

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

For consultation

Foreword

Foreword

In an increasingly sedentary and digital world, it has never been more important for people to access our wonderful greenspaces to walk, wheel, cycle and horse ride. The Public Rights of Way and wider countryside access paths are the vital network that enables so many of our active travel and outdoor leisure pursuits to take place.

Therefore, this network plays a fundamental role in the wellbeing of our residents, the connectivity of our communities and in the appeal to our visitors. The value in maintaining, improving and promoting them is therefore abundantly clear and highly important, both to achieve our vision for Cheshire East and to improve all our daily lives.



Councillor Mark Goldsmith

Chair of Highways and Transport Committee

Access to the countryside and open spaces is widely acknowledged as a significant contributor to physical and mental wellbeing. Public Rights of Way play a large part in facilitating this, and maintaining, improving, and developing the network is of major importance so that as many people as possible are encouraged to, and are able to, access the countryside.

Cheshire East is fortunate in having an extensive and well maintained network. However increased demand, the affects of climate change, and financial constraints, mean that the Rights of Way Improvement Plan is more important than ever. The plan will allow resources to be focussed on where they can be used most advantageously to make improvements.



Cheshire East Local Access Forum is committed to using its influence in a constructive manner to help in developing and expanding access so that everyone is able to enjoy the countryside.

Maurice Palin

Chair of Cheshire East Countryside Access Forum



The Forum is a statutory body set up under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, to provide advice on access to the countryside. See www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/cecaf.

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Introduction

Introduction

What is a Rights of Way Improvement Plan?

Section 60 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000 requires local authorities to publish a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) and review it every 10 years.

The aim of a ROWIP is that it prompts the local authority to go further than simply meeting the basic legal duties for maintaining Public Rights of Way (PROW), recognising the multiple benefits that the use of a connected and accessible network of paths can bring.

To produce a ROWIP a full assessment must be made of the needs of the public using the Public Rights of Way and wider countryside access networks, both now and in the future, including the following:

- the extent to which local rights of way and other countryside access resources meet the present and likely future needs of the public;
- opportunities for exercise and other forms of open air recreation and enjoyment of the authority's area; and,
- the accessibility of local rights of way and other routes to blind or partially-sighted people and others with mobility problems.

Following this assessment, which can be read in the Appendix, local authorities are required to prepare a statement of action setting out how improvements to PROW and wider countryside access could be achieved. We have included an aspirational statement of action which sets out what we would like to achieve, if resources allow.

Cheshire East Council published its first ROWIP in 2011. Many of the findings and objectives of that strategy will remain valid now. These include the extent and connectivity of the path network, the benefits of outdoor activities and countryside access, and the barriers to that access. In contrast, some things will have changed in the years since, including the relative age and health profiles of our communities, the pressures on local authority and household budgets and the increasingly evident impacts of climate change. As a society we also have a greater appreciation, learnt through the Covid pandemic lockdowns, of the vital importance of greenspace and countryside access for both mental and physical wellbeing.

The first Cheshire East ROWIP proved useful in increasing the profile of PROW and wider countryside access within the Council and outside it. It enabled integration with strategies of other departments and external organisations. It also provided leverage for funding applications and justification for requests for new or improved paths from developers through the planning system. Learning from the previous ROWIP, the statement of action of this strategy will not be focussed at a path-specific level, more the focus will be on wider actions through which improvements can be delivered.

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The Cheshire East context

By population, the Council is the third largest unitary authority in the North West and the sixteenth largest in the country¹, providing services for 412,500 residents², plus visitors. Forming part of the historical county of Cheshire, the borough covers a mix of rural and urban environments spanning from the Peak District in the east to the Sandstone Ridge in the west. At nearly 2000km, the length of the PROW network in Cheshire East would stretch from Crewe to Rome.

The strategic policy context

PROW and countryside access networks are recognised as contributing to active travel, leisure, health and wellbeing and the visitor economy. As such, national and local policy and guidance refers to the importance of protecting and enhancing PROW and countryside access networks.

National level

The National Planning Policy Framework, which guides development, states that *“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”*³. Likewise, Active Travel England identifies PROW as forming *“important networks of traffic-free, active travel routes”* which *“people use ... for recreational purposes, as many provide attractive routes through nature. They may also be used for travel with a specific purpose, such as commuting or travelling to facilities.”*⁴

The government's 25 Year Environment Plan⁵ published in 2018 - which featured a public bridleway on the front cover - identified a need to invest in active travel and access for all so as to improve inclusive access to green and blue spaces for wellbeing. The subsequent Environmental Improvement Plan 2023⁶ – which featured the same photo on the front cover of its executive summary – continued the aim of investing in active travel and highlighted the need for people to be responsible in their engagement with the natural environment.

Local level

At a borough-level, the aims of the ROWIP contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan vision of *Enabling prosperity and wellbeing for all in Cheshire East*, through the

¹ Cheshire East Council website 2025: [Current Facts and Figures](#)

² [Cheshire East Plan 2025-29](#)

³ [National Planning Policy Framework - GOV.UK](#), paragraph 105

⁴ [Public rights of way | Active Travel England](#)

⁵ [25 Year Environment Plan](#)

⁶ [Environmental Improvement Plan](#)

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contribution to each of the plan's commitments: 1 - *Unlocking prosperity for all*; 2 - *Improving health and wellbeing*; and, 3 – *An effective and enabling council*².

PROW and country parks are identified within the Council's Local Plan as forming part of the strategic green infrastructure of Cheshire East, as are cycle routes, greenways, canals, estate parklands, river corridors and key areas including those connected by the Gritstone Trail⁷. Supplementary Local Plan documents referring to the value of PROW include the Green Infrastructure Plan⁸, the Green Spaces Strategy⁹ and the Design Guide¹⁰. The Local Plan Developer Contributions Supplementary Planning Document states that "*Public Rights of Way (PROW) are an essential network of connections that enable healthy and active lifestyles*"¹¹. In addition, many Neighbourhood Plans contain reference to and aspirations for PROW.

The PROW and countryside access network can be found in rural countryside locations where they will be used mainly for leisure activities, as they are most often thought of, and are therefore contribute to the Cheshire East Rural Action Plan¹².

The network also extends to within urban areas where it forms vital routes for getting around. The network is therefore well positioned to provide viable and safe alternative routes for local communities by encouraging people out of their cars and to travel by active means of transport, whether on foot, by wheeling - those who use prams, pushchairs, rollators, manual and powered wheelchairs and mobility scooters - by bike or by horse. In recognition of the contribution PROW play in connecting people with places, the ROWIP is integrated into the council's Local Transport Plan and emerging Active Travel Strategy. By reducing private car usage, the ROWIP also links to the council's Air Quality Strategy¹³ and Air Quality Action Plan¹⁴ and Carbon Neutrality Action Plan¹⁵.

The PROW network is freely open to everyone throughout the year. The Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy for the population of Cheshire East 2023-2028 includes the key deliverable of "*Prioritising new walking and cycling infrastructure in areas with higher levels of deprivation and promoting active travel*"¹⁶ whilst the Cheshire East Public Health Annual Report 2022¹⁷ highlights the co-benefits of reducing the impact of climate change.

⁷ [Cheshire East Local Plan Policy SE 6 Green infrastructure](#)

⁸ [Cheshire East Council Green Infrastructure Plan 2019](#)

⁹ [Cheshire East Council Green Space Strategy 2020](#)

¹⁰ [Cheshire East Council Design Guide Volume 2](#)

¹¹ [Cheshire East Council Developer Contributions Supplementary Planning Document](#)

¹² [Cheshire East Rural Action Plan 2022](#)

¹³ [Cheshire East Council Air Quality Strategy](#)

¹⁴ [Cheshire East Council Air Quality Action Plan](#)

¹⁵ [Cheshire East Carbon Neutrality Action Plan](#)

¹⁶ [The Cheshire East Partnership Joint Local Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2023-2028](#)

¹⁷ [Cheshire East Public Health annual 2022 report](#)

Introduction

Maintaining a high quality, accessible, natural environment is essential in supporting the visitor economy, with both local users and visitors from further afield contributing through stopping off at a café following a walk, buying a new set of boots, or staying in the area, for example. The Cheshire East Visitor Economy Strategy 2023-2028¹⁸ recognises the importance and potential of the countryside and walking and cycling routes in the borough, especially post-pandemic, with an increase in dog ownership, increased appeal of outdoor experiences and the increased consumer focus on health and wellbeing.

With the Peak District National Park covering a significant proportion of the upland area of the borough, the Peak District National Park Management Plan 2023-2028¹⁹ is clear as it sets out the aim of “*Ensuring the existing rights of way network is more accessible and connected to recreation hubs*”.

¹⁸ [Cheshire East Visitor Economy Strategy 2023-2028](#)

¹⁹ [Peak District National Park Management Plan 2023-28](#)

Opportunities and challenges

Opportunities and challenges

The evidence base contained in the appendix includes an assessment of the current PROW and countryside access network and the demand for that network. Together with comments from stakeholders both within and external to the Council, this has drawn out the challenges faced in seeking to manage that network and to deliver improvements. It has also identified the opportunities that exist in doing so. These are summarised in the tables below.

Opportunities
Benefits of the PROW and countryside access network for health and wellbeing
Benefits of the PROW and countryside access network for active travel – walking, wheeling and cycling for local journeys
Benefits of the PROW and countryside access network for enhancing respect for the environment
Benefits of the PROW and countryside access network for enhancing a sense of community and a connection to and pride of place
Integration with the Council's strategic documents, especially the emerging Local Transport Plan and Active Travel Strategy
Partnership working with local communities and organisations
Volunteering on the PROW and countryside access network
Agri-environmental land management schemes which may include incentives for land managers to provide public access
Targeted improvements to the PROW and countryside access network, within the scale of landscape scale planning and changes
Landscape restoration projects through the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, such as those for tree-planting, natural capital and biodiversity net gain, offering potential sites for inclusive public access (with appropriate consideration of associated maintenance and liabilities)
Connecting people and places
Improving connectivity in the PROW and countryside access network as new developments go through the planning system
Changing patterns of visitors leading to a potential increase in visitor numbers

Opportunities and challenges

Challenges
Climate change
Resources (time and budget)
Increased and geographic concentrations of visitor demand causing pressure at some key destinations at some locations
Dated, complex and lengthy statutory processes, with uncertain outcomes, involved for any change, such as a diversion, on the Definitive Map and Statement, the legal record of PROW, leading to a reluctance on behalf of land managers to engage
Maintaining the path network on the ground within a working agricultural landscape
Reliance on the public reporting issues on the PROW network to the Council – there is no proactive inspection
Pressures from development across Cheshire East as sites are allocated for development within the Local Plan
Ensuring that developments adequately contribute to both initial capital investment and maintenance costs of public access schemes, ensuring that all factors are addressed (e.g. liabilities, maintenance, inspection, sign off, landownership, not sterilising land parcels)
Legislative changes, for example the Deregulation Act 2015 resulting in increased pressure on PROW legal order process resources
Road safety where the PROW and countryside access networks are fragmented
The confidence of members of the public in using the PROW and countryside access network due to concerns about, for example, encountering livestock, getting lost, walking across private land
Uncertainty for land managers about national policy, for example in agri-environment schemes
Impacts on land managers arising from the public's use of PROW and countryside access networks

What we will aim to do

Draft vision

The vision for the ROWIP sets out the aspiration for PROW and wider countryside access networks in the borough:-

*To contribute to the health, wellbeing and prosperity of our residents
through inclusive and accessible path networks
that encourage outdoor activities, active travel
and more visitors to Cheshire East*


Draft objectives

The network assessment and demand assessment considered in the evidence base identified a gap of what could be done to help provide a network which matches the current and potential demand for that network. Actions to bridge that gap can be organised into 3 themes or objectives.


Mirroring the aims of the Council's emerging Active Travel Strategy, we will aim to:

- *maintain* the PROW and countryside access network to connect green spaces, open countryside and urban areas, so it is available for the public to use and enjoy;
- *improve* the PROW and countryside access network for more people to access whether by foot, wheeling, horse or bike and by adding to it where we can so it is more connected; and,
- *promote* the PROW and countryside access network so that it is used responsibly by as many people as possible and the benefits that can bring are seen by those users, local communities, businesses and landowners.


The draft objectives of the ROWIP are therefore:



We will aspire to **maintain** the PROW and countryside access network so it is available for use by more people



We will aspire to **improve** the PROW and countryside access network so it is more accessible and, by creating missing links, more connected for use by more people



We will aspire to **promote** the PROW and countryside access network so more people enjoy and benefit from its considerate use

What we will aim to do

Draft statement of action

To achieve those objectives, we have set out a number of actions in the tables below. This list is aspirational – it outlines what we would like to achieve if resources, both time and money, allow. Due to the finite nature of such resources, it will not be possible to make all the desired improvements to PROW and countryside access network paths and processes related to them. Action must therefore be targeted to where it is most beneficial within the constraints of the available resources.

What can be delivered will depend on a host of influences including those internal to the Council, those within partner organisations and communities, and those on a national and even international scale – as demonstrated during the Covid pandemic.

Successful delivery and sustainability of both statutory duties funded from the Council's own budgets and non-statutory actions funded from external sources will depend on working in partnership. This will include collaboration with land managers – with landowner agreement being key to the delivery of some actions listed – with users, suppliers, community groups and others. In some actions, the Council will be the lead delivery partner, in others it will act as the enabler.

In the following tables, the priority of the action is indicated by stars, ranging between 1 star indicating a lower priority and 6 stars indicating a higher priority.

What we will aim to do

Draft statement of action - *maintain*

Ref.	Action	Partners	Priority score
M1	Undertake statutory duties to maintain the network, including vegetation management, surfacing, signposting, path furniture (e.g. bridges and gates)	Land managers Volunteers User groups	*****
M2	Increase data on usage of sites and networks to inform policies	Land managers	*****
M3	Seek opportunities for other ways to maintain the PROW network, for example in partnership with local communities	Town & Parish Councils Community Partnerships	*****
M4	Expand the use of volunteering in maintaining the network through recruitment to new Volunteer Co-ordinator position to coordinate work across Green Infrastructure and partners	Volunteers Partners	*****
M5	Develop a prioritisation system for PROW network to focus resources on most valuable paths	User groups	*****
M6	Identify potential climate change adaption changes needed to PROW furniture (bridges, gates) and surfaces/drainage and manage expectations of users in condition of routes	Land managers User groups	****

What we will aim to do

Draft statement of action - *improve*

Ref.	Action	Partners	Priority score
I1	Review the specification design code for PROW and countryside access networks within the emerging Local Plan, referring to guidance such as Sport England's Active Design Guide, British Horse Society guidance, Outdoor Accessibility Guidance, Local Transport Note 1/20 Cycle Infrastructure Design	Planning team	*****
I2	Collaborate with land managers to promote best practice and to reduce the number of stiles on the network, by replacement with gaps or gates, in line with the emerging accessibility policy	Land managers	*****
I3	Set out a policy on acceptable specifications for PROW being diverted through legal order processes, to cover width, surface, furniture, gradient, etc. in line with the emerging accessibility policy	User groups	*****
I4	Through partnership with local communities encourage engagement with, improvement of and promotion of local PROW and countryside access network routes	Town & Parish Councils Community Partnerships	*****
I5	Develop a guide for developers to encourage early accommodation of PROW and countryside access networks in new developments, such as Handforth Garden Village, to include consideration of legal processes, landownership, capital investment, specifications and future maintenance	Developers Planning team	*****
I6	Set out a policy on how the accessibility and inclusivity of the PROW and countryside access network will be improved	User groups	****
I7	Increase the accessibility and inclusivity of the PROW and countryside access network in key geographical areas and destinations	User groups	****

What we will aim to do

I18	Identify gaps in PROW and countryside access networks that could be linked by new routes for active travel and leisure, locally and pan-borough, for example the Greater Bollin Trail aspiration	User groups Active travel teams Land managers	****
I19	Identify potential funding sources for PROW and countryside access network improvement projects	Stakeholders	****
I110	Process diversions for landowners and in the public interest, supporting the removal of paths from gardens and farmyards and away from properties	Landowners User groups	***
I111	Reduce the list of anomalies on the Definitive Map and Statement, the legal record of Public Rights of Way	Land managers User groups	***
I112	Process Definitive Map Modification Order applications ('claims' for PROW) to determination (decision), reducing the waiting list to under 12 months	Applicants Land managers User groups	*
I113	Consolidate the Definitive Map and Statement – publish a Cheshire East legal record of Public Rights of Way, to replace that from the 1950s	Land managers	*

What we will aim to do

Draft statement of action - *promote*

Ref.	Action	Partners	Priority score
P1	Integrate the objectives of the ROWIP in key relevant Council strategies and those of other key organisations	Council teams Partners	*****
P2	Work with colleagues on active travel and available walking, wheeling and cycling routes to school to encourage a reduction in the number of vehicle journeys	Active Travel team	*****
P3	Engage with public health teams and social prescribers to encourage the use of PROW and countryside access networks for outdoor physical activities	Health teams	*****
P4	Work with land managers to encourage responsible use of PROW and countryside access networks	Land managers	*****
P5	Promote alternative routes to help protect sensitive sites and spread visitor pressure away from country park and town park sites and to build confidence in wider exploration and discovery	Land managers	****
P6	Develop Green Infrastructure team communications plan tailored to local, regional and national audiences	Communications team	***
P7	Proactively encourage PROW social media with partners	Partners	***
P8	Refresh accessible PROW and countryside access route leaflets in a digital and accessible format, and expand to include new and improved routes, classing as 'for all', 'for many' and 'for some'	User groups	***

What we will aim to do

P9	Gather data about the features on the PROW network, such as surfaces and path furniture, so it can be shared online to help people make better informed decisions on their visit to encourage outdoor activities	User groups	***
P10	Promote routes to encourage usage to support rural visitor economy businesses	Land managers Visitor Economy team Businesses	*

What we will aim to do

Monitoring

Monitoring the delivery of the ROWIP helps us to understand what is working well and helps to demonstrate the difference the investment in the PROW and countryside access network is making in terms of achieving our vision and objectives. Likewise, monitoring also helps to show the impact of any lack of investment of resources and where we can do things better.

We aim to monitor the progress of this ROWIP and the subsequent implementation plans through the following means, where resources permit:

- Annual PROW team reports to the Highways and Transport Committee;
- Quarterly reports to the Cheshire East Countryside Access Forum;
- Surveys such as the National Highways and Transport Network Satisfaction Surveys;
- 'Ease of use' surveys undertaken by volunteers;
- Research projects, for example Motability University of Westminster project; and,
- The Council's Digital Influence Panel.