



## Report of the Head of Planning and City Regeneration

Planning Committee – 5 December 2023

### Draft Countryside Access Plan 2023-2033

<b>Purpose:</b>	To seek approval of the Draft Plan for the purposes of public consultation
<b>Policy Framework</b>	The Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act; 2000 Local Authority Executive Arrangements (Functions and Responsibilities) (Wales) Regulations 2007 (as amended)
<b>Reason for Decision</b>	Statutory requirement to maintain an up to date Countryside Access Plan
<b>Consultation</b>	Legal , Finance, Access to Services, Rights of Way Scrutiny Working Group
<b>Recommendation(s):</b>	It is recommended that:  1) The Draft Countryside Access Plan is approved for public consultation and reported back, as amended, to Council for final approval.
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<b>Access to Services Officer:</b>	Catherine Window

#### 1.0 Background

1.1 Under the provisions of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act, 2000 The Council are responsible for producing a Countryside Access Plan (CAP), officially known as a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP), every 10 years. This is the primary means by which Councils identify the changes to be made in respect of management and improvement to the local rights of way network to make better provision for users.

1.2 Under Article 4: 1 a (v) of Part 2 of the Council Constitution the Local Authority Executive Arrangements (Functions and Responsibilities) (Wales) Regulations 2007 (as amended) require a Countryside Access Plan to be adopted by the Council.

## **2.0 Plan details**

2.1 This Plan, which is attached as an appendix, will replace the Council's first CAP published in 2007. It will be an essential tool in shaping countryside access for the next ten years and for gaining external sources of funding.

2.2 The CAP assesses all aspects of the present condition of the path network, i.e., public footpaths, bridleways and Access Land within the City and County of Swansea (the County) and identifies how this resource can be better managed and improved. Approximately two thirds of the County's total path network lies within the Gower Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

2.3 The CAP must consider walking, horseriding and cycling with an emphasis on improving access to and recreational use of the County's public rights of way whilst continuing to protect them from development.

2.4 Key objectives of the CAP include:

- Improving coastal access including the Wales Coast Path and the path network near the coast (about 30% of the total path network)
- Increasing the connectivity of the path network by creating and diverting paths in areas where there is demand but few or no paths
- Improving the network so that 75% of it is 'easy to use' – including all the bridleways.

2.5 The CAP describes how the Council seeks to make the most of the economic benefits of countryside access by improving the accessibility of the path network. Gower AONB attracts both domestic and international visitors year-round to enjoy the County's natural landscape, helping to drive sustainable growth of the tourism economy. The extent of path network and Access Land are the main means by which visitors can enjoy this experience and walking is recognised as the most popular activity of visitors.

2.6 The CAP fits within the framework of other relevant national policy and guidance, as well as local policies and strategies. Of particular note is the Wales Transport Strategy, 2021, which aims for walking and cycling to become the normal choice for shorter journeys. Additionally, the Active Travel Plan for Wales, 2016, seeks to enhance provision for walkers and cyclists, whilst the Visit Wales Plan 2020-2025 seeks to deliver investment in the Wales Coast Path, mountain biking and cycling.

2.7 At the local level the Swansea Local Development Plan, 2019, includes strategic policies relating to providing an accessible environment for all,

and specific policy relating to Public Rights of Way and Recreational Routes. Other local strategies promoting improved access opportunities include the Swansea Destination Management Plan, 2023-26 and the Gower AONB Management Plan, 2016.

## 2.8 The CAP consists of two parts:

- Part 1: An assessment of the current condition of the countryside access resource.
- Part 2: A statement of action describing how that resource will be managed in future.

## 2.9 Part 1 includes

- Analysis of Achievements of the current Countryside Access Plan
- Condition of the path network
- Assessment of why access to the countryside is important
- How the registration of the path network is dealt with
- The types of orders made to change the path network
- An explanation of the management of the path network
- Access Land details
- Promotion of access to the countryside

## 2.10 Part 2

Is the CAP's Action Plan and contains 28 actions against which the plan will be annually monitored. It will be published as a separate document to enable regular update and review.

## 2.11 Actions include those relating to making the countryside as accessible to as many walkers and riders as possible; maintenance of the Definitive Map and Statement – the legal record of public rights of way; as well as changes to and management of the Path network.

## 3.0 Next Steps

### 3.1

Once the draft plan is translated it will be subject of a 12 week period of consultation with the public and key stakeholders (Swansea Local Access Forum, Natural Resources Wales and Welsh Government). Taking on board the feedback received, a final amended version will be reported back to Council for approval and published online.

#### **4.0 Legal implications**

- 4.1 There are no legal implications other than those detailed in the body of this report. Responsibility for legal duties associated with public rights of way was passed to the Countryside Access Team in 2022.

#### **5.0 Finance Implications**

- 5.1 The costs of fulfilling all statutory duties and preparation of the CAP must be met from within the team's budget.
- 5.2 Welsh Government have indicated to all Councils that unless there is an adopted CAP in place their allocation of Access Improvement Grant (100% funding) will be reduced by 25%. For Swansea this equates to £18,380 of capital funding which may only be spent on path improvement works and has not been committed to any projects yet and will not be unless and until the CAP is approved.

#### **6.0 Integrated Assessment Implications**

- 6.1 The improvement and maintenance of public rights of way has a positive impact on those who use the path network and encourages greater use of it by residents and visitors to the area. Walking as an activity has both economic and health benefits and improving/extending path connections assists with community cohesion, provides more sustainable travel options and enables better access for all.
- 6.2 Preparation of this plan involves consideration by Scrutiny Working Group, Swansea Local Access Forum (with Natural Resources Wales and Welsh Government input) and Planning Committee, followed by 12 week public consultation. The feedback from the consultation will be reported back to Council next Spring together with an updated version of the plan for adoption.
- 6.3 The Plan has been prepared with full consideration of the Council's duties to work towards Wales' seven shared wellbeing goals and to contribute to sustainable development and management of natural resources.
- 6.4 There are no risks to preparation and adoption of this statutorily required plan. Not having an adopted plan in place would however pose a risk, as there would be less grant income made available and therefore less maintenance and improvement works being carried out, leading to path closures the majority of which lie within the coastal access zone. This would prevent access to most beaches as these can only be accessed via the path network and in turn impact on the visitor economy.
- 6.5 There are significant statutory requirements associated with managing, maintaining, protecting, and recording the path network. Adoption of this plan will meet the Council's duties in this regard, make the countryside as

accessible to as many walkers and riders as possible, and encourage people from all backgrounds to take part in countryside access.

**Background Papers:**

Swansea Countryside Access Plan [Countryside Access Plan 2007-2017 - Swansea](#)

**Appendices:**

Appendix 1: Draft Swansea Countryside Access Plan 2023-2033

Appendix 2: IIA