
Meeting: Executive
Date: 18 March 2013
Subject: Outdoor Access Improvement Plan
Report of: Cllr Brian Spurr, Executive Member for Sustainable Communities – Services
Summary: This report sets out the proposed Outdoor Access Improvement Plan for endorsement by the Executive and adoption by the Council.

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

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

The Outdoor Access Improvement Plan (OAIP) seeks to encourage people to get out and about and to be active in the special landscapes and natural environments of Central Bedfordshire.

It sets out priorities and measures which will make a significant contribution to the quality of life of our residents, communities and visitors and supports the council's priorities by:

- Enhancing Central Bedfordshire
- Promote health and wellbeing and protecting the vulnerable.
- Better infrastructure
- Great Universal Services

Through the delivery of the OAIP the Council's Countryside Sites and Rights of Way network will be managed to meet the needs of our customers, ensuring that both our current and new populations have access to high quality greenspace.

The use of the Public Rights of Way network is well embedded within the Local Transport Plan's Walking and Cycling strategies, seeking to utilise this element of the highway network to provide innovative solutions to the way that people move between communities and around their local area.

The OAIP promotes health and wellbeing by increasing opportunities for people to exercise in Central Bedfordshire's landscapes, promoting low cost active recreational opportunities for walkers, runners, cyclists, horse riders and the general public. The integration of countryside sites and leisure walking and cycling within the Leisure Strategy provides added value to the network of more formal leisure facilities that the Council offers.

Financial:

1. Due to continuing financial pressure the authority is in the process of delivering efficiency savings and the redeployment of finances. These reductions have impacted on Countryside Access service provision. However, by redirecting resources, improved partnership working and accessing external funding the service still aspires to meet our statutory requirements and deliver a customer focused service.
2. Below is the allocation in the capital medium term plan 2013/14 - 2016/17. This allocation is critical to the ongoing delivery of the improvement plan.

In general the programme is £250,000 p/a gross expenditure with £100,000 external funding in order to deliver the improvement plan. The figures for 2013/14 include the match funding and predicted grant for the Houghton Hall Park round 1 (Development stage) Heritage Lottery Fund bid. (This expenditure will only be incurred if CBC is awarded the grant.)

Outdoor Access and Greenspace Improvement Projects (all figures in 000's)							
2013/14 Gross Expenditure	2013/14 External Funding	2014/15 Gross Expenditure	2014/15 External Funding	2015/16 Gross Expenditure	2015/16 External Funding	2016/17 Gross Expenditure	2016/17 External Funding
416	-200	250	-100	250	-100	250	-100

It is expected that further capital allocations for post 2016/17 will be made at the appropriate times.

3. The Outdoor Access Improvement Plan clearly acknowledges the financial pressures that the Council faces in delivering this statutory duty. It's Action Plan has been structured in such a way that it identifies what can be done with revenue budgets and what can only be achieved with additional and/or external funding.

Key	Resource Level	Resource Implications
£	Level 1	Projects that can be delivered within existing resources (both staffing and budgets).
££	Level 2	Projects requiring small levels of extra resourcing – including staffing, financial, or increased partnership working.
£££	Level 3	Projects that can only be delivered through finding and securing of significant new resources.

Legal:

4. 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 Outdoor Access Improvement Plan is the way in which Central Bedfordshire Council will meet this statutory duty.

Risk Management:

5. The following risks have been identified:
 - failure to discharge statutory responsibilities;
 - failure to deliver the Council's priorities and the Sustainable Communities Strategy;
 - failure to meet the needs of our customers; and
 - financial risks, including failure to meet income targets.

These risks have been identified and appropriate mitigating action will be taken.

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

6. Not applicable.

Equalities/Human Rights:

7. Public authorities have a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics; age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
8. An Equality Impact Assessment has shown that the plan has a very positive impact in terms of promoting equality and identifies positive steps that need to be taken to increase access which are imbedded within the action plan.
9. Positive steps include:
 - Maintaining the physical environment in accordance with the Least Restrictive Access Policy; which includes sites, structures, furniture, rights of way and provision of facilities for disabled people and the intellectual environment; which includes language, labelling, interpretation, accessibility statements, mapping and signage.

- Recognises and addresses other potential barriers to users; to be mitigated through staff training, representation of diverse communities, reasonable pricing and better web accessibility through 'Disabled Go'¹.
- Provides resources to promote and support access for all; including core or prioritised funding and appropriate staffing.
- Provides ways to engage all its users and potential users, promoting a sense of identity and affording opportunities to celebrate diversity. The plan supports community participation in outdoor access and activities plus events which appeal to a wide range of people.
- Encourages any people and communities who have not taken advantage of the benefits of the countryside before to get involved – to 'get out' and enjoy its benefits.

Public Health:

10. The Outdoor Access Improvement Plan seeks to promote the adoption of healthy lifestyles, which is one of the key priorities of the Council's Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2012.
11. Within Central Bedfordshire, it is estimated that 49,000 adults (25%) are obese of whom it is estimated 9,000 have high blood pressure, 4,000 have cardiovascular disease and 3,000 have diabetes as a direct result of their weight.
12. By widening our audience and enhancing our facilities we aim to get more of our population active and engaged with the greenspace and landscapes close to them. We will achieve this through partnership development and continued investment through e.g. our health walks programme, cycle route promotion and accessible routes.

Community Safety:

13. The good management and design of green spaces and public access, promotes the concept of safety and security, increasing public confidence and increasing the frequency and number of visits to sites. The OAIP acknowledges the current issues and proposes a new partnership project to look at how key issues such as dog fouling, anti social behaviour and fly tipping can be addressed.

Sustainability:

14. Our green spaces will be managed to enable people to access and understand the environment whilst meeting the requirements of species such as birds, butterflies, amphibians and small mammals, as well as plants such as orchids.

¹ 'Disabled Go' is a website www.disabledgo.com detailing access information for a wide array of public sites and facilities including parks and gardens.

15. 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 council's own carbon emissions.

Procurement:

16. Not applicable.

Overview and Scrutiny:

17. This matter has been considered by Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the 6 March 2013. Comments will be reported to the Executive meeting.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Executive is asked to:

- 1. adopt the Outdoor Access Improvement Plan attached as Appendix A.**

Reason for Recommendation:

So that the Council can demonstrate a structured and prioritised approach to service developments and outputs on public rights of way, countryside sites and community volunteering / activity. Seeking to encourage people to get out and about and be active in the special landscapes and natural environments of Central Bedfordshire.

To achieve its statutory role under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

Executive Summary

18. The Authority has 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 Outdoor Access Improvement Plan attached at Appendix 1 is the way in which Central Bedfordshire Council proposes to meet this statutory duty.
19. The aim of the Plan is to get more people out and about in the countryside of Central Bedfordshire, volunteering, understanding and valuing the special landscape character of our area. Through doing this we seek social, economic and health benefits, to green our communities and to protect the environment.
20. The Outdoor Access Improvement Plan seeks to establish a long term vision and covers the periods 2013 – 2031, in line with the Council's Draft Development Strategy, Leisure Strategy and Health & Wellbeing Strategy.

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| 21. The OAIP contains an Action Plan which is clear and measurable with grouped costings showing what can be achieved with existing budgets and what can only be achieved with additional funding. The service has a proven track record in achieving this. This high level action plan will translate into a linked annual business plan which will be monitored annually by the Executive Member and the Local Access Forum. |
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Background

22. 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. The Outdoor Access Improvement plan seeks to establish a long term vision and covers the periods 2013 – 2031, in line with the Draft Development and Leisure Strategies.
23. As with the previous award winning Outdoor Access Improvement Plan (OAIP) this plan follows National Best Practice and looks holistically at access to the countryside. It incorporates the use of green spaces acting as introductory gateways to the wider landscape and the management and development of public rights of way. This approach was endorsed by Executive on 31 May 2011.
24. The Statutory Guidance for improvement plans 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.
These strategies should be developed within the context of the authorities 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'.
25. The OAIP is linked closely with the Local Transport Plan (LTP), the Local Area Transport Plans, the draft Development Strategy, Green Infrastructure plans, Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the developing Leisure Strategy. The Plan complements and provides added value to these documents and their approaches. Seeking to support:
- the greening of our new and existing communities;
 - reduced congestion;
 - improved accessibility to greenspaces and the landscape;
 - maintain and enhance an attractive image and reputation for the area (supporting local businesses and economic growth);
 - maximising opportunities to benefit health; and
 - improved biodiversity and heritage management on sites that we manage.

26. The CROW Act 2000 requires highway authorities to work with its Local Access Forum to help steer the improvement plan process. The membership of the Central Bedfordshire and Luton Joint Local Access Forum is made up of 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 'volunteerism' at work in Central Bedfordshire.

A sub group of this forum has given regular input into this plan's development and will now work to help guide, monitor and steer its delivery.

Plan Principles

27. The Outdoor Access Improvement Plan (OAIP) looks 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 provide a Plan which contains comprehensive guiding principles which are integrated with a number of strategic approaches across the authority.

28. Core to the process of developing the OAIP is the understanding of the needs of existing users and the anticipated needs of future users. To achieve this we have used existing data, gathered from countryside and rights of way users and non users. Complementing this, wider assessments undertaken for the leisure strategy, health and wellbeing strategy and resident surveys have also been used. This, alongside an assessment of the assets managed by the Council, has enabled us to reach a series of aims, proposed outcomes and policies that will steer the management and development of outdoor access in the future.
29. The quality and value of green space, landscapes and volunteer involvement, link to many of the authority's strategies and plans. The OAIP looks to support these linkages and prioritise outputs to support delivery.

There are specific links 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.

Structure of the Plan

30. The plan contains five Theme Chapters as follows:
- Connecting Spaces – Public Rights of Way and Permissive Paths
 - Breathing Spaces – Council Owned sites and Green Spaces
 - Local Spaces – Community Involvement and Participation
 - Healthy Spaces – Health and Well being
 - Growing Spaces – Countryside and the Growth Agenda
31. The Plan includes an initial 10 year action plan which includes a funding section, an accessibility statement and 5 flagship projects:
- Improved health and wellbeing delivery through countryside access.
 - Greenspace master planning and accessible landscapes e.g. Biggleswade Green Wheel
 - Houghton Hall Park – Renaissance and Renewal at the heart of the growth area
 - Bridleway Connectivity – improving network connectivity and safety
 - Dogs in the Countryside – A focused approach to addressing dog fouling and behaviour.

Delivery of the Plan

32. The detailed action plan focuses on the first 10 years, and will be reviewed and updated every five years during the delivery of the OAIP.
33. The Action Plan predominantly focuses on improving service delivery and improving the management and development of our existing assets, but with a track record of successfully winning external funding this plan also identifies projects and themes that can be targeted for fundraising.
34. The outputs have been prioritised against the availability of funding: those that can be achieved through existing resource levels and projects and those that can only be achievable through *the awarding of additional* capital funding, the winning of external funding or through new ways of working and partnerships.
35. The Countryside Access Service already manages either directly or through 3rd sector contracts over 600 volunteers through its P3 (Projects, People, Partnerships) initiative or through its site based friends of schemes. The plan seeks to continue to invest and extend the opportunities and skills for volunteers and the value for investment that they offer.

36. The Countryside Access Service works with a number of 3rd sector partners to achieve its outputs and to optimise on community engagement and charitable sector funding. In addition to this the OAIP proposes a greater level of Town and Parish Council engagement, seeking to inform and involve 1st tier councils in the planning and delivery of initiatives in their area e.g. Biggleswade Green Wheel.

Consultation Responses

37. The draft plan had a full 13 week consultation, which included public engagement through libraries with over 100 individuals attending. 81 responses were received to the online questionnaire and a further 20 detailed responses were received.
38. All comments have been reviewed and alterations made to the document where appropriate. The public survey was overwhelmingly in support of the aims of the plan. The main issues that emerged from the public and stakeholder responses were:
- a) A lack of recognition of our role to preserve and enhance Biodiversity and the Natural Environment and a need to include the authority's duty under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006 "Every public body must, in exercising its functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity".
 - b) To recognise the NPPF paragraph 92, which gives specific support for Community Forests and the role of the Forest Plan.
 - c) A need to have a greater focus on the highly fragmented Bridleway Network, connecting it up and making it safer, for all users.
 - d) A need to have a more focused approach to dog fouling, dog behaviour and fly tipping.
 - e) Continued support for working in partnership with communities and the 3rd Sector and widening the role that they can play in the delivery of the plan.

Conclusion and Next Steps

39. The immediate next steps will include:
- the production of a public summary document;
 - the development of project briefs and partnerships to establish flagship projects; and
 - public engagement activities over the summer to promote our current work and the direction of future activities.

40. A high quality Outdoor Access Improvement Plan will play a key role in helping to deliver the councils' key priorities and the Sustainable Communities Strategy. It will support localism and partnership working whilst demonstrating 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 for all of its residents.
41. This second Outdoor Access Improvement Plan will steer our work through to 2031, with regular reviews to ensure that our delivery continues to be innovative and inline with changes in legislation and best practice
42. The plan establishes a sustainable and measured approach to working with communities, to managing and developing our countryside assets enabling prioritisation of expenditure and targeting of opportunities for external funding.

Appendices:

Appendix A – Outdoor Access Improvement Plan 2013 – 2031

(Please note that hard copies have only been provided to Executive and Deputy Executive Members and Senior Management, if you require a hard copy please contact Jonathan Woods, Access Development Team Leader)

Background Papers: (open to public inspection)

None