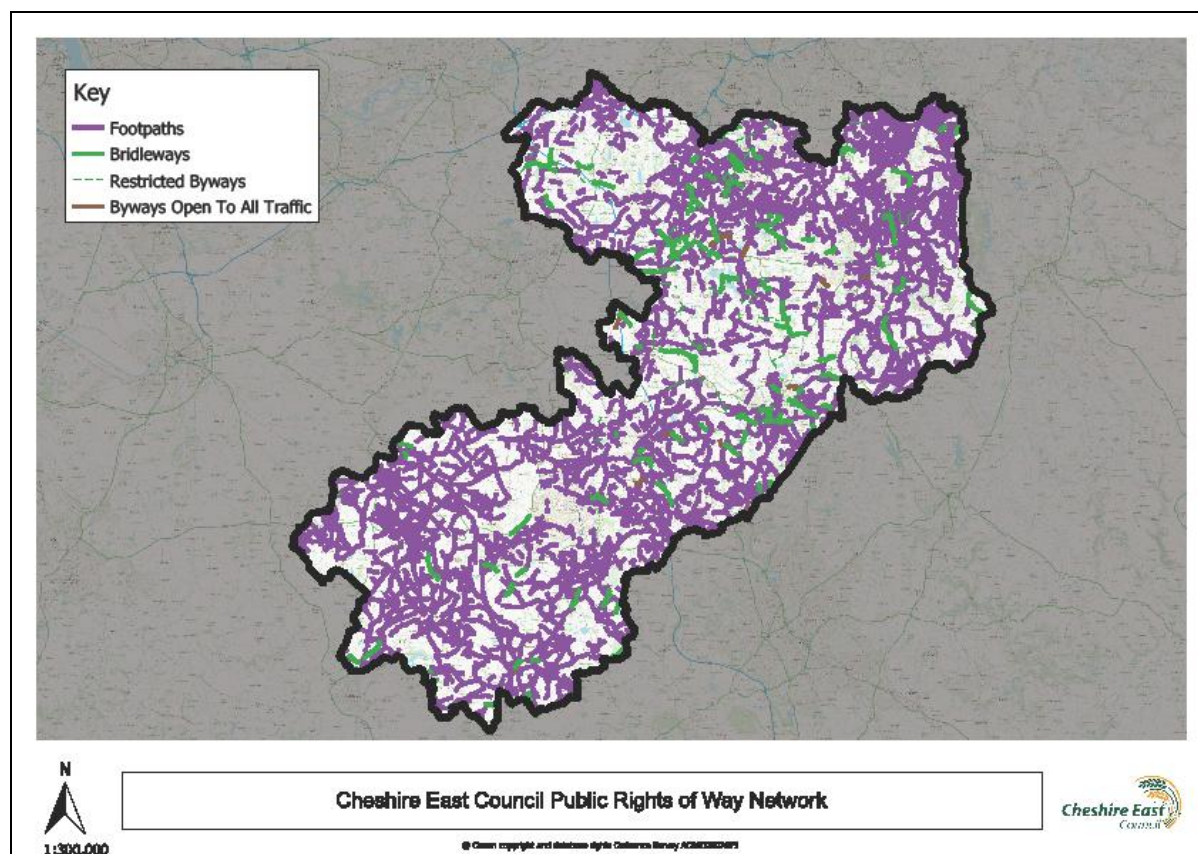


Figure 1 Map of the recorded Public Rights of Way network in Cheshire East

The four different categories of PROW, Footpaths, Public Bridleways, Restricted Byways and Byways Open to All Traffic, are available to different categories of user as summarised in the table below. 'Wheelers' are those who use prams, pushchairs,

¹ As recorded on the Countryside Access Management System database and Geographical Information System on 17th March 2025

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rollators, manual and powered wheelchairs and mobility scooters, although this does not mean that all routes are necessarily accessible for all users.

Category	Summary of user groups
Public footpath	Walkers and wheelers
Public bridleway	Walkers and wheelers, horse riders, cyclists
Restricted byway	Walkers and wheelers, horse riders, cyclists, horse-drawn vehicles
Byway open to all traffic	Walkers and wheelers, horse riders, cyclists, horse-drawn vehicles, motorised vehicles

Table 1 Categories of Public Rights of Way and who can use them

There is a variance between the Cheshire East data and the average across England in terms of the proportions of PROW in each category; Cheshire East has a larger proportion of routes available solely for walkers and wheelers and smaller proportions of the network available to other types of user when compared to the average across England. This comparison is set out in the graph and table below:

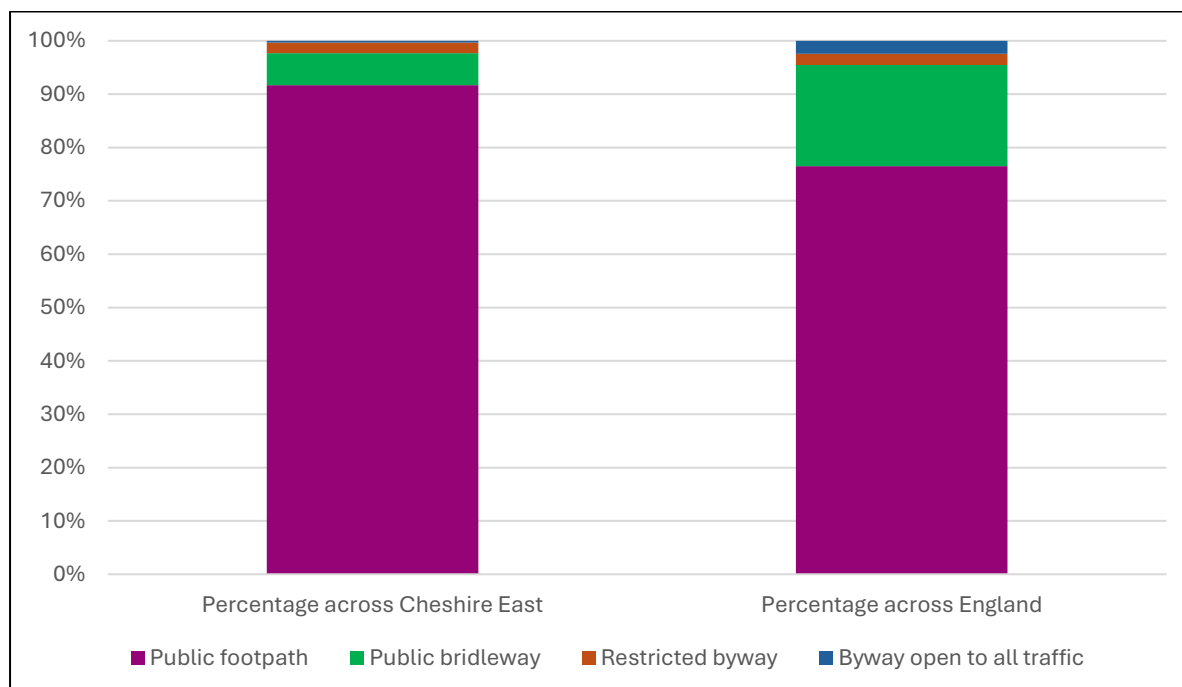


Figure 2 Length of PROW in category as a percentage of total length in Cheshire East compared to the average for England

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Category of PROW	Number of PROW in category ²	Total length of PROW in category (km) ²	Length of PROW in category as % of total length	Percentage across England ³
Public footpath	3194	1,792.9	91.7	76.5
Public bridleway	160	117.0	6.0	19.0
Restricted byway	50	38.8	2.0	2.1
Byway open to all traffic	18	6.4	0.3	2.5

Table 2 Numbers and lengths of PROW in Cheshire East and percentage of each category in Cheshire East compared to the average for England

Further, the distribution of the public rights of way network, and each category of public right of way within that network, is not even throughout the borough. The following map shows the density of public rights of way per kilometre grid square of the Cheshire East area. Whilst this map dates from 2010, the overall density will not have changed at this level of detail. The most densely clustered areas are to the north east of Macclesfield, Disley, Adlington and Mobberley, with isolated areas of high provision elsewhere.

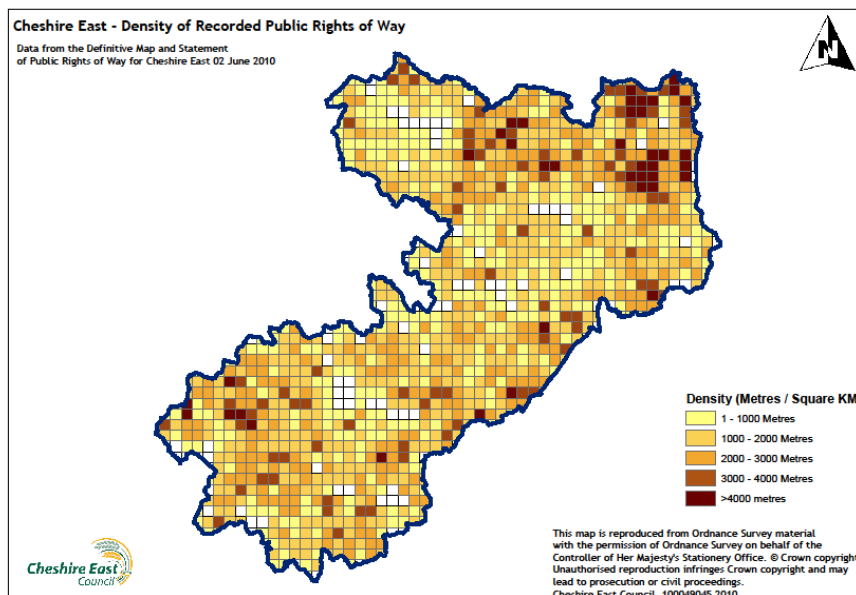


Figure 3 The density of recorded PROW across Cheshire East

² Countryside Access Management System database and Geographical Information System 21/01/2025

³ Ordnance Survey 2023

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The PROW network forms one part of the range of ways the public access the countryside. Other ways include permissive paths, open access land, country parks and linear routes, estate lands and the canal towpath network. Considering countryside access in its widest form, the Cheshire East Green Infrastructure Plan 2019⁴ identifies that the south west part of the Peak District National Park which extends into Cheshire East, *“is important for recreation and tourism due to the extensive open access areas, dense network of footpaths”*.

The Green Infrastructure Plan, under its activity theme of ‘Getting Outdoors Easily’, also identifies the following pinch points where provision of countryside access is limited:-

- land between Lyme Park and the Macclesfield Canal;
- land to the east of Macclesfield;
- land to the south west of Macclesfield;
- land in the Dane Valley between Congleton and Holmes Chapel;
- land to the north of Congleton;
- between Little Moreton Hall and the Macclesfield Canal;
- land near Alsager between the Trent and Mersey Canal and the Salt Line linear country park; and,
- connections between the Wheelock Rail Trail and Salt Line linear country parks linking Wheelock and Alsager.

The Plan explains that these areas *“primarily relate to urban fringes where there is relatively poor access from towns to major Green Infrastructure assets, for example due to public rights of way and other access routes being constrained or fragmented by infrastructure or difficult topography”* (page31).

⁴ [Cheshire East Green Infrastructure Plan 2019](#)

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What have we got for walkers and wheelers?

The 2011 ROWIP identified that provision for walkers is generally good across the borough as a whole, due to the fact that this category of user can access all types of PROW. However local fragmentation remains an issue:-

- routes do not always link together, requiring users to walk along rural roads;
- there is poor provision in the area west of Crewe and along the River Weaver north of Nantwich;
- access to the surrounding countryside is poor from the towns of Crewe, Macclesfield and Middlewich;
- there is a lack of route continuity along the River Weaver valley south of Nantwich to Audlem, other than along the Shropshire Union Canal;
- there is a lack of access in Doddington either side of the A51 to the south of Crewe, where there are a number of attractive landscape features;
- there is a lack of access around Combermere, to the south west of Nantwich, where again there are a number of attractive landscape features;
- access along the River Dane valley is poor, particularly between Radnor Bridge and Holmes Chapel and Holmes Chapel to Middlewich;
- links from Sandbach to Middlewich are lacking (other than via the canal towpath);
- route severance has been caused by the M56, M6 and, in particular, the A556;
- east-west links across the Macclesfield to Stockport mainline railway and the A523 in the Adlington area are poor; and,
- access in the area west of North Rode, either side of the A536, is sparse.

Drilling down to examine the extent of the network available to wheelers, the available data is extremely limited. The Council does not hold an asset inventory of the Public Rights of Way network and so does not have access to a record of its accessibility. Accessibility will depend on the terrain, path surface and width, and path furniture such as stiles, gates and bridges. The accessibility of the network is also impacted by the availability of information to the public about the routes, and the nature of disabilities and equipment used, such as wheelchairs and mobility scooters.

What have we got for horse riders and cyclists?

Even a quick glance at the map below clearly shows that the provision of the rights of way network that is open for use by horse riders and cyclists is a fraction - 8.3% by length - of that available to walkers, and also presents a very fragmented network. The risks posed from traffic using the rural roads which connect the routes that are available is regarded by many user groups and the Cheshire East Countryside Access Forum as a major issue for the borough. A few new Bridleways and Restricted Byways have been added to the Definitive Map through creation projects

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and Definitive Map Modification Order applications, increasing the percentage of the network available from 7.6% in 2011, but the overall provision and connectivity is lacking.

The Green Infrastructure Plan 2019 recognises that “*the Rights of Way Improvement Plans for the National Park and adjacent areas recognise that the bridleway network is generally more fragmented than the public right of way (PROW) network available for walkers*” (page 33).

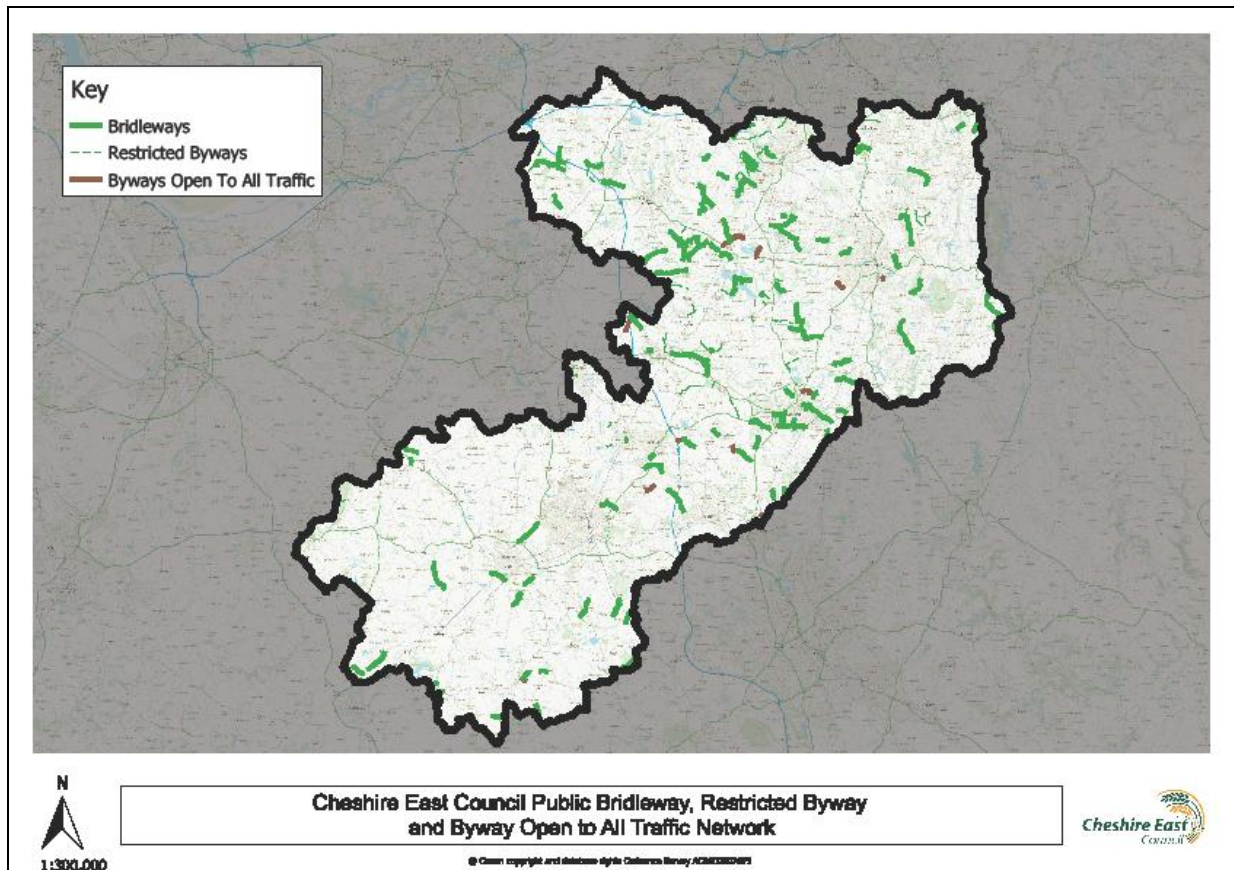


Figure 4 PROW available to horse riders and cyclists

What have we got for carriage drivers and recreational motor vehicles?

Horsedrawn vehicles can use Restricted Byways and Byways Open to All Traffic (BOATs). There are few of these in Cheshire East, totalling 2.3% of the network's length. Mechanically-propelled vehicles, such as 4WD vehicles, can use BOATs. There are even fewer in Cheshire East, comprising 0.3% of the length of the network. Such vehicles can also use unsealed unclassified roads in the countryside, but there remains uncertainty about the status of some routes and their maintenance.

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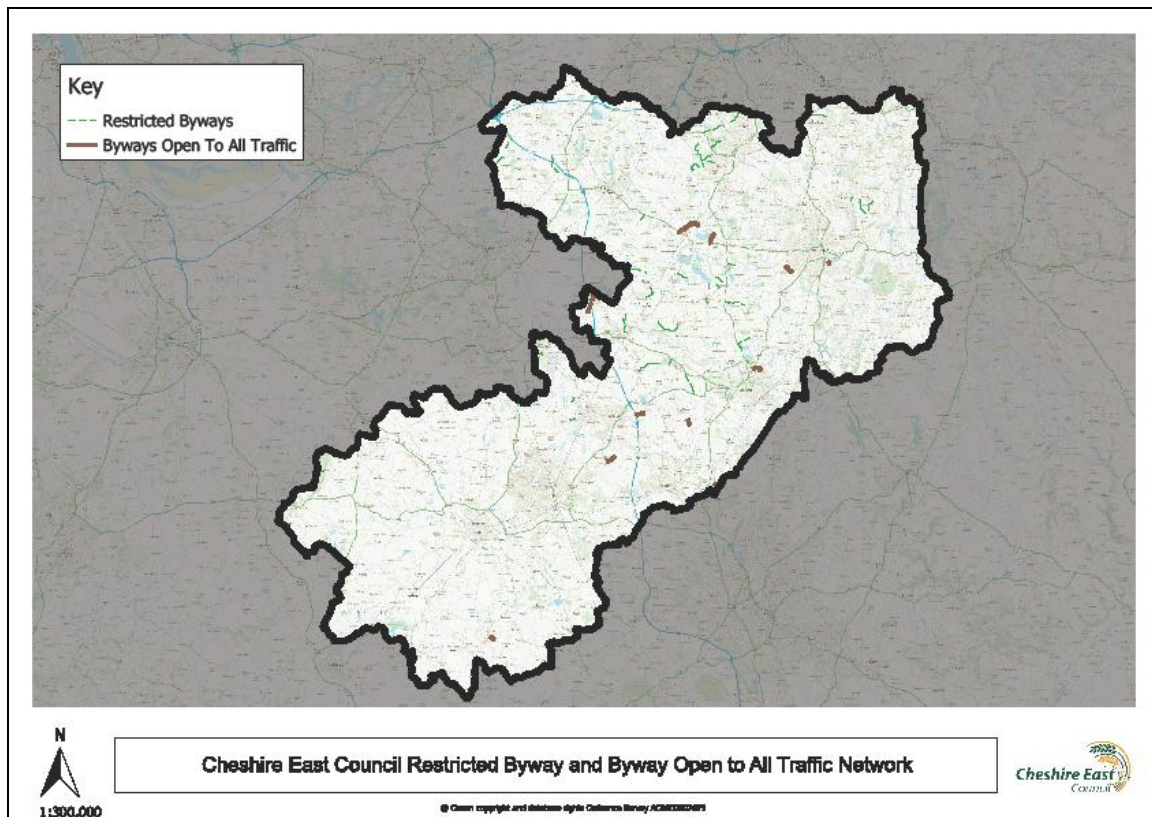


Figure 5 Restricted Byway and Byway Open to All Traffic network

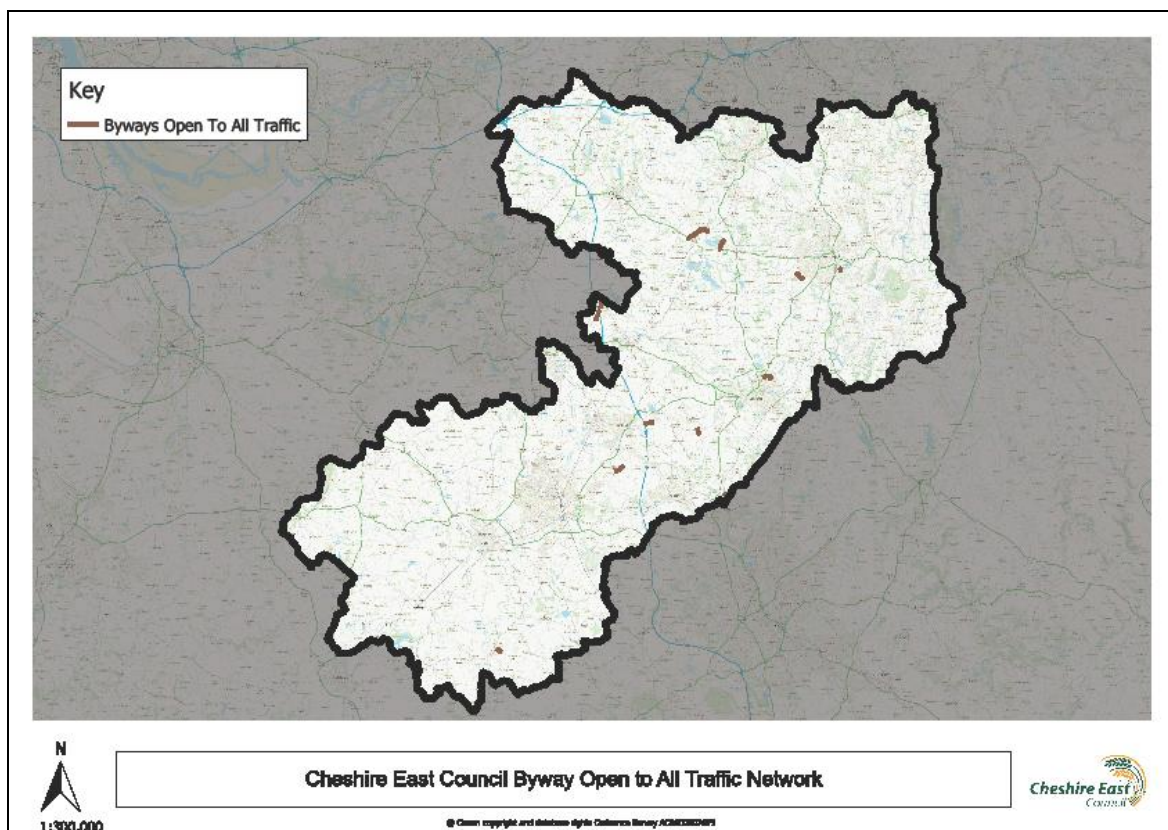


Figure 6 Byway Open to All Traffic network

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Other types of countryside access

As noted above, the public accesses the countryside through a range of routes and sites.

As well as the PROW network, the Council also manages a portfolio of country parks through its Countryside Ranger Service. These range from linear routes to Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and include:-

- Tegg's Nose Country Park, Macclesfield;
- Brereton Heath Local Nature Reserve, Congleton;
- Biddulph Valley Way, Congleton;
- Dane in Shaw Pasture Site of Special Scientific Interest, Congleton;
- Wheelock Rail Trail, Sandbach;
- Salt Line, Alsager;
- Lindow Common Site of Special Scientific Interest, Wilmslow;
- Sound Common Site of Special Scientific Interest, near Nantwich;
- Riverside Park, Macclesfield;
- Middlewood Way, Macclesfield-Poynton; and,
- Jacksons' Brickworks Local Nature Reserve, Poynton;

In addition, the Countryside Ranger Service manages sites and projects across the wider Bollin Valley Partnership landscape scale management area in the north of the borough, which includes permissive paths and paths on Council land.

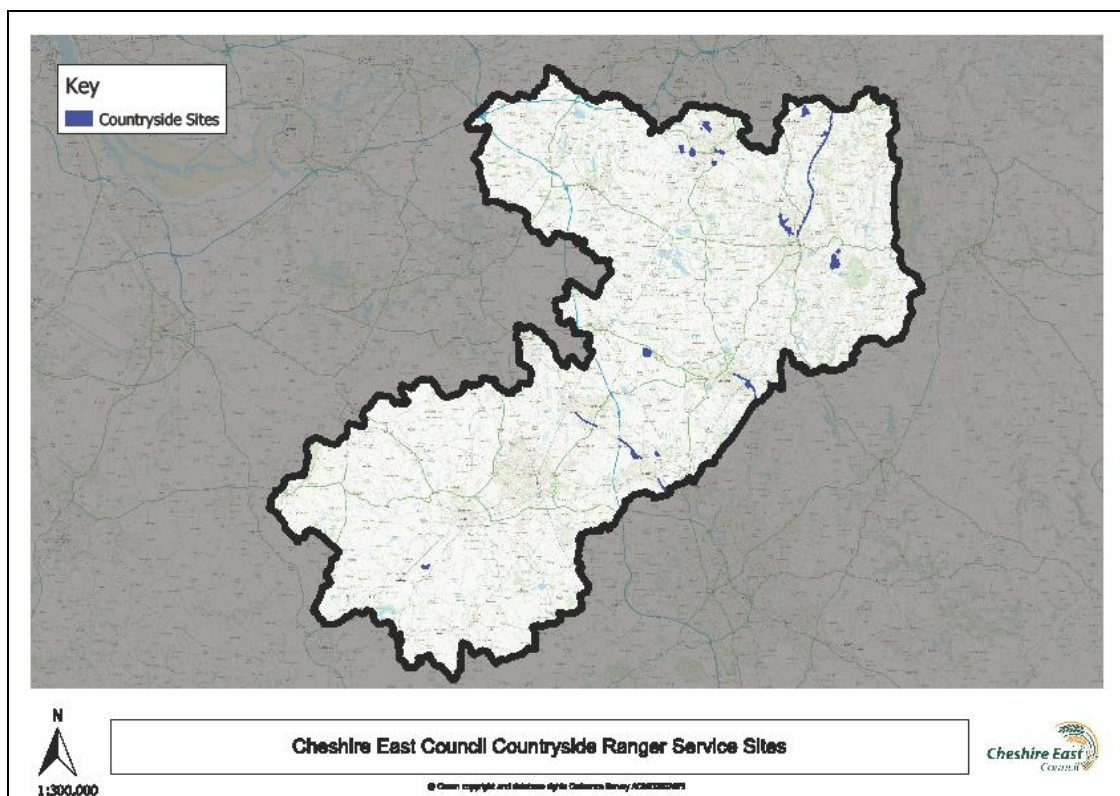


Figure 7 Cheshire East Council Countryside Ranger Service sites

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Woodland

Cheshire East has a limited number of woodland areas where public access is permitted. These include Macclesfield Forest, a site of over 415 hectares (1,025 acres) owned by United Utilities plc. Managed in partnership with Cheshire Wildlife Trust, this site offers a range of walking, wheeling, mountain biking and horse riding trails along with picnic, bird watching and fishing facilities.

Another notable area of woodland is that at Alderley Edge owned by the National Trust, which offers visitors a range of facilities including The Wizard's Wander easy-access circular walk.

The Council, amongst other landowners, is current planting new woodland areas as part of its zero carbon policy. Such projects may present opportunities for securing new public access, though with notable risk and maintenance liabilities..

Towpaths

The Canal & River Trust manage a network of 65 km (40 miles) of canal towpath in Cheshire East, spanning the Macclesfield, Trent and Mersey, Shropshire Union and Peak Forest Canals. Some of these are recorded as PROW, others not, but all offer public access for walkers with varying access opportunities for wheelers and cyclists.

In addition, the private Bridgewater Canal runs along the northern boundary of Cheshire East, offering a traffic-free route for walkers, wheelers and cyclists.

Permissive paths

There are a number of formally recorded permissive paths across the borough, where a landowner allows the public to use a particular route. Some of these are shown on Ordnance Survey mapping, whilst others will be more known to local residents. Such records may be in the format of a permissive path agreement with the Council, or through government agri-environment schemes. There are also a number of permissive paths which are not formally recorded.

Country estates

The public is invited, when walking and wheeling during site opening hours, to access the countryside within some country estates. These include sites managed by the National Trust such as its over 567 hectares (1,400 acres) historic parkland at Lyme Park and its 162 hectares (400 acres) woodland and countryside surrounding the River Bollin at Quarry Bank near Wilmslow.

Promoted routes

There are a large – and growing - number of medium or long distance routes which are entirely within or pass through Cheshire East on the PROW network. Of these routes, few are available for cyclists and horse riders. The majority of these routes

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are developed and promoted by organisations outside of the Council. At present, promoted routes do not receive any additional maintenance over and above the rest of the PROW network unless external grant funding is sourced – as was delivered on the Gritstone Trail as part of the Twin Trails project. However, it is recognised that promoted routes provide information to give potential users the confidence to explore the countryside.

Cheshire's Twin Trails Project

A partnership project, developed by Cheshire West and Chester Council and Cheshire East Council, delivered improvements to the infrastructure of Cheshire's Twin Trails in recognition of their value to the visitor economy.

The project secured £148,524.16 of Rural Development Programme for England (2014-20) funding under the growth programme as part of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development.

The funding was used to bring the two trails to a consistent and high quality, replacing stiles with gates, improving path surfacing, installing signage and interpretation for visitors.



The quality of the network

It is notoriously difficult to measure the quality of a public rights of way network. Indeed, The Countryside Agency research⁵ concluded that there were “*no robust, consistent and comprehensive datasets that could be used to measure overall progress*” in defining, maintaining and publicising their PROW networks.

Nationally, an ‘ease of use’ performance indicator was developed to make an overall assessment of an individual path. This included whether it was signposted, unobstructed and with surface and furniture in good repair. The assessment was undertaken by PROW Officers who covered 5% of the network each year. The PROW Team of the Council now works in partnership with volunteers from East Cheshire Ramblers and Peak and Northern Footpath Society who regularly undertake inspections of a wider proportion of the network. It is noted that such assessments consider the PROW network from the point of view of a walker, rather than a wheeler, cyclist, horse rider or horsedrawn vehicle driver.

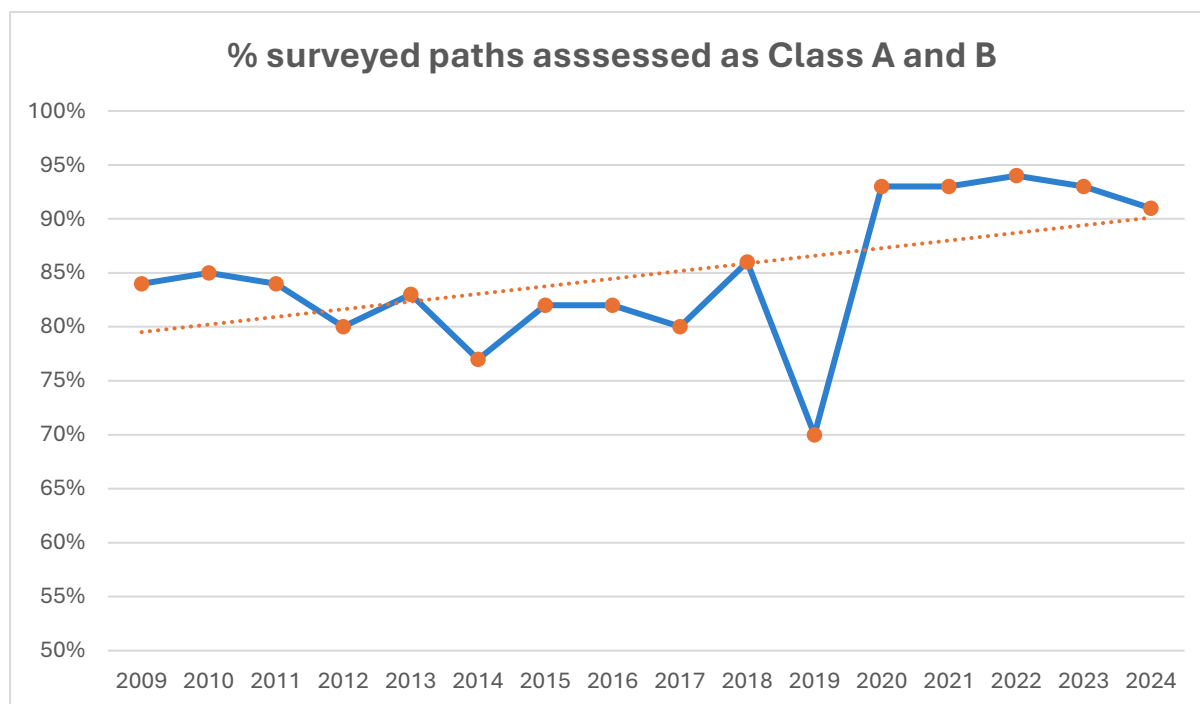


Figure 8 Random PROW ‘Ease of Use’ survey results

⁵ [Countryside Agency 2006 Public rights of way: a review of provision by highway authorities](#)

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Public satisfaction surveys

An indicative performance indicator is offered by the annual National Highways and Transport (NHT) Public Satisfaction Survey. This survey is conducted by post, on behalf of a participating highway authority with a sample size set by that authority. The survey results contain benchmarking indicators relating to walking and cycling including the local Public Rights of Way network. Questions assess the level of satisfaction with various factors relating to Public Rights of Way.

Although a limited data base, the results offer an indication of trends in public satisfaction for PROW within Cheshire East, which are largely in line with national trends shown by the average satisfaction scores of participating authorities. The data covers the period of the COVID pandemic and is therefore not necessarily indicative of trends outside of that time, but many indicate the impact of reduced output of Council resources coupled with the increased use of the network resulting in the deterioration in path surfaces and assets during that time.

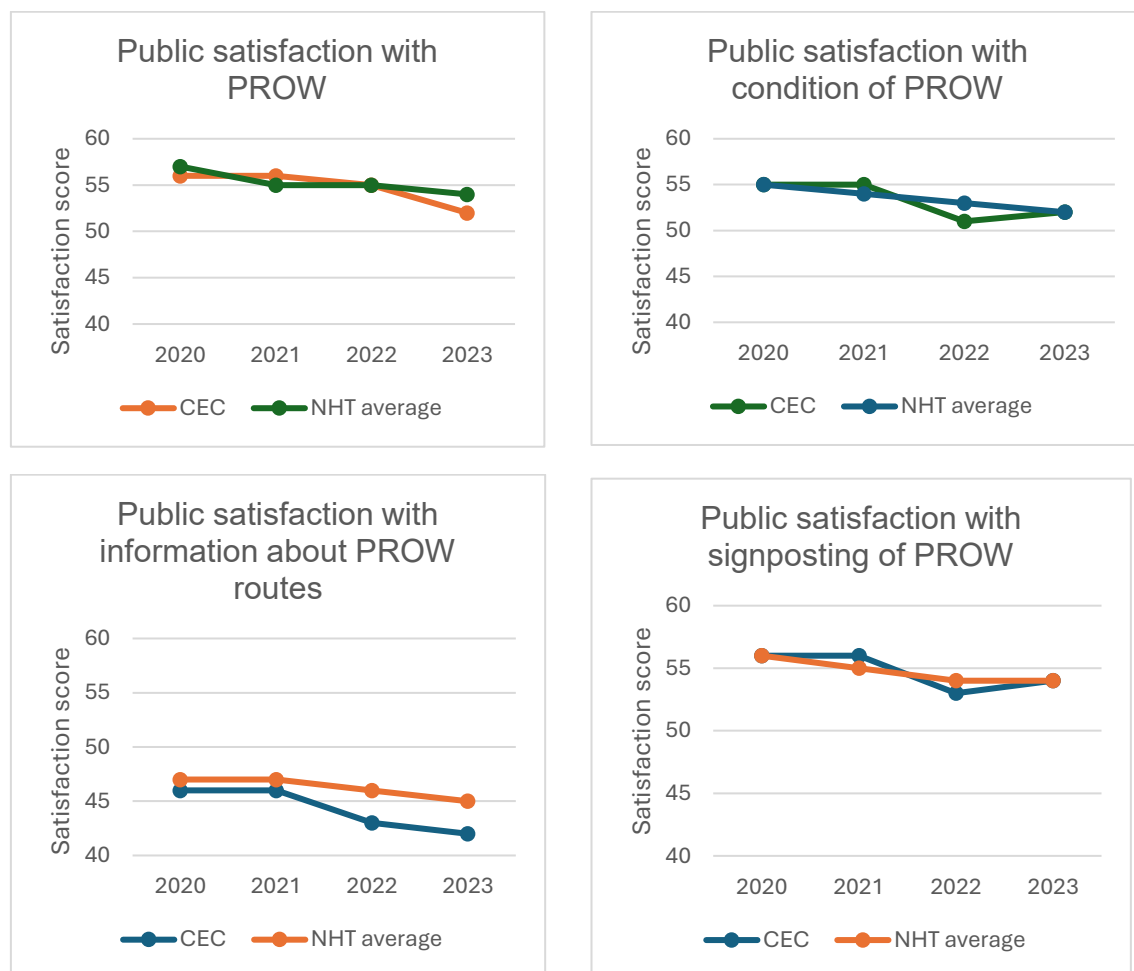


Figure 9 National Highways and Transport Public Satisfaction Survey results

“My sister-in-law, a tough long-distance walker who has experienced paths in all areas of the country from Land's End to John o' Groats (literally!), says she would put Cheshire East at the top of all local authorities for the excellent standard of their footpaths“

Obstructions and temporary closures on the PROW network

Fortunately, through good working relationships, the numbers of obstructions on the PROW are minimal. Issues, which are largely to do with the growing of crops on cross-field paths or the installation of temporary electric fences for livestock management, are normally resolved following a reminder to the farmer. Other, longer term obstructions such as buildings constructed on the line of a PROW, are identified from time to time and are sought to be resolved by the diversion of the PROW.

Temporary closures of PROW are permitted for works by land managers and utility companies, for example, with housing developments also featuring as a high proportion of such closures, normally with the provision of an alternative route for the public to use.

In recent years, temporary closures of some PROW have had to be put in place whilst funding was secured for the repair or replacement of bridges on the network. River erosion of bankside paths is another reason for such closures, the numbers of these fluctuating year on year. Further still, issues arising due to potential risks from trees alongside PROW are increasing in number and also result in short term closures of paths.

Accessibility

The quality of the network will depend on the assessor's viewpoint and is therefore subjective and varying. Different users may be looking for different qualities when using the network depending on their reason for use and their needs. As noted above, the Council does not have an inventory of assets against which to monitor condition or the physical accessibility of the network.

What the Council does record on an annual basis is the numbers of pieces of path furniture, such as stiles and gates, which are installed. The following graph shows the relative numbers of stiles being installed on the PROW network in recent years, compared to the number of pedestrian gates, with nearly twice as many gates installed in 2024-25 than stiles. The PROW team takes every opportunity to work with landowners to seek to replace stiles with more accessible gates. However, as stiles remain the property of the landowner, the landowner can retain the way a PROW crosses a boundary as a stile should they wish. The number of items of path furniture installed can be seen to have reduced during the COVID pandemic, due to

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reduced capacity of PROW Officers as their efforts, under restricted working practices, had to be focussed on the issues caused by the lockdowns. These figures are now increasing.

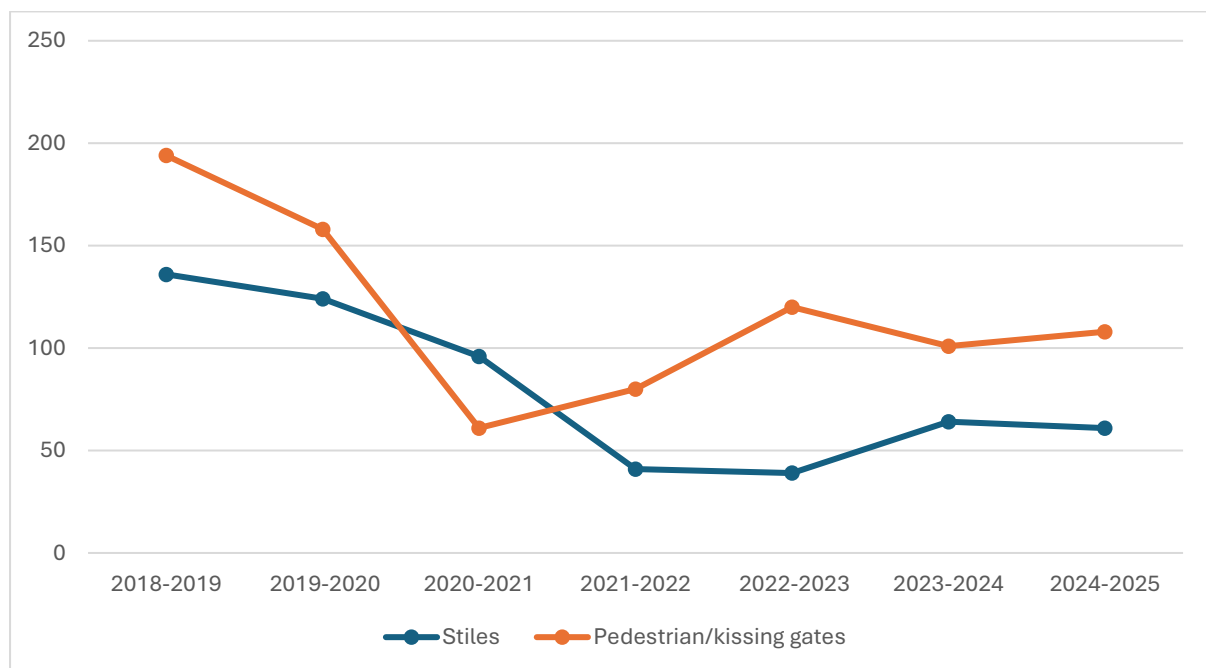


Figure 10 Comparison of numbers of stiles and pedestrian gates installed on the PROW network

The impact of climate change on the condition of the network

The impact of climate change increasing the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events is highlighting the vulnerability of the network to such events. The effects being witnessed include the erosion of path surfaces and the erosion of river banks and bridge abutments. The Met Office⁶ predicts that, compared to the UK's climate in 1990, by 2070 winters will be up to 30% wetter, with an increase in rainfall intensity of up to 25%. It is predicted that summers will be up to 60% drier, depending on the region, with rainfall intensity increasing by up to 20%. Such scenarios will affect path surfaces and cause river erosion issues.

The Met Office⁷ also notes, though with the caveat that forecast models offer less confidence in this area, that there will be a slight increase in the number and intensity of winter storms, in the UK in the future, including disproportionately more severe storms. Such scenarios, particularly when coupled with wet ground conditions, will increase the frequency of tree and branch failures which can obstruct PROW and cause risk to users. To give an indication of this increasing area of work, in the central area of the borough in 2022-23 there were 25 tree issues reported on the PROW network, rising to 44 in 2023-24 and 58 in 2024-25.

⁶ [Climate change in the UK - Met Office](#) 14th April 2025

⁷ [UK and Global extreme events – Wind storms - Met Office](#) 14th April 2025

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The Cheshire East Countryside Access Forum has identified the need to recognise the impact of climate change on countryside access networks, and in turn the usability of those networks for local residents and visitors alike. The Forum also recognised changing patterns in the visitor economy under climate change, and the potential increase in use of the networks, as destinations for outdoor activities alter across the globe. The need to develop an adaption strategy was, therefore, highlighted.

In 2023 the National Trust⁸ published a report which explored the impact of climate change on the land and buildings of the charity which owns many sites offering countryside access. It recognised that climate change affects the carrying capacity of the ground, resulting in changes to path maintenance and approaches being required. By setting out potential options, thresholds and tipping points, the Trust is seeking to assist its site managers in adapting to the impact of climate change.

Amongst a range of policy requests, the document called for a new emphasis on climate adaptation to match that on climate mitigation, which is already taking place through measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

⁸ [A Climate for Change: Adaptation and the National Trust](#)

Conclusion

The PROW network of Cheshire East is extensive, but not equality distributed in geographic location or availability to the different categories of users. Further, the network is fragmented by roads.

The quality of the network is largely regarded and assessed as being high. However, the accessibility of the network to users with differing needs is, to a large extent unknown, and considered to be relatively restricted.

"During this last year of lockdown, my brother and I have been taking regular weekly walks, covering virtually all of the footpaths in the Poynton area, which we have not done for many years.

We have been so impressed with the standard of all these paths - stiles, gates, waymarks, signposts all in excellent condition, that our walks have been a pleasure.

I am 86, my brother is 79 and has Parkinson's Disease, and we have had no difficulty in walking all the routes"

"