

Rights of Way Improvement Plans (England and Wales)

THIS BRIEFING COVERS: Key priorities for cycling - surveying the network, implementing improvements, promoting off-road cycling; advice for local authorities and cyclists.

HEADLINE MESSAGE

Cycle-friendly Rights of Way Improvement Plans (RoWIPs) can help boost the quantity and quality of routes and open spaces available for cycling in the countryside. They can also help promote them to the public so that more people can enjoy the rights of way network by cycle.

KEY FACTS

- RoWIPs were introduced by s60 of the *Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000* (CRoW), and all local authorities (apart from inner London authorities), must produce them.
- In their RoWIPs, local authorities must state the action they propose to take for the management of local rights of way, and for securing improvements.
- RoWIPs must be based on an assessment of:
 - the extent to which local rights of way meet the present and likely future needs of the public;
 - the opportunities provided by local rights of way (and in particular by footpaths, cycle tracks, bridleways and restricted byways) for exercise and other forms of open-air recreation and the enjoyment of their area;
 - the accessibility of local rights of way to blind or partially sighted persons and others with mobility problems.
- Local Access Forums (LAFs), parish councils and others are involved with the development of RoWIPs.
- RoWIPs have to be reviewed after 10 years, but there is no requirement to implement them.

Cycling UK VIEW

- There is currently a considerable, suppressed demand for motor-traffic-free off-road cycling routes, especially close to where people live. Provision for family cycling is particularly poor. RoWIPs offer opportunities to improve off-road cycling provision, including for people who use adapted cycles.
- To maximise the benefits of cycling, the delivery of RoWIPs should:
 - Be informed by a survey of the off-road cycling network
 - Identify gaps and implement improvements
 - Promote, sign and maintain routes for cyclists
- Given local authorities' limited resources, RoWIPs benefit from the input of volunteers working through the Local Access Forum (LAF) and in conjunction with local authority staff.



KEY PRIORITIES FOR CYCLING

Many original RoWIPs have already reached, or are now reaching, their tenth anniversaries,¹ thus triggering the required review process. This must involve a new assessment, and a review of the original plan.

Note: some authorities are coming up with alternative names for their RoWIPs – e.g. ‘Countryside Access Improvement Plans’ (or similar), usually to reflect a decision to consider broader access provision in addition to their local rights of way. They must, however, make it obvious that the document is still their RoWIP.

The following key priorities, recommended by Cycling UK when authorities were working on their first RoWIPs, are equally applicable to the revision process:

1. Survey the off-road cycling network

This survey should cover:

- How suitable bridleways, byways, restricted byways, byways open to all traffic (BOATs) and unsurfaced unclassified roads (UUCRs) are for cycling, including people who use adapted cycles;
- The potential of non-statutory trails on Forestry Commission land, routes cared for by The Canal and River Trust, motor-traffic-free routes on Sustrans National Cycle Network, and any other paths where cycling is permitted;
- ‘Adventure cycling’ locations for youngsters.

2. Identify and implement improvements

Cycle-friendly RoWIPs should also identify gaps, missing links and other shortcomings in the current off-road cycling network, and prepare proposals, priorities and timescales to remedy these.

Cycling UK is campaigning for much wider access for cyclists to the countryside in general, and for an overhaul of the rights of way system. For now, however, we believe that, as far as possible, RoWIPs should address the importance of:

- Dealing with byway and bridleway anomalies in the definitive map², and resolving them through historical research and subsequent Map Modification Orders;
- Ensuring that local authority highway departments pass on information on all unsurfaced unclassified county roads (UUCRs) to Ordnance Survey for inclusion as ‘other routes with public access’ on 1:25.000 and 1:50.000 maps;
- Recording all UUCRs as a public right of way (e.g. as a restricted byway) on the definitive map to save them from extinction on 1 January 2026, the cut-off date for the definitive map stipulated by CRow. (UUCRs are on the *List of Streets*, which simply lists roads maintainable at public expense, but this is not enough in itself to save them).

Note: See our briefing on unsurfaced highways for Cycling UK’s solution to the complexities involved in this process:

www.cyclinguk.org/campaigning/views-and-briefings/unsurfaced-highways-shared-motor-vehicles

- Identify where a creation order or gaining permission from the landowner could help link up fragmented bridleways, byways and UUCRs. These could include linear links alongside railways, streams or the non-towpath side of canals;
- Consider creation orders to upgrade appropriate footpaths so that cyclists and equestrians have access to continuous networks of off-road routes in the countryside.³

3. Promote, sign and maintain off-road cycling routes

In Cycling UK's view, RoWIPs should also promote the existing off-road cycling network by developing routes for families, trail cyclists, mountain bikers and users of adapted cycles, including:

- High quality linear motor-traffic-free or calmed routes into the countryside from urban areas;
- High quality circular or linear motor-traffic-free routes close to towns and in the wider countryside for families and occasional cyclists;
- Circular routes close to towns and in the wider countryside for more experienced mountain bikers;
- Tourism-focused circular and linear routes that can be accessed from railway stations.

These routes should then be prioritised for maintenance, signposting and waymarking, either by the highway authority itself or in co-operation with landowners or volunteers, and be promoted through guidebooks, maps, leaflets and websites.

PRACTICAL STEPS

There is no duty to implement RoWIPs, so some poorer performing local authorities may be lagging behind. Some may not have – or wish to allocate – sufficient resources to support and deliver them effectively.⁴ Drawing on voluntary expertise and help, especially via the LAF, is a good way of making up the deficit.

Advice for local authorities:

- Talk to the local community, local cycling groups, mountain bikers and cycle shops to identify needs;
- Note the current RoWIP's shortcomings and suggest revisions to address them when it is reviewed;
- Identify potential circular routes, and work with the LAF, Public Rights of Way section, other departments (and Directors of Public Health), tourism or health funders to promote them.

Advice for cyclists:

- Apply for membership of the LAF or Rights of Way Liaison Group where it exists; or attend LAF meetings as a member of the public to support cycling initiatives;
- Suggest improvements to the network and potential off-road cycling routes, and be prepared to organise a survey of the network;
- Identify the cycling positive statements in the current RoWIP, and lobby to get them implemented.

FURTHER READING

- Cycling UK's campaigns briefing on Local Access Forums (LAFs): www.cyclinguk.org/campaigning/views-and-briefings/local-access-forums-england-wales
- Natural England/DEFRA's access and rights of way webpages: www.gov.uk/topic/outdoor-access-recreation/rights-of-way-open-access
- Guidance on RoWIPs: England - www.gov.uk/guidance/local-authority-rights-of-way-improvement-plans / Wales - <https://democracy.cyngor.gwynedd.gov.uk/documents/s7724/Appendix%201.pdf>

¹ Section 60 of CROW, which imposed a duty on local authorities (except for inner London authorities) to prepare a RoWIP, was commenced in 2002. The Act gave authorities five years after the commencement of the section to prepare and publish their plans. This means that all RoWIPs should have been published by 2007/8 at the latest, making 2017/18 their (latest) tenth anniversary.

² The definitive map is a statutory document that must be produced and kept up to date by every county council or unitary authority (except Inner London Boroughs). Every single right of way in an authority's area should be recorded on it. The map can be modified via Definitive Map Modification Orders (DMMOs), as long as there is evidence to support the application. The CRoW Act introduced a cut-off date of 1 January 2026 for adding historic paths to the map (i.e. 31 December 2025 will be the last day for adding them). If they are not added, the paths will be extinguished as rights of way.

³ The circumstances in which Cycling UK thinks footpaths could be appropriately upgraded are set out in our briefing on public footpaths: <https://www.cyclinguk.org/campaigning/views-and-briefings/public-footpaths-england-wales>

⁴ Funding was originally intended to be linked to Local Transport Plans (LTPs), but resources have been lacking for most RoWIPs.