
Meeting: Executive
Date: 31 May 2011
Subject: Replacement of and Consultation on a new Outdoor Access Improvement Plan
Report of: Executive Member for Sustainable Communities - Strategic Planning and Economic Development
Summary: This paper seeks to gain endorsement from Executive for the preparation and replacement of its Outdoor Access Improvement Plan.

Advising Officer: Gary Alderson (Director of Sustainable Communities)
Contact Officer: Paul Cook (Head of Transport Strategy & Countryside Access)
Public/Exempt: Public
Wards Affected: All
Function of: Council
Key Decision Yes
Reason for urgency/ exemption from call-in (if appropriate) Not applicable

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

The Outdoor Access Improvement Plan is an important document that will help deliver the Council's priorities and the Sustainable Community Strategy in the following ways:
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<i>Supporting and Caring for an Ageing Population:</i>
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Many of our access and conservation volunteers are retired and older people. Through our continued management and development of volunteering opportunities such as the 'friends of parks' and 'P3 - People Projects Partnership schemes' we promote opportunities for people to get involved in their local community, encouraging the empowerment of people and increased ownership and engagement with local green spaces and the natural environment. In addition our 'access for all' initiative develops paths for the less mobile providing wheelchair access to facilities which in the past have been inaccessible.
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Educating, protecting and providing opportunities for children and young people:

Well utilised green spaces provide an education resource; this is being demonstrated through providing sustainable transport routes to schools and amenities and promoting school visits to country parks, such as Dunstable Downs and Stockgrove Country Park, and through the delivery of the Forest Schools programme on some of our wooded sites. The Youth Parliament are involved in the management of the Council's sites, and this helps ensure that Children and Young People are involved in decisions and that our sites and access provision are designed to fit their needs. Through our site management partners, training schemes in landscaping and the environment management industry, are being implemented on our green spaces, these develop skills and work experience providing linkage with further volunteering and employment opportunities.

Managing growth effectively:

Increasing opportunities for our existing and future populations to access and engage with green spaces and the countryside of Central Bedfordshire is an important part of our growth agenda and a critical element of 'Place Making': many of the Council's sites are identified within the local development frameworks as being vital to the delivery of sustainable growth in the area.

Master planning of green spaces affected by population growth is being undertaken with community involvement. This will ensure that our spaces meet public needs and minimise impact on vulnerable habitats whilst contributing to wider Green Infrastructure and the range of facilities of Central Bedfordshire.

Creating Safer Communities:

Well managed green spaces will promote public confidence, increase the frequency and number of visits to the countryside and provide a sense of ownership. New green space's incorporated into the design of communities will be safe and secure following 'by design principles'.

Promoting Healthier Lifestyles:

Public rights of way and green space increase opportunities for people to exercise through the exploration the landscapes of Central Bedfordshire, promoting low cost active recreational opportunities, for walkers, runners, cyclists and the general public. The continued support and development of the 'Central Bedfordshire Health Walks Partnership – Simply Walking' will continue to provide active recreation, coaching and social walks, this volunteer delivered programme encourages people to 'simply walking your way to health' and is looking to proactively target the over 60's and those at risk of obesity and diabetes.

Nurturing a sense of pride and belonging:

This is supported through our work with the third sector and direct public engagement on a variety of initiatives. Through the management of our volunteering schemes we actively promote community participation and the development of local pride enabling local ownership, action and decision making.

Caring for a green and clean environment:

This is supported through encouraging and improving access to new and existing green spaces within and close to the growth areas, (e.g. Rushmere Park) providing a range of walking and cycling opportunities (e.g. Circular walks and the Dunstable Downs Multi user path and Totternhoe Greenway), enabling active lifestyles and protecting and raising awareness of biodiversity.

Financial:

The 5-year Outdoor Access Improvement Plan 2012-2017 provides essential information for the service to input into the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan. The service has experienced revenue and capital budget constraints as the Council has worked to balance its budget. Given the tight funding arrangements over the medium term it is important that the consultation draws out local community, visitor and investor preferences for green space and attractions. The revised plan needs to consider the options for managing portfolio of assets, operating costs and income streams. The prospect of new acquisitions (including possible bequests), extensions and divestments need to be explored. More immediately the service needs to contribute to the budgetary targets for the Directorate in 2012/13 and 2013/14 for which ideas are being explored.

Legal:

It is a statutory duty under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (section 60) to publish and review, at least every ten years, a 'Rights of Way Improvement Plan' (ROWIP). The existing document which was produced by the former county council on runs until 2011, a second plan is required to complete the 10 year requirement. The Outdoor Access Improvement Plan is the way in which Central Bedfordshire Council proposes to meet this statutory duty.

The Statutory Guidance requires authorities to develop proposals to improve and manage their networks to meet the [present and likely future] needs of the public, looking at ways in which they can benefit health, transport, recreation, tourism and other local economic needs and to *develop their strategies within the context of their other relevant plans and strategies - including healthy living, leisure, recreation, sport, tourism, economic regeneration, transport, planning and community strategies – so that they 'influence' these areas of responsibility. It also explicitly requires assessment of opportunities for exercise and other forms of 'open area recreation and enjoyment of the area'*.

Risk Management:

Failure to publish this statutory plan may result in legal challenge and will impact on the development of other linking strategies and plans and the ability to develop long term proposals to meet housing growth and to maximise planning gain opportunity and external funding streams.

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

No direct implications.

Equalities/Human Rights:

Public authorities have a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and to foster good relations in respect of the following protected characteristics; age, disability, gender re-assignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

An Equalities Impact Assessment will be undertaken to ensure that the plan satisfies the legal obligations required of the council and in part actively enables greater equalities and access to facilities. The provision of low cost recreational facilities to the wider public will help promote equal access to facilities.

Community Safety:

The good management and design of green spaces, promotes the concept of safety and security increasing public confidence and increases the frequency and number of visits. The development of this plan will seek to incorporate 'safer by design principles' into the management of our existing sites and the development of green spaces in our new communities.

Sustainability:

Our green spaces will be managed in such a way as to both enable people to access and understand the environment as well as meeting the requirements of species such as birds, butterflies, amphibians and small mammals, as well as plants like orchids to thrive on our sites.

Our green spaces have many benefits including the provision of shade provided by trees, having a cooling effect on the surrounding environment and its ability to slow down the movement of water from heavy rainfall reducing peak flows and cutting the risk of flooding. Green spaces allow water to filter down and replenish groundwater. In addition, our land resource, particularly the woodlands, help balance the Council's negative activities identified in carbon auditing.

The plan will promote green space close to where people live, with the aim of reducing vehicular movements and related pollution. Additionally the sustainable management of our woodlands and green spaces will support the council in providing positive measures that could be offset against the councils own carbon emissions.

Summary of Overview and Scrutiny Comments:

The views of Overview and Scrutiny will be sought before the final plan is submitted to the Executive for approval. Overview and Scrutiny Committee deliberations will be informed by the results of public and stakeholder consultations.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. that the Executive approves the process set out in this report to replace the existing Outdoor Access Improvement Plan with an updated policy document for Central Bedfordshire to run for 5 years as from the 2012 to the 2017; and**
- 2. that the views of the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee are sought, prior to a further report to Executive for decision later in the year.**

Executive Summary

This report gives the background to the replacement and updating of the Outdoor Access Improvement Plan (OAIP) and explains the processes necessary to achieve the implementation of this 2nd phase of our statutory requirement.

The up-dated plan will form the guiding principles that will act as the cornerstone of green space and access management for Central Bedfordshire for the period 2012 - 2017, up-dating and replacing the existing Outdoor Access Improvement Plan 2006 – 2011.

The development of the second 5 year Action Plan is seen as the opportunity to revise and tailor the OAIP more specifically to Central Bedfordshire's priorities, values and geographical area, integrating with the *Sustainable Communities Strategy*, the Local Development Framework, Local Transport Plan and wider suite of new policies and strategies.

The management of green spaces and access to the wider countryside is a central element of 'Place Making', ensuring that Central Bedfordshire is seen as a green and pleasant place to live and work. This plan will have a key role in facilitating the Big Society helping people and communities to both explore and understand our varied landscapes and become involved in its management, increasing volunteering and generating an increased sense of ownership and pride.

Background

1. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 gave Local Authorities a statutory duty to publish and review, at least every ten years, a 'Rights of Way Improvement Plan'. The aim of the Plan is to create greater access to the countryside for social and economic benefits, and to protect the environment.
2. The 2006 Outdoor Access Improvement Plan (OAIP), produced by former County Council, included a 5 year action plan and looked holistically at access to the countryside including the use of green spaces acting as introductory gateways to the wider landscape by use of public rights of way.
3. Following Local Government Reorganisation, the existing OAIP was transferred as an adopted policy to Central Bedfordshire Council, as one of the two succeeding unitary authorities.

4. The Statutory Guidance requires authorities to *develop proposals to improve and manage their networks to meet the [present and likely future] needs of the public, looking at ways in which they can benefit health, transport, recreation, tourism and other local economic needs and to develop their strategies within the context of their other relevant plans and strategies - including healthy living, leisure, recreation, sport, tourism, economic regeneration, transport, planning and community strategies – so that they ‘influence’ these areas of responsibility. It also explicitly requires assessment of opportunities for exercise and other forms of ‘open area recreation and enjoyment of the area’.*
5. The OAIP is linked closely with the local transport plan (LTP); with linkages have been made within the Cycling and Walking Strategy of Central Bedfordshire’s recently adopted LTP3. These Strategies identify the need for further development of walking and cycling and sets out strongly the benefits of creating an effective and sustainable transport system - reduced congestion and improved accessibility, a more attractive image and reputation for the area (supporting local businesses and economic growth), and benefits to health and community cohesion.

Plan Principles

6. Following Best Practice published by Natural England, it is proposed that the new plan will again look holistically at countryside access and the inter-relationships between people, green spaces and linear access such as rights of way and permissive paths.

The principle behind this is that most countryside users participate in an activity, such as dog walking, rambling or cycling and they are less concerned about whether they are exercising a statutory right by using a right of way.

By considering all forms of access, ranging from doorstep green to country parks and from rights of way on the urban fringe to paths which promote health and enable access to our special landscapes, we are able to ensure that we cater for all needs and provides a Plan which provides comprehensive guiding principles which are integrated with the Sustainable Community Strategy and provides a key role in supporting the Local Development Framework and the Local Transport Plan.

7. Core to the process of developing an improvement plan is the understanding of the needs of existing users and the anticipated needs of future users. To achieve this we will use the extensive data gathered from the previous surveys and update this with data gathered over 2009 and 2010, this will provide the plan with clear steer towards its priorities.

8. The up-dated plan will identify the links between the management of green space and countryside access and the work and priorities of the wider authority.

The quality and value of green space, landscapes and volunteer involvement, link too many of the authority's strategies and plans, the new OAIP will look to support these linkages and prioritise outputs to support delivery.

There will be specific linkage to:

- Planning and managing for growth
- Health and increasing physical activity
- Greater local involvement in the management of countryside access
- Volunteering and active participation
- Developing a strong rural economy
- Transport
- Increasing opportunities for learning

9. It is proposed that the Action Plan for the next 5 year period will predominantly focus on improving service delivery and improving the management of our existing assets, but with a track record of successful winning external funding it is critical that the plan identifies projects and themes that can be targeting for fundraising.

The outputs will be prioritised dependent on the availability of funding. Actions will identify what can be achieved through existing resource levels and identify areas which will only be achievable through *the awarding of additional capital funding*, the winning of external funding or through new ways of working and partnerships.

10. The action plan proposes identifying a small number of flagship projects, these projects will be a key focus over the 5 year delivery period of the plan. For example, these project look to address:

- Deal with fragmentation of our networks
- The quality of access close to our urban fringe and growth areas
- Contributing to the delivery of Green Infrastructure
- Working closely with communities on the management of green spaces and the linear network
- Improving the rights of way 'ease of use' performance

11. It is proposed that the revised action plan will be divided into 3 themes based on the functional management of the Countryside Access as detailed below:
- Rights of Way and landscape access
 - Management of the Definitive Map and Statement
 - Order processing and management
 - Bridge and large structure
 - Enhancing networks close to where people live and in areas of high landscape significance
 - Seasonal management
 - Enforcement
 - Improving ease of access
 - Management of defect reports
 - Countryside Sites
 - Green spaces, woodlands and nature reserves
 - Country Parks
 - Common Land
 - Village Greens
 - Open Access Land
 - Development of local council countryside site management partnerships.
 - Community Engagement and empowerment:
 - Developing local involvement through in the main managing our existing and developing new P3 (people, projects, partnerships) schemes and our friends of countryside sites programmes
 - Developing and enhancing the Bedfordshire Health Walks partnership 'simply walking'
 - Supporting audience engagement and widening, through promotion and events
12. This plan is critical in focusing the priorities for the council's Countryside Access Service. Over the last 10 years the financial resources available to the service have been significantly reduced. Between 2002 and 2009 the rights of way budget was reduced by over 24% resulting in a decline in the national audited 'ease of use' performance indicator for rights of way. In 2010/11 the Countryside Access budget was reduced by £183,000 and in 2011/12 by £154,000 amounting to a further 18% reduction in the total budget for service, reflecting the difficult financial position of the authority. Given these increasingly limited resources, it is vital that the work of the service is focused on its priorities both statutory day to day work and development schemes, developing new cost effective working methods and maximising opportunities to upwardly gear local authority funding by winning external resource where possible. The plan will play a key role in achieving this.

Consultation

13. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires highway authorities to set up Local Access Forums to help steer the improvement plan process. Following the creation of the unitary authority of Central Bedfordshire Council a new Local Access Forum was established for Central Bedfordshire and Luton area. Its members are local people with a balance of interests in the countryside, including recreational users, land managers and those with interests in nature conservation, heritage, business, health, transport and access for the less able. This is a highly successful forum which is a great example of the 'Big Society' at work in Central Bedfordshire

A sub group of this forum has been established to have regular input into the plans development. We will work with this forum to help guide the development of the up-dated plan and to adopt the final version and review annually reports monitoring its delivery.

14. On completion of the consultation draft, a stakeholder and parish council consultation will be undertaken to seek views on the draft plan and its proposed actions. It is expected that this will be a 13 week consultation process, including attendance at public exhibitions, talks, presentations and other consultation opportunities. Feedback will be enabling through the receipt of both internet response and full written formats, in response to feedback the plan will be reviewed and finalised.
15. It is proposed that the Draft Outdoor Access Improvement Plan will be taken to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee for their comments before returning to Executive for decision.

Next Steps and Timeline

16. The next steps in developing the plan are as follows:
- Review and assessment of outputs from 2006 – 2011 OAIP and identification of items to be carried forward. (completed by end of May 2011)
 - The drawing together of a key issues, including assessment from public surveys and national trends and issues related to the management of infrastructure and service delivery. (complete by end of June 2011)
 - Completion of a draft plan and the preparation of consultation process (to be complete by Mid August 2011)
 - Consultation Period (September > November 2011)
 - Plan Adoption (January 2012)

Conclusions

17. A high quality Outdoor Access Improvement Plan will play a key role in helping to deliver the Sustainable Communities Strategy and the Council's key priorities. The up-dating and replacement of the Plan will set out how the council will promote the use of its countryside to support economic growth, promote volunteering and healthy activity as well as improving the quality of life of all its local residents.

Appendices:

None

Location of papers:

The former plan 2006-2011 is located on Central Bedfordshire Council's web site:

http://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/environment-and-planning/Countryside/access_land/default.aspx

Related Legislation:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/37/part/II/crossheading/rights-of-way-improvement-plans>

Statutory Guidance for the production of improvement Plans

<http://archive.defra.gov.uk/rural/documents/countryside/prow/rowip.pdf>