

Dorchester Transport Action Group

Response to Dorset Council's Rights of Way Improvement Plan Consultation

Version 1

Friday 9th October

Section 1: About You.

Dorchester Transport Action Group

Dorchester Transport Action Group was formed in 2021. It is a non-party-political, unincorporated, not for profit organisation with the aims and objectives to:

- To improve sustainable transport provision for Dorchester and its surrounding area based on local knowledge and experience of residents and visitors. To help those without access to a car and those with mobility or access difficulties. To make low carbon alternatives to car use more attractive, recognising the importance of the Climate and Ecological Emergency.
- To educate the general public to understand and actively support sustainable travel, to increase their influence on policy, and to change travel behaviours.
- To support our local councils and other Dorset Transport Action Groups to improve transport provision.
- To influence bus and rail operators and other local transport organisations to make improvements to their services.
- To set out a long-term vision for the transport system in Dorchester and surrounding area.

We are one of 6 TAG groups operating in Dorset. We work closely with Dorchester Town Council and other parish councils in the area. We are not a statutory consultation body but we are financially supported by Dorset Council and meet with them regularly to discuss transport issues.

Section 2: Vision

Strongly Agree

We strongly support the vision, to create a world-class network of PROWs that make best use of Dorset's unique coastline and countryside and to connect communities using active travel. To be credible it must deliver specific routes across Dorset such the Greenways - the West Dorset Railways (including the Loders to Bradpole Greenway), The North Dorset Trailway, the Cordite Way, the Bridport to Chideock Path, the Bridport to Bradstock Path, the extension to the Portesham to Abbotsbury railway and others. Many of these routes are incomplete and incomplete with significant gaps. Sometimes these are stuck due to insufficient funding but often it is due to intransigent land owners.

One comment is that the current vision statement appears a little too centred on walks and could be more clearly designed around rural cycling, scootering and riding routes as well.

Section 3: Policies

Policy 1 – Maintaining/Improving the Existing Network

Strongly Agree

At present, new routes are built on a section-by-section basis, with gaps left where landowner agreement has not been reached. DTAG calls for Dorset Council to commit that, once a route has been approved as providing significant public benefit, the Council will complete the full route within an agreed timescale – using path creation orders, or compulsory purchase orders as a last resort, where negotiation has failed. This would ensure that Dorset has a meaningful network of rural active

travel infrastructure that maximises public health, environmental and economic benefits, built within a reasonable timeframe.

Policy 2 – Raise Awareness

Agree

Publicity and awareness are important but the priority must be a fully connected, inclusive network of routes. Fully completed routes will encourage more people to use the network for active travel and recreation. Care must be taken to make sure such Footpaths, Bridleways, cycle routes, Greenways and Trailways are not over publicised until local social and environmental issues have been addressed.

Policy 3 – Making the Network More Accessible

Strongly Agree

The extension of Dorset's Rights of Way should be inclusive and accessible to as many people as possible. This means targeting those who have the least access to transport and mobility, redressing existing inequalities and prioritising those who are currently excluded. That being said, not every public path will be suitable for everyone to use, and so every path must be considered on its own merits.

Policy 4 – Empowering Communities

Strongly Agree

Community groups are often the starting point for identifying the need for new greenways or extensions to existing routes. These volunteer groups often make a huge contribution by campaigning, researching, and raising awareness. Once routes are in place they provide a vital resource that helps maintain and promote them. After decades of governmental cutbacks, these voluntary groups (such as the TAGs and Greenways groups) play an increasingly important role in complementing the services provided by Dorset Council and need to work closely together to achieve a timely and positive result.

Dorchester TAG would like to see greater council commitment to completing routes within a defined timescale would sustain volunteer motivation and reduce the risk of disengagement due to lack of progress. Completing entire routes joins communities together and will inspire and reinforce volunteers' continued involvement in these projects.

Policy 5 – Building the Dorset Economy

Agree

There is a growing evidence base that active travel networks benefit the local economy especially through tourism and health. In addition, some rights of way have become essential low-congestion routes for travel to work. The existing, incomplete network of trailways already brings economic benefits, but this would be significantly greater if the partial routes were completed to create properly connected routes to foster connected communities.

Policy 6 – Countryside Code / Landowners

Agree

We completely support working collaboratively with landowners and following the Countryside Code to encourage responsible behaviour for the benefit of both people and the environment. However, some landowners have proved to be blockers to development of greenways which is disproportionate to the potential benefit to the wider public. The council needs to be firmer with these people to best benefit the whole community.

Policy 7 – Housing Development and the Local Plan

Agree

New developments often provide an opportunity to improve the local rights of way and create new greenways through CIL and Sections 106 payments. In addition, new developments should always include active travel routes to nearby towns and villages to encourage healthy behaviours and discourage car-centric journeys for the new residents. This is particularly relevant if the North Dorchester Garden Community gets planning permission to ensure there are high-quality active travel routes from the development to Charminster, Stinsford, Kingston Maurward and Dorchester.

Policy 8 – Health and Wellbeing

Strongly Agree

DTAG strongly agrees with the health and wellbeing benefits set out in the Rights of Way Improvement Plan. A network of complete trailways will provide both physical and mental health benefits and help avoid social isolation. Connecting rural and urban communities will enable people to incorporate active travel into their everyday journeys.

Policy 9 – Sustainable Transport and Active Travel

Strongly Agree

We strongly support the intention to integrate the rights of way network with active travel routes. Creating inclusive, continuous routes is key to building an effective active travel network that promotes sustainable travel and encourages short journeys to be made by walking, wheeling or cycling. A primary barrier to active travel is the lack of safe, direct routes. A connected greenway network would support rural active travel for school, work and recreation.

Policy 10 – Definitive Map Duties

Agree

We support continued public access to up-to-date maps and legal records so people can easily understand and use the rights of way network. More collaboration is required with local groups to maximise the public benefits.

Section 4: Priorities

Which of the following are most important to you? (Rank up to 3)

1. Maintaining and improving the existing Public Rights of Way
2. Empowering Communities to help improve their Rights of Way Network
3. Maximise out PROW for Sustainable Transport linking Communities and Active Travel

Other options (which are also important):

- Raise awareness of public rights of way
- Making our Network more Accessible
- Building the Dorset Economy through our public rights of way network
- Ensuring the Countryside Code and access legislation is followed, and landowners are respected
- Using new housing development and the Local Plan to enhance public rights of way
- Maximise the PROW network's contribution to health and wellbeing
- To uphold the council's legal duties to provide an up-to-date definitive map and statement which is accessible to the public

Section 5: Your Experience of the Network

- How easy or difficult is it to use rights of way in Dorset? –
- How easy or difficult is it to find information about routes? –
- What is your level of confidence when navigating public paths and routes? –
- How easy or difficult is it to report a problem on a path to Dorset Council? – Most people don't know but these days it is relatively easy to find out.

Section 6: Final Comments

What barriers, if any, do you experience when using rights of way in Dorset?

- Barriers are very route specific. Most PROWs are excellent but some are in a poor condition. Many could be improved and extended. A prioritised list that is agreed with local people would be helpful.

Further Comments

In addition to the ten policies set out in the consultation, Dorset Greenways Alliance encourages Dorset Council to aim to improve its Active Travel Capability rating from Level 1 to Level 2 which will increase Dorset's active travel funding.

We also note the absence of a monitoring framework within the plan. Without a clear mechanism for tracking delivery against the plan's own policies – for example, measuring progress on completing partial routes under Policy 1, or on improving accessibility under Policy 3 – neither the Council nor the public will be able to assess whether the plan's aims are being achieved. We recommend that a monitoring framework, with clear indicators and regular reporting, be built into the final plan.

Summary

In summary, Dorchester Transport Action Group asks Dorset Council to:

- Work more closely with TAGs and local organisations to create, support and promote PROWs and active travel pathways in Dorset.
- Commit to developing a prioritised Active Travel routes (such as Dorset's Trackways and Greenways) within an agreed timescale. Path Creation Orders should be used more promptly when landowner negotiations fail
- Ensure that if the North Dorchester development goes ahead, the developer constructs a network of safe, separated active travel routes from the development all the way back to Dorchester to create a realistic and healthy alternative to travel by car.
- Introduce a monitoring framework to track delivery against the plan's policies
- Aim to improve Dorset's Active Travel Capability rating from Level 1 to Level 2