

SUBJECT: COUNTRYSIDE ACCESS IMPROVEMENT PLAN

MEETING: Cabinet

DATE: 19th February 2020

DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED: ALL

1. PURPOSE:

- 1.1 To consider the approval of the Countryside Access Improvement Plan (Rights of Way Improvement Plan) and the Countryside Access Policy, Protocol and Operational Management Guide following the completion of public consultation.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 2.1 Cabinet approves the finalised Countryside Access Improvement Plan (Rights of Way Improvement Plan) and the Countryside Access Policy, Protocol and Operational Management Guide

3. KEY ISSUES:

- 3.1 There is a statutory requirement to produce a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP) and undertake a review of it. Strong Communities Select Committee considered the proposed timetable and assessment stages in November 2016. Subsequently substantial research and consultations were undertaken before formal public consultation on a Draft RoWIP. Strong Communities Select Committee considered the responses to the draft in January.
- 3.2 The RoWIP is required by the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000 to cover the management, development, integration and promotion of local rights of way and countryside access networks. Welsh Government published guidance on the review of RoWIPs in July 2016. As the content of the RoWIP now includes wider countryside access issues, such as countryside sites and not just rights of way, on this occasion we have chosen to call the plan Monmouthshire's Countryside Access Improvement Plan (MCAIP).
- 3.3 There are strong links between the MCAIP, Active Travel and the GI Strategy promoting opportunities for sustainable access and recreation that encourage healthy lifestyles and improve well-being for communities. The maintenance and improvement of the rights of way network, which includes many routes in urban and rural areas used for purposeful journeys as well as recreational use, will help deliver active travel embracing multifunctional benefits, including creating and improving safe and pleasant off-road active travel / multipurpose routes and well-connected, multifunctional greenspaces.

- 3.4 The first Monmouthshire RoWIP was approved in 2007 (and can be viewed at <http://www.monmouthshire.gov.uk/app/uploads/2013/09/ROWIP-final-doc.pdf>). The review requirements and a proposed timetable were published in November 2016. Public consultations were carried out in 2017/18 to inform the assessments. A formal decision was made, by Individual Cabinet Member Decision in May 2019, to undertake the next statutory consultation stage on a draft plan with the results of the consultation and the final plan being reported to Select Committee and Cabinet.
- 3.5 The public consultation on the Draft CAIP and its five assessments has run for 14 weeks to 16 December 2019. All documents including a Well-Being Assessment have been available to download <https://www.monlife.co.uk/outdoor/countryside-access/rights-of-way-improvement-plan/>. Large print copies were sent out as requested. The consultation was advertised at the Usk Show and 300+ individuals and organisations were directly notified by email regarding the consultation. Advertisements were placed in the press and social media and posters and postcards were handed out and displayed in museums, leisure centres, libraries etc. Other people/organisations also promoted the consultation on their websites and through social media.
- 3.6 In total 34 responses were received to the Draft CAIP consultation and as required by statute the Monmouthshire Local Access Forum and Brecon Beacons National Park Local Access Forum have been consulted on the responses received.
- 3.7 A summary of the consultation responses is provided in Appendix 2. The responses can be summarised as follows:
- 1) The majority of respondents are currently users of the Public Rights of Way network.
 - 2) Some new partnerships and projects were offered for inclusion in the RoWIP. For example, the Disabled Ramblers have offered to work with us to test new routes and to review our furniture guide.
 - 3) There is strong support for the plan, the themes, the way it is presented and that it is comprehensive and clearly sets out aims and objectives. There were no objections to any priorities. Hannah Blythn, Minister for Housing and Local Government says *"...Crucially, having an up-to-date ROWIP will also assist with any future funding schemes made available by the Welsh Government or third Sector. Thank you for putting together the new ROWIP, it will put MCC in good stead for supporting the economy, encouraging active lifestyles and contributing to making Monmouthshire a great place to work, live and visit."* Natural Resources Wales said *"This is a good forward thinking plan which is progressive in its actions, mindful of future considerations in Wales. We consider it provides a sound basis for future management and collaborative working to deliver benefits to the public and contribute to multiple national policies, PROW and networks."*
 - 4) Some respondents raised concern about lack of funding. *"I wish the funding for the Countryside and ROW service would be increased to ensure their vital work is continued and those maintenance statistics really could improve. Our health, mental and physical depends on it!"*
- 3.8 While it is a statutory obligation to produce a RoWIP there is no obligation to deliver the improvements identified in the plan. This was to encourage authorities to produce plans that

were ambitious rather than simply seeking to match the scale of ambition with the resource available.

- 3.9 Many successful projects delivering improvements to the network were delivered through the life span of the first RoWIP as a result of amending policies, our approach, partnership working, securing external funding and developer contribution. Improving our partnership approach, as outlined in the draft CAIP, will continue to help deliver improvements.
- 3.10 Detailed responses were received from many respondents. These had similar topics
- 1) **Public Rights of Way network issues.** Not surprisingly some respondents took the opportunity to raise matters relating to current issues on the network, for instance overgrown or obstructed paths. In these cases, the responses are being captured in our management system (if they are not already) and will/are being actioned in line with our stated policies and available resources.
 - 2) **Requests for specific schemes:** Some responses related to specific requests for improvements or commitment to very specific programmes of work. There is a list of these in chapter 16 of the RoWIP. These requests have been added here unless they were already on the list.
 - 3) **Policy and delivery plan amendments:** Some respondents endorsed existing policies such as the Least Restrictive Access Policy. But some sought amendments to policies and/or the delivery plan to strengthen them to address specific issues or provide support for specific actions. These responses have been carefully considered and where appropriate the CAIP has been amended to reflect them. In some cases, however, it is felt that the Plan does not need amendment but that these points can be better addressed through incorporating these comments into existing service policies. For example, Canoe Wales requirement is addressed already in 6.1 of our Countryside Access Policy, Protocol and Operational Management Report (Appendix 4). This policy review is an integral element of the ROWIP. It focusses directly on how the service delivers statutory elements of its work, manages the resources available to it and operational priorities. It will be an active document being amended as required when procedures and legislation change.
 - 4) Several respondents raised concerns about the impact of **Welsh Government's proposed legislation** for allowing cyclists and horse riders use footpaths. They suggest the RoWIP should include more information about this, but as this proposal is in very early stages with Welsh Government it is not felt that the RoWIP is the best place to pre-empt what may or may not occur.
 - 5) **General changes:** Some respondents made useful comments about rewording or adding links to more information and the necessary corrections/additions have been made to the RoWIP as necessary.
 - 6) **Rights with responsibilities:** There was an interest by a few respondents and also the Monmouthshire Local Access Forum for greater policy support for the management or prohibition of motor vehicles on rights of way and county unclassified roads. Also to ensure the public and landowners were aware of their rights and responsibilities.
 - 7) **Priorities and Statements of Action:** A few respondents wanted the Statements of Action in Chapter 17 to include more detailed costs, timescales and priorities. However, the Guidance from Welsh Government is that such things should be contained in "Delivery Plans" which will be produced annually to show progress being made on the RoWIP.

3.11 Two themes received specific comments:

3.12 **Active Healthy Lifestyles:** Reducing speed and better managing county unclassified roads was welcomed by cyclists and walkers. Several responses expressed the view that public transport should feature more positively in the RoWIP. It was suggested that a collaborative approach with improved promotion on bus services should be added and this was endorsed by Monmouthshire Local Access Forum.

3.13 **Well maintained network:** This particular theme drew feedback. There is no doubt that users particularly feel that if the plan is to provide positive outcomes, then the PROW network must be well maintained and accessible. The frequency and amount of vegetation clearance and signage was seen as important. Respondents also agreed with stakeholder's views on pages 25 and 26 re cropping and enforcement and making more use of volunteers and partnership with town and community councils to maintain and fund improvements.

4 **EQUALITY AND FUTURE GENERATIONS EVALUATION (INCLUDES SOCIAL JUSTICE, SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING):**

4.1 The assessments show that a new Plan will maintain long-term planning and management arrangements to ensure that outcomes are sustainable in the future. It will support continued efforts to create a walking and riding tourism product enhancing Monmouthshire as a tourism destination, deliver economic, social and environmental regeneration outcomes to Monmouthshire and provide improved physical access, volunteering opportunities and activity.

5 **OPTIONS APPRAISAL**

Option	Benefits	Risks	Comments
Not proceed to publishing the CAIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• None identified	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No access to future grant• Undermines partnerships• Makes it difficult to update policies and strategies for countryside access management.• The CROW Act requires all local authorities to review and publish a ROWIP. WG has produced guidance that covers new issues such Active Travel that does not appear in the old ROWIP	Welsh Government Guidance says that we would need to publish any reasons why we do not consider there is a need to redraft the ROWIP.
Publish the CAIP	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Supports appropriate management of countryside access provision within Monmouthshire• Supports existing relationships and new partnership work• Maintains potential access to future funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• None identified	Meets Welsh Government Guidance and legislation.

6 EVALUATION CRITERIA

- 6.1 Progress will be monitored against the approved MCAIP by the production of an annual or three year MCAIP “Delivery Plan” and the monitoring and evaluation arrangements in place for specific programmes and projects

7 REASONS:

- 7.1 A review of the RoWIP is required by s60(3) of the CRow Act 2000. Statutory Guidance for RoWIP Reviews has been published by Welsh Government which includes the need to carry out consultation on the Draft RoWIP. The consultation shows support for the plan. The draft plan has been amended in light of the consultation responses received. If adopted it will shape the work of the service over the coming decade.
- 7.2 Appropriately managed and promoted public rights of way, countryside and coastal access support the tourism economy and locally accessible services by developing the county’s walking product. The countryside access network provides opportunities for residents and visitors to enjoy active and healthy lifestyles and provides direct and indirect volunteering and community involvement opportunities to contribute to healthy and fulfilled lives.

8 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 8.1 The delivery of programmes and projects set out in the plan will be dependent on identifying resource from within existing budgets or securing the necessary resource either through the County Council’s normal budgetary processes or external funding sources, including specific grants or developer contributions.

9 CONSULTEES:

SLT
Cabinet
Chief Operating Officer MonLlife
Chief Officer Enterprise

Strong Communities Select Committee considered the draft ROWIP and consultation responses on 23rd January 2020 and resolved as follows:

Pre-decision scrutiny of the plan has been welcomed by this committee. We are very supportive of the volunteering that the service benefits greatly from, however, we have some concern relating to the resources of the team. We consider the plan is fit for purpose and we support you in taking it forward to Cabinet for endorsement on 19th February.

10 BACKGROUND PAPERS:

Appendix 1: Equality and Future Generations Evaluation (attached)
Appendix 2: Final MCAIP Consultation Report December 2019 (attached)
Appendix 3: Countryside Access Improvement Plan (attached)
Appendix 4: Countryside Access Policy, Protocol and Operational Management Guide (attached)

11 AUTHORS AND CONTACT DETAILS:

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