Place and Resources Overview Committee

19 November 2026

Dorset Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) 2026-2036

For Recommendation to Cabinet

Cabinet Member:
Cllr J Jeanes, Place Services

Local Councillor(s): All Dorset Council Members

Senior Leadership Team:
J Britton - Executive Director, Economy & Environment

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Statutory Authority: Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000

Report status: Public Choose an item.

1. Executive summary (maximum of 500 words)

1.1 The Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) 2026-2036 sets out Dorset Council's strategic approach to managing, maintaining and improving Dorset's 2,855-mile public rights of way network over the next ten years. Dorset Council has a statutory duty as Highway Authority to prepare and review a Rights of Way Improvement Plan. The network plays a significant role in supporting active travel, public health, economic growth, access to nature, climate resilience and community wellbeing.

The plan establishes a vision to make Dorset one of the nation's leading counties for walking, cycling, horse riding and access to nature. It contains ten policy areas covering maintenance, accessibility, sustainable transport, economic development, community involvement, planning and development, health and wellbeing, landowner engagement and management of the Definitive Map and Statement.

The plan has been developed following extensive stakeholder and public consultation and aligns with Dorset Council priorities relating to communities, economic growth, housing and responding to the climate and ecological emergency.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1 That Place and Resources Overview committee recommend that Cabinet:

1. Approves the Dorset Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) 2026-2036.
2. Authorises officers to implement the policies and actions contained within the plan.
3. Notes that delivery will be subject to the availability of future funding, external grants and developer contributions.
4. Agrees that progress and performance be monitored through periodic review and reporting.

3. Reason for the recommendation(s)

3.1 The Council has a statutory obligation under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 to prepare and publish a Rights of Way Improvement Plan. Adoption of the plan provides a clear strategic framework for investment, partnership working and service delivery over the next decade, ensuring the network supports wider council priorities including health improvement, sustainable transport, economic growth, biodiversity and climate resilience.

4. The report

Dorset Council manages approximately 2,855 miles (4,594 km) of public rights of way, together with trailways, promoted routes, access land, country parks and wider greenspace assets. The ROWIP establishes a strategic framework for improving this network between 2026 and 2036.

The plan identifies four strategic themes:

- A high-quality network
- Accessible and inclusive access
- Supporting communities and the economy
- Connecting with wider strategic priorities including transport, health and climate action

The plan contains ten policy areas:

1. Maintaining and improving the existing network.
2. Raising awareness of public rights of way.
3. Improving accessibility.
4. Empowering communities.
5. Supporting the economy.
6. Promoting responsible use and supporting landowners.
7. Maximising benefits from development and planning.
8. Improving health and wellbeing.
9. Supporting sustainable transport and active travel.
10. Maintaining the Definitive Map and Statement.

The implementation plan identifies significant infrastructure investment opportunities, including improvements to trailways, accessible routes, bridleway infrastructure, surfacing, active travel connectivity and the South West Coast Path.

The ROWIP reflects the results and themes of the public consultation.

5. Alternative options considered

5.1 Do nothing was considered but rejected because the Council would fail to meet its statutory duties under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 and would lack a strategic framework for future investment and management of the network. Maintaining the existing ROWIP without update was also rejected as it would not reflect current legislation, user expectations, stakeholder feedback or Council priorities.

6. Legal considerations

6.1 Section 60 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires local highway authorities to prepare and review Rights of Way Improvement Plans. Adoption of the ROWIP supports Dorset Council in meeting its statutory responsibilities as Highway Authority. The plan also supports the Council's duties under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 regarding the maintenance of the Definitive Map and Statement and aligns with responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010

7. Financial implications

7.1The ROWIP is a strategic plan and does not itself commit the Council to specific expenditure beyond approved budgets. Delivery will be funded through a combination of Local Transport Plan funding, Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy contributions, DEFRA and Natural England programmes, external grants and partnership funding. The plan anticipates in excess of £2 million investment during the first five years, together with annual Local Transport Plan funding exceeding £300,000 per annum and additional external funding opportunities.

8. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

8.1The ROWIP supports Dorset Council's response to the climate and ecological emergency by encouraging sustainable travel, reducing reliance on private vehicles, improving access to green infrastructure and promoting responsible use of the natural environment. The plan also supports biodiversity, landscape enhancement and access to nature through improved connectivity to greenspaces, trailways, access land and the coast.

9. Well-being and health implications

9.1 The plan makes a significant contribution to improving public health and wellbeing by increasing opportunities for walking, cycling, horse riding and access to nature. It aligns with Public Health Dorset's "Movement for Movement" programme and supports preventative health measures through increased physical activity, social connection and improved access to green spaces.

10. Other implications

10.1 The ROWIP has been widely consulted within DC and is relevant to Dorset strategic objectives and many of Dorset wider policies and plans. The ROWIP supports Dorset's visitor economy by promoting walking, cycling and outdoor recreation. It contributes to sustainable tourism, rural economic growth and improved community resilience. It also supports delivery of wider transport, planning, public health and economic development strategies. Examples of these are listed below:

- Dorset Council Plan

- Local Transport Plan 4 (LTP4)
- Dorset Local Plan (emerging)
- Dorset Destination Management Plan (LVEP)
- Movement for Movement (Physical Activity Strategy)
- Dorset Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy
- Green Infrastructure Strategy and Open Space Strategies
- Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS)
- Dorset Health and Wellbeing Strategy
- Dorset Housing Strategy
- Children and Young People's Plan
- Dorset Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

11. Risk implications: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as: Low

11.1 **Current Risk:** Medium

Residual Risk: Low

Failure to adopt and implement an updated ROWIP could result in:

- Failure to meet statutory duties.
- Missed external funding opportunities.
- Reduced ability to influence planning and development outcomes.
- Reduced network accessibility and condition.
- Adverse impacts on health, wellbeing and sustainable transport objectives.

These risks will be mitigated through adoption of the plan, partnership working, regular review and the pursuit of external funding opportunities.

12. Equalities

12.1 An Equalities Impact Assessment has been undertaken. The plan seeks to improve accessibility for all users by reducing barriers, increasing provision of accessible routes, replacing stiles with more accessible infrastructure where appropriate and improving information for people with varying needs and abilities. The plan supports the Council's duties under the Equality Act 2010

13. Appendices

13.1 Appendix 1 - Dorset Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2026-2036

Appendix 2 - Consultation Findings and Strategic Responses

Appendix 3 - Rights of Way Implementation Plan

14. Background papers

14.1

- **Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000**

Places a statutory duty on highway authorities to assess the extent to which local rights of way meet current and future public needs and to prepare and review a Rights of Way Improvement Plan.

- **Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981**

Provides the legal framework for the recording and protection of Public Rights of Way through the Definitive Map and Statement and supports the protection of wildlife and habitats associated with the network.

- **Dorset Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2026-2036 Draft Consultation Document**

Consultation responses and evidence gathered during the preparation of this Plan have helped shape the priorities, objectives and actions contained within the final ROWIP.

- **Dorset Council Plan**

The ROWIP contributes to Dorset Council's ambitions for thriving communities, a healthy environment, improved health and wellbeing, sustainable growth and tackling climate change through increased access to nature, recreation and active travel opportunities.

- **Dorset Local Transport Plan 4 (LTP4)**

The rights of way network forms an important component of Dorset's wider transport network. The ROWIP supports LTP4 objectives by promoting walking, wheeling, cycling and horse riding, improving connectivity between communities, services and public transport, and reducing reliance on private car travel. Strategic trailways, greenways and multi-user routes can help deliver active travel, sustainable transport and carbon reduction objectives.

- **Dorset Physical Activity Strategy ("Movement for Movement")**

The rights of way network provides free and accessible opportunities for people to be physically active. The ROWIP supports the strategy's aim of helping more residents become active through everyday movement, recreation and access to natural environments.

Dorset Climate and Ecological Emergency Strategy

The ROWIP contributes towards climate and ecological objectives by encouraging sustainable travel, improving access to nature, supporting biodiversity enhancement and increasing the resilience of the access network to the impacts of climate change.

15. Report sign-off

15.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Assurance & Governance (Monitoring Officer), the Director for Resources (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Cabinet Member(s)