

Durham County Council Rights of Way Improvement Plan Consultation Draft

The City of Durham Trust welcomes the opportunity to comment on the fourth ROWIP. Our general comments on the Plan are:

A state of the network assessment. An understanding of the strategic approach to PROW improvement in the Plan would be considerably improved if the current state of the network is revealed. It should be possible after producing three earlier Plans to summarise how the network has changed over that time and its current state. With this information, it would then be possible to assess if the mix of strategic policies is adequate for the scale of the task ahead, and thereby to make a stronger case, if necessary, for resources to improve the network. Furthermore, information on the proportions and total length of the network that are in different states of usability is essential for the proposed continuous monitoring and regular reviewing of the policies to have meaning for both internal and external stakeholders. Indeed, it is important to know if the anticipated increase in demand for walking is against a continuing decline in resources and the quality of the network, and if increased resources towards improvement might result from the case made in this Plan.

The strategic aim and objectives of the Plan. DCC asks if it has identified the right strategic objectives and if any have been missed. Our view is that these are a mixture of objectives, policies and initiatives and could be made more coherent as shown below.

DCC Strategic Objectives	Coherent Strategic Objectives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Promoting</i> a PROW network that contributes to the Green Economy by marketing the County’s high-quality environment. • <i>Empowering</i> communities and individuals to ‘Move More’. • <i>Ensuring</i> the County’s PROW are accessible to people of all abilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Maintaining</i> a high-quality access network <i>Enhancing</i> accessibility to people of all abilities <i>Engaging</i> communities and individuals in PROW <i>Developing</i> PROW in and around new developments <i>Promoting</i> the PROW network <i>Protecting</i> PROW from loss or damage.

The strategic choices. If it is the case that there will be insufficient resources available to fully meet the aim of achieving a network fit for the 21st Century within the timescale of the Plan, then the Plan must have considered trade-offs. For example, will all PROW be improved to the desired standard or will only a proportion be improved? Will the resources to be invested in popular routes be at the expense of general maintenance resulting in a managed decline of the lesser used network? How much of the network improvement can be carried out by local communities? A frank assessment of the potential to deal with the deficiencies revealed by the previous iterations of this Plan would be extremely helpful in understanding and supporting the priorities of this Plan.

Policies 1 to 6. The Trust strongly supports the policies and actions that flow from them. Following on from the comments above, there could be a benefit in some redrafting of the 6 policies to relate directly to the six consistent strategic objectives set out above (or a version of the consistent strategic objectives acceptable to the Council). In this way, it will be possible to follow progress from strategic intention into priorities, action, monitoring and review.

Policy 1 Managing and Delivering a High-Quality Access network. The Policy is seeking to deliver a huge range of priorities. As expressed above, there are choices to be made if resources are limited and not all can be the highest priority. Section B of the policy refers to only creating new paths when there is a need. It is not clear whether this caveat also applies to “improving existing routes” earlier

in the sentence. The document does not indicate how needs will be determined. Need is not the same as demand, and cannot be judged solely on evidence of existing use. The importance of the PROW network for everyday journeys, as well as leisure, needs to be recognised, and need may be identifiable through referring to Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans and similar analysis.

The inclusion of a major high-quality walking and cycling scheme on the route of the former Stockton and Darlington Heritage Railway suggests that there could be support for similar schemes. The City of Durham Council has given consideration to a **Durham City Green Belt Trail** as the third trail centred on the World Heritage Site of Durham City Cathedral and Castle and the Trust recommends formal appraisal of this scheme. It would be a three- to four-day trail through the Durham City Green Belt which acts as an informal parkland setting for the City and contains many attractions within it. Such a route would strengthen the links between the City and its ring of surrounding villages for all purposes. It would be mostly on existing paths including railway paths although some path creation would be necessary for its completion. It also relates well to the National Trust's proposal for a Green Corridor from its Crook Hall Gardens to Finchale Abbey.

Policy 2: Awareness of Public Rights of Way and other routes. Digitising the wider access network and public routes onto one digital platform will be transformational in promoting the network to all users and to ensure that walking becomes a more popular activity for all purposes from day-to-day movement to healthy exercise and tourism promotion. Creating a tiered system of branded national and regional routes, tourist routes and local routes will indeed help to ensure investment in the right places.

While working with a commercial partner to develop a County Durham specific smartphone app is a laudable policy objective, the Council should also be making its data available via a permissive licence allowing third parties to incorporate the information in their own applications. The routes of all paths on the network, their legal status, accessibility, surface quality, branding, and any temporary closures are all information which would be valuable to users. The text following the policy mentions Strava and Komoot. Both of these services depend on OpenStreetMap for the underlying data, as does the national Cyclestreets journey planner and leisure-oriented sites like cycle.travel. The Council could work with local OpenStreetMap volunteers to enhance the map data, or partner with OSM consultants to set up automated data feeds from the Council's proposed digital platform, enabling high-quality mapping to be shared with the widest possible user-base.

Policy 3: Making our Network Accessible. The Trust recommends that the **Durham City Heritage Trail** be included in the '10 in 10' project in that it meets the criterion of being in central Durham and has potential for improved wheelchair access. It also has accessible parking, links with rail and could be promoted strongly as a visitor and tourist attraction. The trail shown in the leaflet produced by the Trust and the City of Durham Parish Council has a route for wheelchair users and people of limited mobility. The Trust would welcome discussions on how to improve this routing and the physical surfaces to make it eligible for inclusion in the '10 in 10' initiative.

Policy 4: Empowering Communities to 'own' their Public Right of Way Network. The Trust supports the County Council's 'Moving Together' Strategy to encourage communities to take 'ownership' of their local paths and PROW building on the success of the Parish Path Partnership over the last 30 years. We will encourage the City of Durham Parish Council to work with DCC to find local community ambassadors to help promote local routes and maximise the local environment to support physical activity, and to identify a community hub with facilities where information about local PROW is accessible for a greater understanding of local PROW and the history or culture that is attached to them. ['Looking Forwards'](#), the companion document to the Durham City Neighbourhood Plan contains an initiative for 'Identifying, Conserving and Improving Footpaths In and Around

Durham City. The Trust would welcome the opportunity to work with local community ambassadors on implementing this initiative. The community hub could also advise and assist residents and community groups to apply for existing paths to become PROW.

In the section on Case Studies, consideration could be given to the inclusion of the City of Durham Parish Council and the Trust's cooperation as an example of local involvement in PROW and positive community involvement. The Durham City Heritage and Seven Hills Trail leaflets have been published over the past two years and the Parish Council is active in engaging local people in litter picking local paths.

Policy 5: Promoting the Economy and Cultural Identity of County Durham through our Public Rights of Way Network. The Trust supports the promotion of the tourist economy and cultural heritage of County Durham and to engage people of all ages. The Trust has already engaged with Visit County Durham to promote the Heritage and Seven Hills Trails and would welcome further support in this endeavour under this policy.

The Council may be able to promote walking and cycling routes more widely by engaging with partners such as Sustrans, Cycling UK and the Ramblers Association which host route maps and GPS files on their websites.

Policy 6: Ensuring the Countryside Code is followed, and Landowners are respected. The Trust supports this policy and has specifically referenced the Countryside Code in the leaflet for the Durham Seven Hills Trail. It is also vital to create better relationships with landowners where desirable improvements to the PROW network including permissive paths are located.

The Trust welcomes the inclusion of partnership with the Police over the issue of anti-social motorbike use on the PROW network, which can conflict with aims to make the network more accessible. The emphasis on enforcement is very welcome. This needs to be applied to the design of new developments also. The recent approval of planning permission for the Bent House Lane housing site has incorporated chicane barriers on paths, presumably to combat motorbike use, but this will limit the usefulness of the new routes for some, including people relying on non-standard cycles and other mobility aids. There needs to be a more consistent approach to planning approvals in this area which favours accessibility, supported where necessary by enforcement.

Policy 7: Incorporating Public Rights of Way in New Development. The Trust strongly supports the protection and enhancement of existing PROW; the seeking of additions to the PROW network when new development is being planned; the provision of clear guidelines on securing S106 money; and the spending of this funding in the right places to prioritise and protect the PROW network. We recommend that these policy elements are brought to bear on the Sniperley Masterplan and modifications be made to that document if necessary.

One area which the PROW team could improve on, in relation to planning approvals, is obtaining conditions to ensure that path connections are made available as soon as sites are occupied. The document refers to Mount Oswald as a case study, but several key paths giving access northwards to the A167 and walking routes to primary and secondary schools were opened to users a considerable time after the first houses were occupied.

Policy 8: Monitoring the use of our Public Rights of Way. The Trust agrees that monitoring the use of the PROW network and understanding how the use of the PROW network impacts ecology and climate resilience is important. It is also important to monitor the achievements of the Plan and would recommend the adoption of a performance standard for each policy so that internal and external stakeholders can receive the evidence of where the Plan is succeeding and failing on a regular basis.

Conclusion. The County Council asks if ROWIP 4 contains the right policies overall to improve our public rights of way network over the next 10 years. The Trusts conclusions are:

1. The Plan is a major step forward in engaging local communities in the management of the PROW network

2. The work of the Trust and the City of Durham Council should be recognised as an example of good practice as a Case Study and

- The Heritage Trail should be included in the '10 in 10' Accessible Network initiative.
- The Green Belt Trail should be given consideration for inclusion in the 'High Quality Access Network'.
- The City of Durham Parish Council should be supported by the County Council in encouraging local engagement in PROW.

3. Modifications should be made to the Sniperley Masterplan document if necessary to bring it into line with the policy for **incorporating Public Rights of Way in new development**

4. A frank assessment based on the current state of the network, of the potential to deal with the deficiencies revealed by the previous 3 iterations of this Plan should be made as part of more coherent approach to the relationship of strategic objectives and policies, and performance standards to monitor the achievements of the Plan should be adopted.