Mend the Gap Access Improvement Report

Executive Summary

Prepared by K Foster, Outdoor access consultant, January 2025

Introduction:

This report evaluates the potential for access improvements in the Mend the Gap area, with an aim of enhancing public access to, and enjoyment of, the landscapes linking the Chilterns and the North Wessex Downs, and in support of Mend the Gap's core focus of mitigating the visual and ecological impacts of the Great Western mainline's electrification, while promoting inclusivity and accessibility for all users.

Methodology:

The evaluation employed a multi-phase approach to identify areas for improvement:

- Site Assessments: Nineteen potential gateway locations were assessed based on key criteria, including public transport access, parking facilities, paths, and amenities such as toilets and refreshment areas.
- Stakeholder Consultations: Engagements with local councils, residents, disability advocacy groups, and national organisations were conducted via meetings, surveys, and questionnaires to gather insights on current barriers and needs.
- Data Analysis: Field data and consultation feedback were analysed to pinpoint accessibility gaps and prioritise recommendations.
- Strategic Review: Consideration was given to policy frameworks, such as the National Planning Policy Framework and the Countryside for All Good Practice Guide, to ensure alignment with broader accessibility goals and funding options.

Key Findings:

- Gateway Sites: Cholsey Meadows, Wheel Orchard Car Park, and Pangbourne Recreation Ground were identified as high-priority locations for development due to their existing infrastructure and potential for enhancement.
- Accessibility Challenges: Issues include limited mobility access, poor path conditions, inadequate disabled parking spaces, and insufficient toilet facilities across various sites.
- Stakeholder Input: Feedback highlighted the need for clearer signage, better interpretation of routes, improved accessibility for users with disabilities, and safer travel options connecting key sites.
- Strategic Opportunities: Enhancements to National Trail connections, active travel corridors, and inclusive outdoor spaces were identified as priorities in order to deliver long-term access improvements.

Recommendations:

- Promoted Routes: A series of potential easier-access routes have been identified and audited in order to improve access for people with disabilities and/or limited mobility.
- Wider Improvements: The report identifies a series of additional steps, including the upgrading of path surfaces, replacement of stiles with accessible gates, and locations for provision of additional disabled parking spaces.
- Enhanced Facilities: Additional longer-term improvements to support a wider visitor demographic had been identified, including by introducing Changing Places toilets and improving signage and interpretation.
- Strategic Developments: Recommendations include the development of safe, continuous active travel corridors, such as Goring to Wallingford and Pangbourne to Reading, including the introduction of quiet-lanes designations on several existing low-traffic routes.
- Communication Strategies: Provide detailed, accessible route information through clear signage, virtual previews, and multi-format resources to support diverse user needs.

Conclusion:

This report emphasises the importance of addressing accessibility challenges while fostering environmental conservation and community engagement. By implementing the proposed recommendations, the Mend the Gap programme could create a more inclusive and sustainable landscape, enhancing its appeal to both local communities and visitors.

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The Mend the Gap programme

Funded by Network Rail, the vision of the Mend the Gap programme is that the 'outstanding landscape that links the Chilterns and the North Wessex Downs will be enhanced and enriched for wildlife, residents and visitors, helping to heal and soften the scars left by electrification of the Great Western main line."

The programme is delivering projects and schemes that will, in combination, help to reduce and compensate for the visual harm done to the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs National Landscapes by the electrification of the Great Western main line, where it runs through the two National Landscapes.

Project background

The Mend the Gap area straddles two National Landscapes and is nestled between the urban settlements of Reading, Didcot and Henley. It is an important area for walking, cycling and leisure activities, with both the Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trail cutting through it, and many other rights of way, local parks and greenspaces. Its settlements are served by a number of rail and bus transport services.

However, whilst access to greenspaces and countryside is a big attraction offering lots of options for the able-bodied, provision is much more limited for those with reduced mobility or additional needs. Many organisations have been working to improve accessibility in the area, including the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs National Landscapes, National Trails, local authority rights of way teams, the Chiltern Society and others.

Chilterns Conservation Board, acting as commissioning authority for the project, sought the completion of a report looking at at both existing public access and potential improvements in access provision within the project area.

One of the strategic priorities of the Mend the Gap programme is to improve access for all, making it easier for local communities and visitors to access and enjoy this part of the

National Landscapes. include physical access improvements (more accessible gates, surfaces and facilities) and improved information and interpretation. This audit will be an important step towards realising this ambition.

Principal Contractor

With a background in forestry and wildlife management, later focusing on recreational access, the contractor (Kieran Foster) has spent approximately 30 years involved in recreational access initiatives and access advocacy, largely on cycle access but increasingly developing into rights of way and multi-user accessible routes.

The above includes the last eight years as a self-employed consultant engaged mainly as national off-road advisor for a major cycling charity, with additional contracts developing over 600 miles of promoted walking, cycling and horse-riding routes around the country, supported by guidebooks and multi-media interpretation - also including the full range of route development work including GIS mapping, statutory and local stakeholder consultation, working within protected landscapes and EUROPA 2000 designated sites. Previous work has involved extensive consultation with partners (Natural England, Natural Resources Wales, Local Access Forums, protected landscape staff, county council highways and rights of way officers, parish and district councils, tourism departments etc.)

The contractor also has extensive experience developing and assessing promoted routes and access gateway locations. Since 2018 with Surrey Hills AONB (now National Landscape) advising on access issues, including an ongoing package of work developing accessible gateways in the Surrey Hills, and led the work for British Horse Society on their engagement with Natural England and National Parks over the development of a National Trail accessible riders route, and is a member of the Institute of Public Rights of Way and Access Management (IPROW)
Finally, the contractor has acted as a national-level stakeholder on numerous outdoor access consultation panels, including DEFRA panels on outdoor access and promoted routes, green infrastructure, Environmental Land Management and on accessibility of National Trails for disabled users.

Project Brief:

The commissioned project included three main phases, namely:

1. Identify and map the key potential ‘gateway’ locations from which visitors are likely to explore the local area, eat and assess the current offering and facilities in order to select those with most potential for promotion and improvement, in accordance with the aims of the project.

2. Consult with the relevant parish council and a variety of other stakeholders, in order to recommend the best gateway access points and routes, and assess those locations for improvements in order to satisfy the programme’s long-term vision of routes which offer:

    - Suitability for users with differing levels of mobility needs.
    - A contextually appropriate level of supporting facilities - including provision of parking, toilets, refreshments, seating and interpretation
    - An appreciation of natural beauty or heritage.

3. Produce a written report which would:

    - Identify gateway access points and easy access route, including setting out suitability for different users or levels of mobility aid (eg wheelchairs/mobility scooters/pushchairs).
    - Makes recommendations as to how to improve accessibility for each gateway and route, and how to widen accessibility. Including both short term low-cost interventions and more ambitious long-term solutions

- Make recommendations on inclusive interpretation and signage for the routes, in order to cater those with visual, hearing and wider needs.
- Make broad recommendations of communications channels that could be used to promote accessible walks to potential users.

Contents:

- Accessible Facilities
- Accessible Routes
- Accessible gaps, gates and stiles
- Communication of accessible routes & facilities

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Annex 1: Consultation & stakeholder engagement methodology & results

- Activities
- Priorities
- Transport and Parking
- Disability Access
- Additional Comments
- Additional Questions

Identification of gateway locations and initial site assessment:

A total of nineteen sites were assessed as potential sites for development as gateway sites. A number of other potential sites were dismissed at an early stage due to lack of facilities or other identified sensitivities (eg. predominantly residential areas, lack of potential routes etc.)

A formalised assessment matrix, identifying key issues for assessment was developed for assessment of the remaining sites, however a small number of sites did not lend themselves well to this as they offered an 'area' rather than individual focal point. We have therefore sought to encompass these sites in an appropriate manner alongside our assessment matrix in our analysis, and in development of our recommendations.

Sites subsequently highlighted for individual site assessment were therefore as follows:

- Cholsey railway station
- Cholsey village hall/pavilion
- St Marys Church
- Manor Farm
- Cholsey Meadows

- Leatherne Bottle
- Swan Car Park (& nearby recreation ground)
- Wheel Orchard Car Park
- Goring Railway Station
- Whitehill Burial Ground

- Pangbourne Railway Station
- Dolphin Centre
- Village Hall
- Recreation Ground
- Whitchurch Maze

All sites were subject to visits in order to assess and record the key features in the scoring matrix based around:

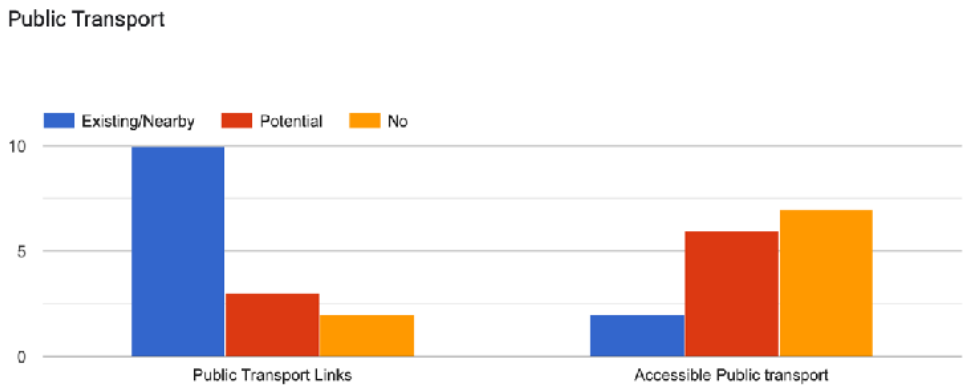
Access to public transport
Parking (including consideration of accessibility, surfacing & number of disabled parking spaces)
Refreshment facilities (including consideration of accessibility)
Toilets (including accessibility, baby changing & disabled facilities)
Outdoor Seating (including accessibility)
Paths (including waymarked routes & accessibility)
Cycle facilities

Details of the results from this process, and an analysis of results, is included below:

Data analysis & key trends:

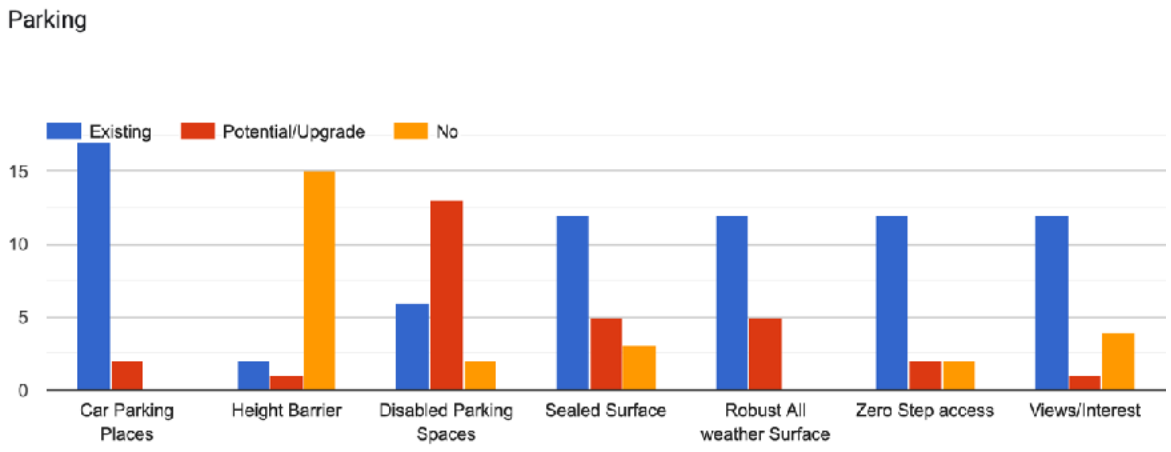
Analysis of the initial site assessment data has shown us that:

1. Public Transport



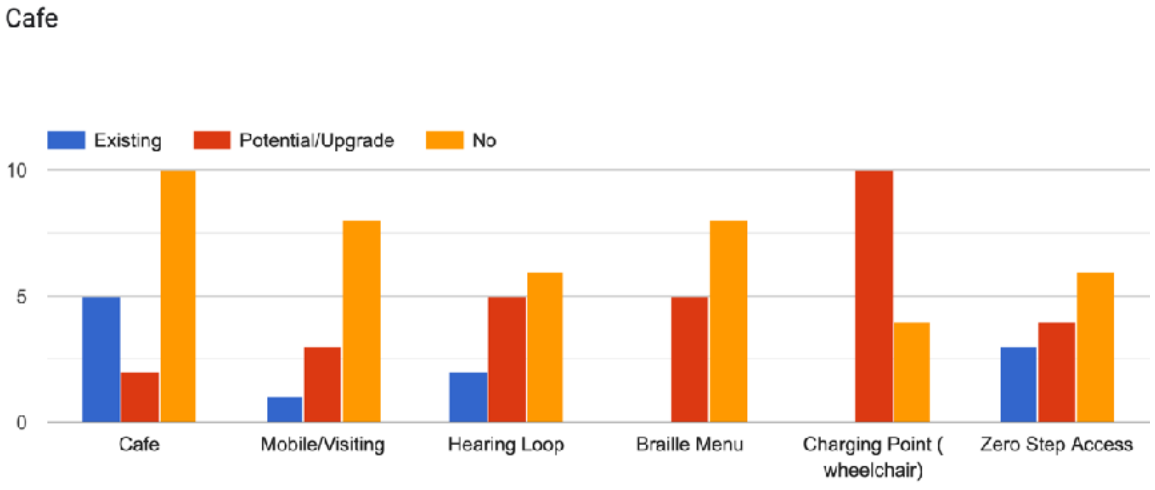
- Links: Public transport is available nearby in some areas but not universally accessible across all locations. Areas with existing public transport links are common, but some locations still require upgrades or are lacking entirely.
- Strengths: Locations like Cholsey Village Hall, Cholsey Meadows, Goring Station, and Pangbourne Recreation Ground have good existing or nearby public transport links. These sites score high on accessibility (4 or 5), making them well connected and accessible to a broad range of visitors.
- Weaknesses: Sites such as Cholsey RW and St Mary's show lower scores (3 or below), suggesting that public transport options at these locations are more limited or harder to access. Improvements in public transport links are needed to ensure better accessibility.
- Accessible Transport: Accessible public transport is an area that needs significant attention, as many places show potential for upgrades or no accessible options at all.
- Strengths: Sites like Goring Station have robust accessible transport connections, which suggests that people with mobility challenges can reach these sites without major issues.
- Weaknesses: Cholsey Railway Station, St Mary's, and others score poorly here (1 or 2), indicating a lack of accessible transport options, which could hinder access for disabled visitors or those requiring more specialised assistance.

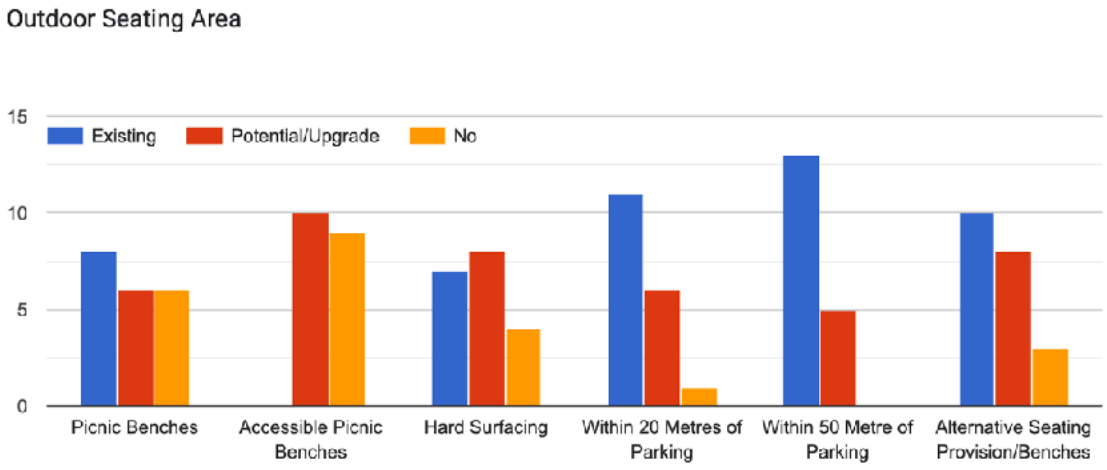
2. Parking Infrastructure



- Car Parking Spaces: Generally, car parking spaces are present across multiple locations, though some are limited in number or availability. Many places show potential for more spaces.
- Height Barriers: A few locations have height barriers, which could restrict access for larger vehicles such as horseboxes, particularly in locations with a mix of potential upgrades.
- Strengths: Sites like Cholsey Meadows, Wheel Orchard Carpark, and Cholsey Village Hall offer sufficient regular parking spaces, which would be suitable for accommodating a limited increase in visitors.
- Weaknesses: Leatherne Bottle and Swan Car Park have a limited number of parking spaces, which could be problematic during busy periods. Sites like St Mary's church have been flagged as needing improvements if it were to be promoted as a gateway site for either regular or disabled users.
- Disabled Parking: While there are designated disabled parking spaces in many areas, some places have inadequate facilities or potential for upgrades to make the spaces more accessible (e.g., improved dimensions or manoeuvring space).
- Strengths: Cholsey Meadows and Cholsey Village Hall have adequate disabled parking spaces, ensuring accessibility for visitors with mobility challenges.
- Weaknesses: Sites such as Leatherne Bottle, St Mary's church and Manor Farm have limited or insufficient disabled parking spaces. Leatherne Bottle's disabled parking spaces are not deemed fit for purpose.
- Strengths: Cholsey Meadows, Wheel Orchard and The Dolphin Centre at Pangbourne have good quality sealed or robust all-weather parking surfaces that provide a safe parking experience even in poor weather conditions.
- Weaknesses: St Mary's and Leatherne Bottle have issues with parking surface quality, such as poor surfacing or the need for resurfacing. Improving these surfaces would be necessary for enhancing accessibility.

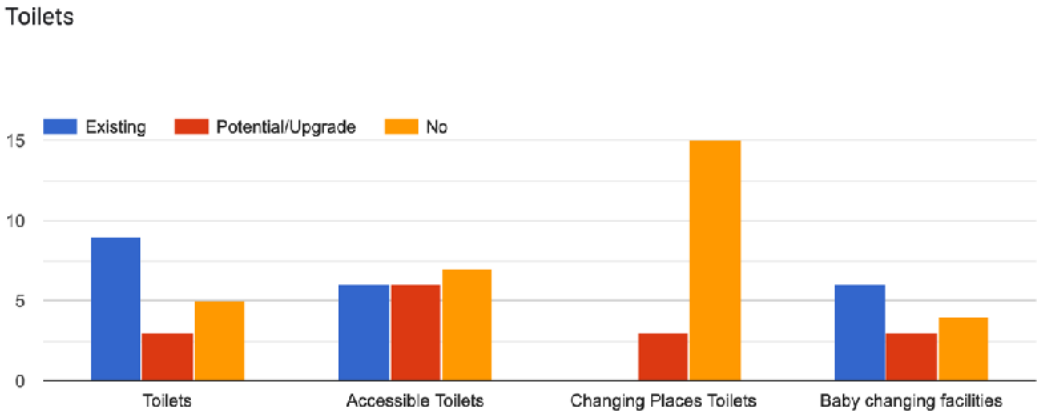
3. Refreshment and Rest/Outdoor Seating Areas





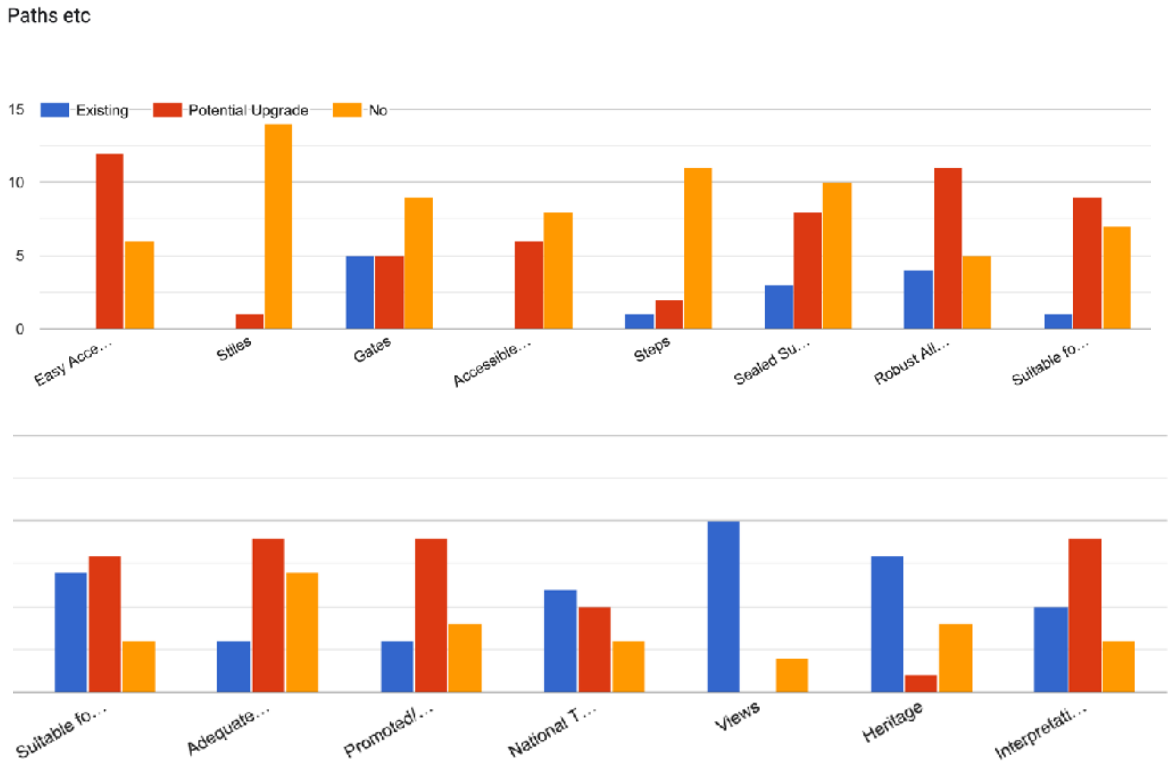
- Cafes: Several locations offer refreshments, with some cafes already meeting accessibility standards such as zero-step access. However, others show potential for upgrades, especially concerning the installation of Braille menus or hearing loops.
- Strengths: Cholsey Meadows and Wheel Orchard offer good refreshment locations, with good accessibility features such as wheelchair access and charging points.
- Weaknesses: Many sites, like St Mary's church and Manor Farm have limited options, either offering only community cafes that are open for short hours or lacking cafes altogether. This can be a major inconvenience for visitors who would like to take a break or have refreshments during their visit.
- Outdoor Seating Areas: Many sites offer outdoor seating; however, accessible picnic benches or hard surfacing to access these are limited in some locations, highlighting the need for further development. Seating near parking is another area that requires improvement in many places.
- Strengths: Sites such as Cholsey Meadows and Streatley recreation ground offer potential for well-equipped outdoor seating areas, including accessible picnic benches. This would makes these sites more attractive to visitors, especially families and those who wish to rest outdoors.
- Weaknesses: Leatherne Bottle and Pangbourne recreation ground have limited or insufficient outdoor seating options, which could discourage visitors from spending time outdoors. The quality and quantity of seating could be improved at these locations.

4. Toilets



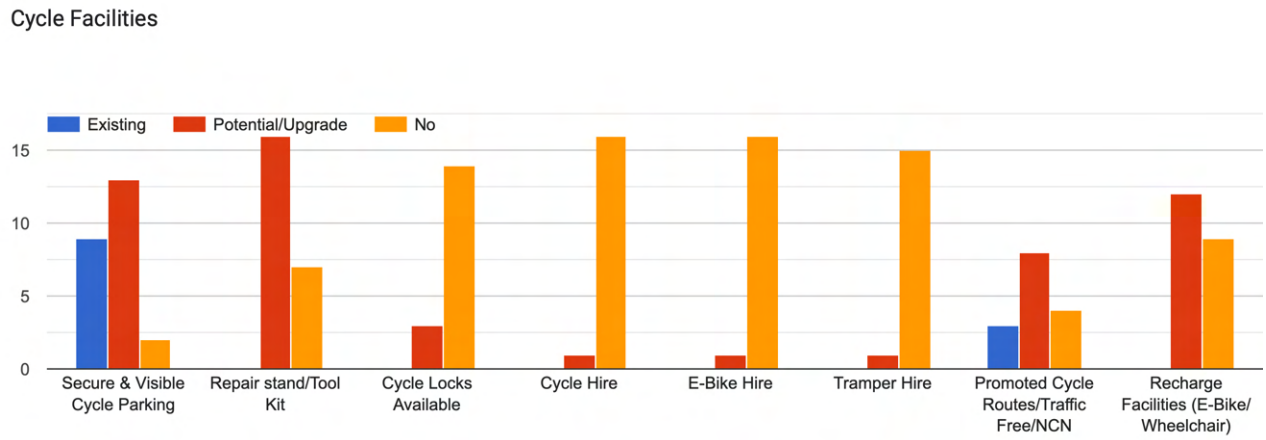
- Accessible Toilets: Accessible toilets are available in some locations, but others show a need for upgrades or lack facilities entirely.
- Strengths: Wheel Orchard car park and Pangbourne recreation ground provide accessible toilet facilities. This ensures that visitors with disabilities or mobility challenges have the necessary facilities when they visit.
- Weaknesses: a number of sites currently lack fully accessible toilet provision.
- Changing Places Toilets: A few areas with existing facilities show potential for the installation of Changing Places Toilets, which would offer an important improvement for disabled visitors.

5. Paths and Routes



- Accessibility: Paths suitable for wheelchairs and trampers are a key focus, with a number of sites showing potential for upgrade. Some paths are still only partially accessible due to gates, stiles, or uneven surfaces.
- Strengths: Locations like Cholsey Meadows, Cholsey VH, and Pangbourne Rec Ground offer potential for paved and accessible paths - suitable for wheelchairs, trampers, or those with limited mobility, and improvements to these would add to the overall accessibility of the site.
- Weaknesses: Sites like Leatherne Bottle, Lardon Chase, and St Mary's have path issues, such as uneven surfaces, stiles, or steep gradients, which can be barriers to accessibility. Significant work may be needed to make these sites fully accessible to people with mobility aids.
- Waymarking and Routes: Locations that are part of National Trails or promoted routes often provide better accessibility. However, many potential routes still need upgrading to enhance their accessibility.

6. Cycle Facilities



- Cycle Parking: Secure cycle parking is available in some locations, but other sites either have limited space or show potential for upgrades, such as adding repair stands or e-bike charging points.
- Strengths: Cholsey VH and Cholsey Meadows have good cycle facilities, such as secure cycle parking and potential for cycle hire services. These features are particularly beneficial for cyclists and e-bike users.
- Weaknesses: Leatherne Bottle and Swan Car Park lack dedicated cycle facilities, which could make these sites less appealing for cycling visitors.
- Promoted Routes: promoted cycle routes are limited, with potential for development. King Alfred's Way, a long-distance promoted off-road cycle route - developed by the report authors on behalf of Cycling UK - passes through the project area resulting in significant levels of seasonal recreational cycle use between Goring and Pangbourne, while the longstanding proposals for a Ridgeway riders route may offer potential for expansion of the local offer.

7. Overall Quality and Suggestions

- Subjective Ratings: Many of the existing facilities receive subjective assessments that range from good to excellent, especially where there is clear potential for improvement. Parking, routes, and toilets tend to be the most consistent areas requiring attention.
- Cholsey Meadows is one of the most accessible sites overall, with access to public transport, parking, toilets, cafes, paths, and cycle facilities. The site's potential to cater to a wide range of users is significant, with many features already in place. Cholsey VH is another strong site, providing access to transport, toilets, cafes, and parking. The site's overall quality appears high across most aspects, although the lack of disabled access at Cholsey railway station acts currently as a significant barrier to Improvements in access in this area
- Goring Station and Wheel Orchard car park also stands out with high scores in parking, public transport links, and path accessibility.
- Leatherne Bottle and Swan Car Park are flagged for several issues, including limited parking, poor surface quality, and limited accessible facilities. These sites would need significant improvements to ensure they are fully accessible.
- St Mary's church and Manor Farm also require attention to parking, toilets, and paths. The sites' potential is noted, but improvements would be needed to cater to a wider range of visitors.
- Potential for Future Development: Many areas show significant potential for upgrades, especially in terms of improving accessibility for disabled users, improving surface quality on routes, and adding more infrastructure for outdoor activities (e.g., cycling, walking, etc.).

Summary:

Consistent issues witnessed were:

- Limited accessibility for wheelchair users/limited mobility. This is highlighted in particular with rail stations (only one platform at Pangbourne is accessible, none at Cholsey)
- Lack of suitable disabled car parking spaces close to accessible routes and/or other facilities
- Accessibility/quality of toilets
- Inaccessible path surfacing

The data analysis further highlights that while there are numerous existing provisions for public transport, parking, cafes, toilets, and outdoor facilities, there is also substantial potential for improvement in accessibility, infrastructure, and services. Specific areas for attention include accessible parking, paths suitable for wheelchairs, and more inclusive facilities. Enhancing these facilities and ensuring better connectivity between them would improve the overall countryside experience for all users, including those with mobility challenges.

1. **Improve Public Transport Access**: Sites like Cholsey village hall and St Mary's church need better, accessible, public transport links or improvements to existing services.
2. **Enhance Parking Facilities**: Locations like Leatherne Bottle and Swan Car Park need additional parking spaces and better parking surfaces. Special attention is needed for increasing the number of disabled parking spaces.
3. **Upgrade Toilets**: Sites like Wheel Orchard car park, Pangbourne recreation ground (and/or Dolphin centre) and Cholsey VH would benefit from upgrade of existing toilet facilities to changing places standards in order to improve the experience for visitors with disabilities.
4. **Improve Outdoor Seating**: Across the board, sites with limited outdoor seating should invest in additional seating options, ensuring they are accessible and properly positioned, close to parking spaces and, where possible, with high quality, accessible surfacing. It is particularly notable that no sites currently offer accessible picnic tables.
5. **Develop Cycle Infrastructure**: Sites that lack cycle facilities should consider adding secure bike parking and cycle hire options, as these are attractive features for cyclists and eco-conscious visitors.
6. **Cafes & Refreshments**: Expanding cafe options, especially in underserved sites such as St Mary's and Manor Farm, would significantly improve visitor satisfaction.

It was felt that at some of these sites, these challenges could be overcome in the short to medium term. Weight was placed on these as being key locations for further discussion, while other sites were faced with challenges that were felt to be more difficult to overcome. However, many of the weaker sites could still be significantly improved, increasing their accessibility and overall appeal.

Key conclusions regards choice of gateway sites:

As a result of our data analysis from the initial assessment, along with discussion with stakeholders and consultation feedback (see following section) the following sites were felt to offer the best overall balance of facilities, routes and overall impression on which to focus our formal recommendations:

Cholsey - Cholsey Meadows and Ferry Lane

Goring - Wheel Orchard Car Park

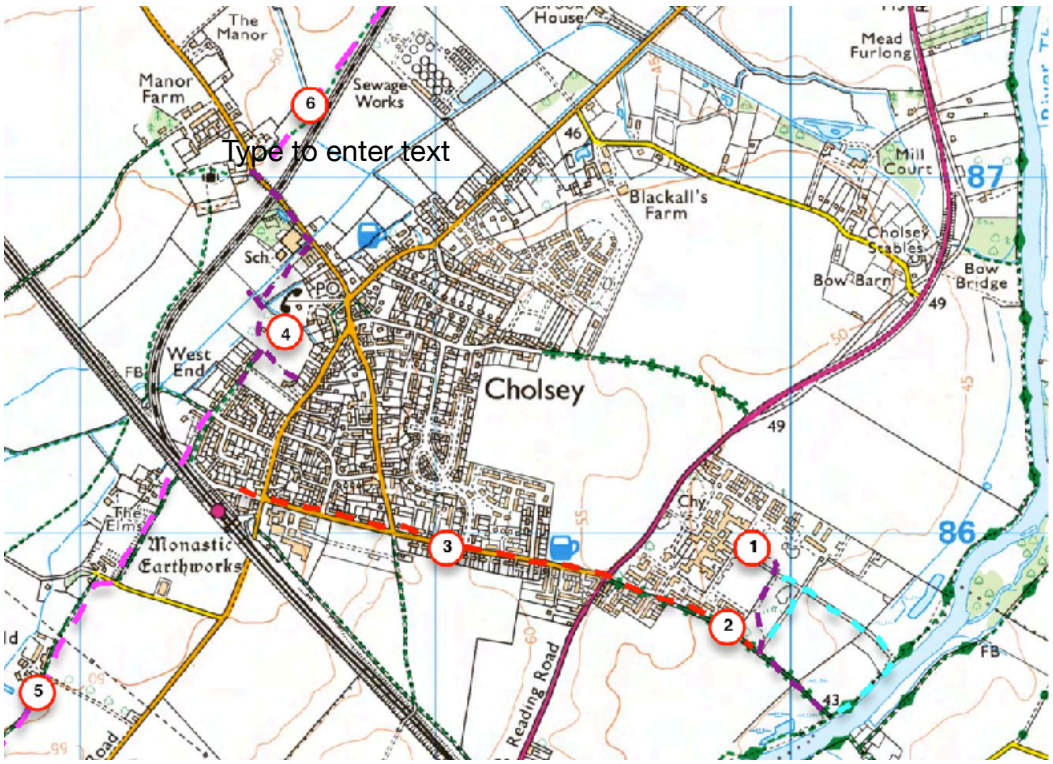
Pangbourne - Recreation Ground and Meadows

Our main report recommendations and proposed accessible routes therefore flow out of these as key locations for project development, but are not strictly limited to these locations as a number of additional opportunities for access improvement were identified as part of our research and engagement.

Recommendations:

We have discussed above a number of key concepts and interventions that we believe are relevant to improving public access in general, with an overview of how these broader concepts fit in with our more site specific considerations. We will set out below more specific recommendations broken down on an area by area basis, along with additional recommendations for solutions to specific site related issues.

Cholsey



Map 1: Overview of recommendations for Cholsey area
(All mapping © Ordnance Survey, licence no 100044050)

1 - Ferry Lane/Fairmile Hospital easier access route:

Ferry Lane is a tarmac surfaced Byway Open to All Traffic, a little over half a mile long, leading from Reading Road to the Thames Path National Trail and River Thames. It has a small parking area at the end, which also offers an important slipway/access point to the river for canoeists & other recreational water users.

Ferry lane is also located alongside the former Fair Mile hospital, with both the hospital building and part of the grounds of which have been developed for housing. Crucially, however, some of the former buildings have been retained for community space, including children's play area, parking and cafe. This offers a high value hub location, close to an attractive area of water meadows, and with easy access to the National trail.

After assessment and discussion of the options at this location, we feel this is an ideal location for the provision of an easier-access route that links together both the community facilities at the former Fairmile Hospital site, Ferry Lane, and the National Trail. We believe that this area could offer the provision of an 'access for all' route, along with the potential provision of a longer 'access for many' route connecting through the nearby meadows on existing paths in order to complete a circular route. Further details and route audit are annexed to this report

2 - Ferry Lane traffic management:

An additional consideration with respect to Ferry Lane is the issue of vehicular use and parking. Discussion with stakeholders and consultees revealed a distinct issue with increased use of this location since the Covid pandemic, and increasing problems with inconsiderate parking, vehicles driving too fast and generally increased levels of use.

As a result of the complexity of different views, and considerations of multiple user groups and , we have developed what we believe is a somewhat radical, but also wide-ranging and strategic proposal for the management of this Byway.

At the moment, the entire length of the byway is used by motor vehicles, primarily as an access route to the small parking area at the end of the lane close to the slipway (former ferry point). This makes the lane unattractive to other recreational users and causes significant parking problems in peak visitor season.

Our recommendation is that this lane needs to be reclaimed as a place primarily for recreational walking, cycling and equestrian users rather than motor vehicles. We are, we believe, supported in this conclusion by the existing formal legal designation of the route as a Byway Open to All Traffic, which means a highway over which the public have a right of way for vehicular and all other kinds of traffic, but which is used by the public mainly for the purpose for which footpaths and bridleways are so used[1].

We believe that in order to achieve this outcome, a number of steps need to be made:

i) Quiet lane designation over the full length of the lane, including reduction of the speed limit to 20mph (see the explanation of quiet lane designation earlier in this report)
ii) Traffic restrictions over the lower section of the lane prohibiting all vehicles except for disabled users (blue badge holders) and vehicles unloading boats.
iii) Parking restrictions over the lower section of the lane prohibiting parking for all vehicles except blue badge holders

[1] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/69/section/66

iv) The resurfacing of the verge with compacted gravel over a section of approximately 200 metres on the upper section of the lane to provide a dedicated roadside parking area along this section of the lane (within the highway width)

We believe that the above steps, taken in conjunction, offer a distinct opportunity to significantly rebalance the use of this lane by the public, reduce the impact of vehicles on both the tranquility and character of this stretch of pathway (notable for both its established hedgerows and the Meadows nature reserve and potentially reduce the impact of dog walking by reducing the temptation for owners to let their dogs out of the cars straight onto Riverside paths and the nature reserve. We suggest that these considerations should adequately offset the impact of loss of any grass verge habitat, particularly as sections of this are already used as an informal parking area.

There is additional potential to further refine this proposal through the provision of a parking space on adjoining land, either alongside the new housing estate or in adjoining agricultural field, however either of these options would require additional land, while creating a dedicated parking bay (extending and resurfacing the existing informal verge parking areas) would not require additional land.

3 - National Trail feeder route:

We regard the route from the Thames Path National Trail at the base of Ferry Lane to the Railway Station at Cholsey as an important feeder route. This route allows direct access to the National Trail from London and other main line stations, and as such should be seen as offering significant potential for sustainable travel and reduction in car use amongst National Trail users. It also offers National Trail users a useful 'station to station' link - whereby Thames Path National Trail users can 'daisy chain' together sections of the trail between rail stations at Reading, Pangbourne and Goring.

Further, we note with regret that the design of Cholsey Railway Station is inaccessible to most disabled users. We recognise that solutions to accessibility at this site are likely to be difficult and expensive, although we would highlight that the importance of the National Trail link, and importance of providing sustainable transport options to disabled and less-able users should carry weight in the prioritisation of future Network Rail funding for access improvements, and additional notice is drawn to expected review of National Landscape priorities, which may result in the extension of organisations duty of regard with reference to access to nature and recreational value of National Landscapes[2]

Consideration was given to the best option for this route, including the potential to utilise the Byway along Ilges Lane (Cholsey BOAT 13), however on balance it was believed that the more direct route via Papist Way offered the most practical and preferred route (and indeed, was the preferred route of Edward Thomas in his published 1911 perambulation of the *Icknield Way*).

As such, we would strongly recommend a clearly waymarked and promoted route utilising contextually appropriate signage highlighting the route between the railway station and the National Trail at the base of Ferry Lane. We note that some signage does already exist at the base of Ferry Lane stating "Byway - Cholsey Railway Satiation 1m" however we believe that renewed signage, both here and at points along the route (in particular at the A329 crossing and at the railway station directing people towards the National Trail would be valuable additions to the communication of the National Trail route, both to visitors and local residents.

It is also highlighted that a safe crossing point of the A329 is, in our opinion, vitally needed as part of this feeder route. While a nominal 30mph limit may exist along this section of A-road, our observations were that this is not consistently complied with, and that the level of traffic on this route, including HGV's, was unpleasant and intimidating. This knowledge ties into both our recommendations for a safe road crossing here and also our recommendations for safe active travel corridors between Wallingford and outlying villages.

[2] DEFRA press release 16th December 2024: "New legislation and guidance will give National Parks and National Landscapes a clear mandate to widen the public's access to nature through strengthened purposes"

4 - Cholsey Recreation Ground accessible route:

Discussion with stakeholders, including Cholsey Parish Council, shows significant demand for a safe and accessible route through Cholsey recreation ground in order to connect community facilities - including the pavilion community centre, primary school and sports ground.

It is also of significant importance that the main section of this route would provide a safe, traffic free link from residential areas in and around the railway station and surrounding streets to the village school. As a result it is vital that this route is accessible for wheelchairs, buggies and children scooters, so requires high quality accessible surfacing.

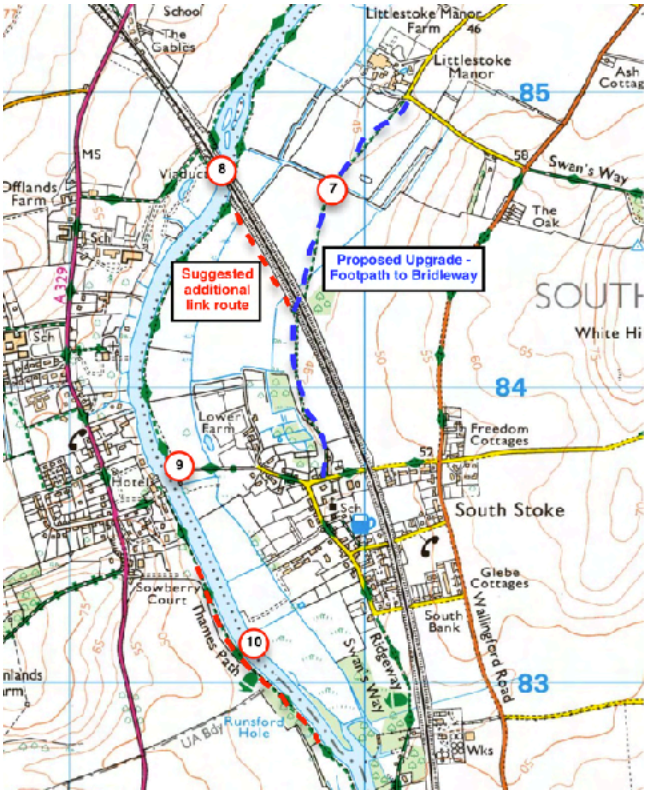
Further details, and an audit of the existing route, are contained in the annex to this report.

5 & 6 - Wallingford to Aston Tirrold active travel corridor:

Discussions with parish councils saw significant demand for improved active travel links in this area, including the idea of onward connections to Aston Tirrold and Blewbury. This route corridor is therefore identified as a long-term strategic access proposal, that would largely be dependent on future developments in active-travel funding.

The existing (direct) road route from Cholsey to Wallingford is identified by the DFT's propensity to cycle tool[3] as a key local corridor for cycle commuting, this is supported by Strava Metro data analysis (which due to Licencing restrictions cannot be replicated in full here). However as mentioned earlier in this report, the existing shared use pavement is, at places, narrow, and crash data analysis reveals a number of recorded serious road traffic incidents along this section of road. Any attempt to widen the footway to more modern standards would require significant cost in widening the road corridor, and as such we believe that upgrade and resurfacing of the current footpath, running alongside the heritage railway line from Cholsey to Wallingford, is likely to offer a viable and more affordable solution to delivering safe and accessible infrastructure - that would also offer additional benefits for recreational and leisure use in conjunction with the heritage railway line.

As identified, we also believe that this proposal would offer the possibility of extension onwards via existing bridleways to Aston Tirrold in order to provide a continuous traffic free corridor.



Map 2: Continuation of recommendations for Cholsey area

[3] https://www.pct.bike

7 - South Stoke to Littlestoke Manor bridleway upgrade (Wallingford to Goring Active Travel Corridor:

As discussed in our section on strategic active travel corridors, conversations with stakeholders have identified significant demand for improved active travel options, in these discussions, particular emphasis was placed by local groups on the lack of a safe active travel corridor between Goring and Wallingford.

We are aware of previous conversations about this route, and the report author was party to several years ago that directly looked into the possibility of upgrading the footpath through the railway tunnel into either a cycle track or bridleway. At the time it was felt that this was a desirable and attractive proposal but that local authorities were reluctant to utilise their statutory powers and uncertainty about the potential levels of cost and funding sources.

Significant consideration of alternative route options, including both creation of a surfaced riverside path and the possibility of a surfaced roadside route along the B4009 (where the Swan's Way[4] currently runs), however our belief is that this option offers the best all-round solution to the issues identified.

A primary consideration for this proposal is the condition of the current Ridgeway NT route (through the meadows and under the viaduct) which is currently inaccessible to a significant proportion of users. The current public footpath and towpath section is already subject to the impact of seasonal flooding and the risk of bank erosion. Given existing trends, the impact of climate change is likely to make this effects of these issues considerably worse in the near future, and providing an alternative, more sustainable, line for the National Trail route, well away from the effects of flooding and erosion is justifiable from the point of climate mitigation - without this intervention, the route risks being made impassable for large portions of the year, and any significant bank erosion could result in complete loss of the existing public footpath on this section of the route. (Current legal opinion is that, unlike coastal erosion, where a section of public footpath is permanently lost to riverbank erosion, then that part of the path ceases to exist, leaving ‘stub-ends’ at the bankside).

An additional consideration is the possibility of redirecting and consolidating both the Ridgeway National Trail and Swan's Way promoted routes into a single safe corridor, as part of a new, upgraded multi-user route. We believe that this this would also be in keeping with long-term proposals for the creation of a Ridgeway NT ‘riders route’ and with the purposes of National Trail designation

In forming this proposal, we have considered carefully the potential impact on Ridgeway users of removing this short section of riverside trail, but feel that the impact of this is significantly mitigated by the existence of the Thames Path NT on the adjoining bank as an alternative option, and by the effect of our additional proposals regards support for the ferry service at Moulsford/ South Stoke and improvements to the footway link at the A4130 Mongewell crossing, and our additional suggestion for a new footpath route running alongside the railway, linking the viaduct and the underpass.

Existing British Horse society guidance[5] comments that:

> *There are many examples of equestrian use of disused railway tunnels and long underpasses, such as under motorways; there is no reason to exclude horses from them. Examples include several on the Monsal Trail in Derbyshire and the Denstone Trail in Staffordshire, both disused railway lines, and the Trans Pennine Trail at Thurgoland. Some tunnels/underpasses are quite narrow, but it is not an issue so long as all users know to expect others and to pass with care and consideration. Signs are important on shared use trails to make clear to all users to expect horses.*

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[4] https://www.nationaltrail.co.uk/en_GB/short-routes/swan-s-way/

[5] https://www.bhs.org.uk/media/2gnexyyf/dimensions-1124.pdf

Horses and their riders or drivers are highly variable. While some will never tackle a tunnel or underpass, others will do so easily. It depends on temperament and training of both horse and handler. There is no reason to exclude all horses on the basis that a few may not wish to use a tunnel or underpass

This guidance is given additional weight by its acceptance by the Court of Appeal in a recent case on the suitability of a motorway underpass for upgrade to Bridleway status[6] As such, we feel that this route. Including the railway underpass is suitable for upgrade to Bridleway.

The overall impact of this proposal would therefore be to create a traffic free multi-user corridor all the way from Reading to Wallingford. As no such route currently exists, the creation of this continuous corridor is likely to offer very significant value for recreation and leisure use within the project area, along with active travel benefits. Further, the proposal carries significant benefits for the accessibility of this section of National Trail for a wide range of users, including the disabled, cyclists and equestrian users, and a significant improvement in equestrian road safety through the provision of a safe, traffic free alternative for the Swan's Way. Allied with consideration of the impact of flooding and future climate sensitivity of the existing riverside path, we believe this proposal offers a companying justification for the significant step of rerouting a section of National Trail onto a new alignment. As previously noted, as this constitutes both an Active Travel improvement and an enhancement to the Ridgeway National Trail, a number of finding streams may be relevant, including planning offset (S106/CIL), active travel funding and other Route ex including FiPL and National Lottery landscapes funding.

8 - Viaduct Pathway repair & improvement:

As detailed in the above section proposing rationalisation of the Ridgeway route, it is of particular note that sections of path approaching and passing under the viaduct on the right bank (Thames Path NT) is in a state of poor repair, and has reportedly deteriorated badly in recent years due to seasonal flooding and general wear and tear. This poor condition currently impacts on use and needs attention as a matter of priority. The section of boardwalk under the viaduct on this bank (Thames Path NT) is in poor condition and further deterioration is likely to begin presenting a risk to users.

An additional consideration may also be the risk of increased bank erosion at this site affecting the structural integrity of the Railway viaduct, and we would strongly recommend raising the issue with Network Rail to see of bank repair with stone gabions might be necessary, and whether path repairs might be achievable as a side-benefit of that work. The path on the left bank is in somewhat better condition.

9 - South Stoke slipway maintenance:

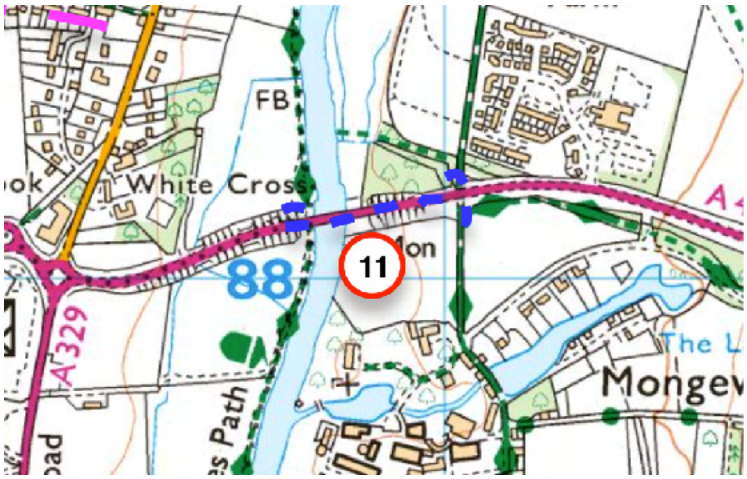
Users have reported a gradual deterioration in the conditions in and around the slipway at South Stoke, including rutting and vegetation growth. We would recommend minor sprucing up of this location and pothole repair on the approach track.

10 - Moulsford towpath improvements:

The section of wooded/scrub towpath immediately south of Moulsford for about 300 metres has begun to show significant signs of wear, having become narrow, rutted, and with exposed tree roots. This has, we fear, deteriorated to the point of significantly affecting use by less able visitors. We recommend that this area receives surface repairs including vegetation management. Significant delay in this risks resulting in more substantial repairs in the medium term. It is also noted that this section is at the culmination of the stretch of path leading from Cleeve court, where accessibility improvements have been recommended, as such these repairs should be

[6] Garland & Anor v Secretary of State for Environment, Food And Rural Affairs [2021] EWCA Civ 1098

seen as complimentary to the proposed bridge replacement at Cleeve court, or the provision of a new access route to Cleeve lock.



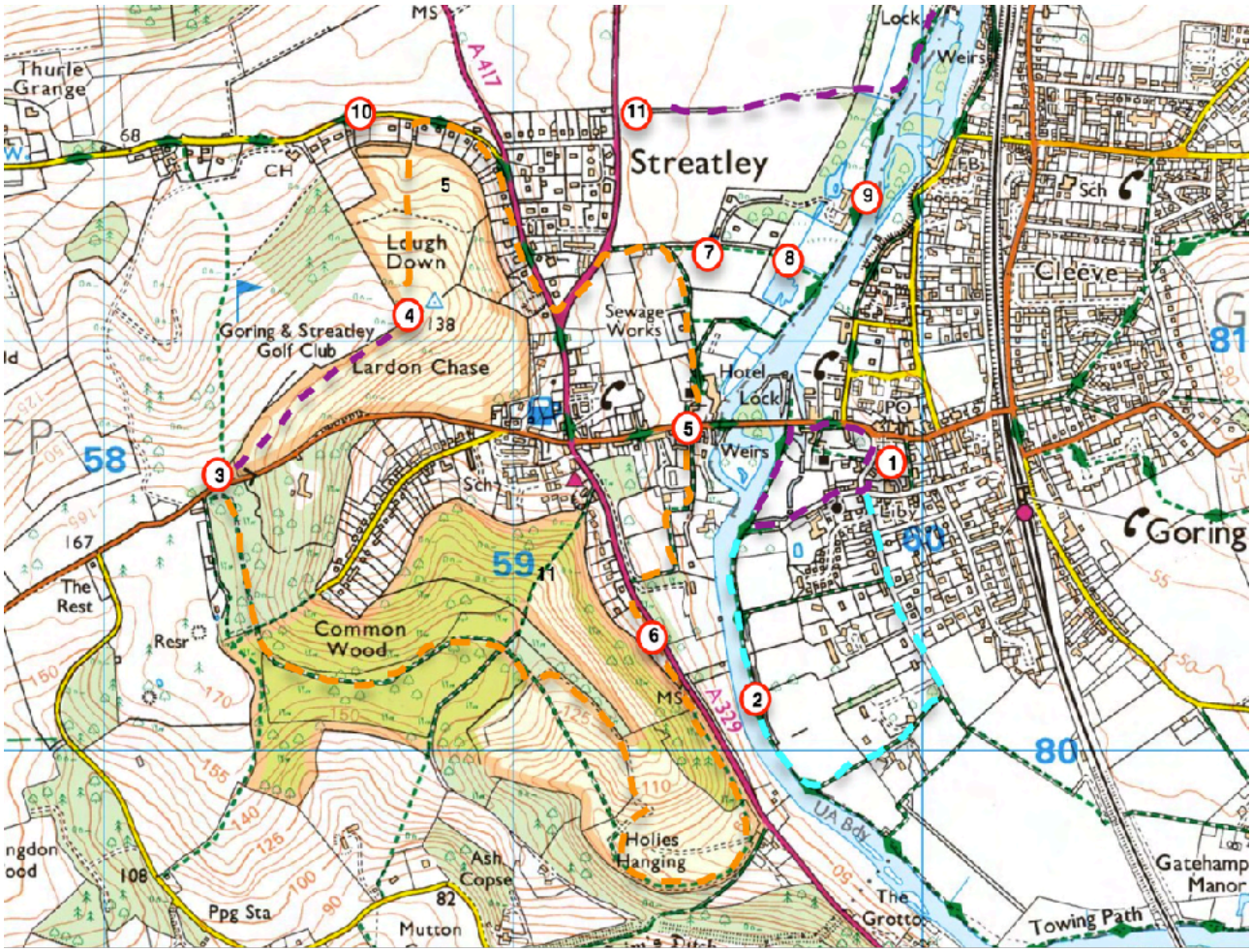
Map 3: Continuation of recommendations for Cholsey area

11 - A4130 Wallingford Bypass/Noswurthy Mamun bridge link route:

The stretch of shared-use cycle path and footway across this bridge, which links between the towpath on the right bank of the Thames (Thames Path NT) and the bridleway underpass at Mongewell on the left bank (connecting to the Ridgeway NT) is a crucially important link route due to the fact that it directly connects two National Trails. Additionally, it offers the potential for a circular route (in conjunction with either the bridge at Goring or the aforementioned ferry service at South Stoke/Moulsford). We therefore recommend that, as with the Ferry Lane bridleway link route, this section of path should receive upgraded signage to National Trail standards making NT users fully aware of this important connection between the National trails and potentially including map/interpretation highlighting the link and onward connections.

Additional interpretation is recommended on this section highlighting the Norman Church, in the nearby grounds of the former Carmel College, as a heritage feature.

Goring & Streatley



Map 4: Overview of recommendations for Goring & Streatley area

1 & 2 - Goring, Wheel Orchard & Ferry Lane easier access routes:

The Wheel Orchard car park was one of our most highly rated potential gateway sites in the site assessment phase. In particular it stood out for the quality of car parking, the range of nearby facilities, proximity to public transport and overall impression.

We have identified, after discussion with local parish council representatives, significant demand for further improvements, and support for the use of this location for an accessible route. This well-visited area is close to a number of attractive local heritage features, including an attractive section of the river towpath and National Trail that is popular with visitors, but currently offers challenges for disabled users.

We have identified both a smaller ‘access for all’ route based from Wheel Orchard car park, leading down through streets to the towpath and base of the bridge and along the towpath and returning via Ferry Lane, and a longer ‘access for many’ route that

The identified access for all route, expanded upon as part of the detailed assessments in Annex 1 to this report utilises sections of towpath in the control and management of the Environment

agency, along with sections of public footpath, and part of the Thames Path National Trail. Although environmental sensitivities may exist due to the proximity of the river, it is felt that surface improvements, along with the provision of other facilities would be of significant benefit to a large number of users, given the proximity to population and high footfall of this attractive location. This would include:

As part of this, provision of additional seating, including accessible picnic benches, in and around Ferry Lane open space would provide a more attractive and enjoyable space for both visitors and local residents.

The section of towpath south of Ferry Lane, marked as point 2 on the map above, was also, at time of assessment, in partial disrepair, and requires resurfacing in order to make it more accessible to less-able users. We regard this route as being suitable for an 'access for many' route rather than access for all due to limited width and uneven surfaces. Nonetheless this ll has significant potential for provision of an accessible and enjoyable route that a significant number of visitors would be likely to enjoy.

Discussion on this section of route has also highlighted a number of concerns over the impact of boat mooring along this section of path, including both bank damage from temporary mooring poles and the impact of mooring on nesting bird species, in particular Kingfishers. We would recommend that consideration is given to restrictions on mooring on this section of river, in particular possible seasonal restrictions to protect breeding kingfishers.

3 & 4 - Streatley, Lardon Chase Ridgeline easier access route and viewpoint:

The National Trust car park at the top of Streatley Hill offers an isolated, but important, existing gateway location for public access. Crucially, this location, although offering limited facilities, offers direct links to two important viewpoints, and opportunities for improved access for all/ access for some routes from the car park to these locations.

Of note, this site has no public transport, or toilets, and is a significant distance (up a steep hill) from the nearby town and other facilities. However, the distinctive possibility of connecting this car park to the viewpoints offers an important opportunity to open up these characteristic and desirable views to those who are currently unable to access them, and would provide, we believe, an outstanding addition to the access facilities in the local area.

The existing route at this location is identified by the National Trust as being suitable for wheelchairs but not mobility scooters - however the car park is surfaced with loose chipping with, at present, no designated disabled parking spaces. We recommend that there is urgent need for better surfaced disabled parking spaces over at least part of this car park (we recommend the instillation of two to three disabled parking places within the section section of car parking closest to the gate onto Lardon Chase)

The section of potential route North of the car park along the ridge is designated as a Site of Special Scientific interest (SSSI) due to its value as an area of calcareous grassland with high floral diversity - this designation requires a careful balancing exercise over any intervention resulting in potential negative impacts on protected features, however existing levels of access, in conjunction with management grazing, have been witnessed to result in areas of significant vegetation loss, that could potentially be mitigated through provision of route improvements.

Existing research on the impact of surfacing paths[7] has shown very significant improvements in path compliance as a result of which could be reasonably expected to reduce 'spreading' and encourage users to stick to the path)

As a result, We believe that access improvements at this location would offer significant benefits to accessibility without risking significant negative impacts on protected site integrity. We would

[7] https://www.conservationevidence.com/actions/311

therefore recommend the instillation of a well surfaced path between the car park, leading along the ridge to the viewpoints, as discussed in full in the annex to this report.

We also recommend that the associated viewpoints offer opportunities for the provision of interpretation, discussing the history of the location and explanation of significant landscape features. This may be best achieved through the provision of a Toposcope or surfaced viewpoint with interpretation boards explaining landscape. We would also recommend consideration of some form of 3D interpretation of landscape allowing visually impaired visitors to better understand and interpret the view and landscape. Some potential examples for this are detailed below:

Image 1-3 - examples of physical landscape interpretative installations

5 & 6 - Streatley, potential 'Streatley Views' waymarked route:

In discussion with local stakeholders, we have identified the potential for a promoted or waymarked route for more able bodied users to enjoy a number of highlights of the local area, leading from the end of the bridge at Goring, along footpaths and residential roads and then along a fairly steep and exhilarating climb to the viewpoint identified at #4, then continuing on via a fairly well surfaced path to take in the popular viewpoint view at the Holies/Hollies, and back to town.

This route would offer a significant tourism draw and potential benefit for local businesses through greater promotion of the area as a destination for enjoyment of the countryside. By no means do we suggest that this route is entirely new, and we believe it has been promoted in the past through guidebooks and similar, but we recommend that with some improvements it has significant potential for more widespread marketing and promotion .

A key improvement that we believe is necessary is that, as we understand it from discussion with local stakeholders, the existing permissive path identified at point 6 has recently had access withdrawn. We suggest that the existing popularity of this route, and in particular the importance of avoiding walkers having to walk alongside the busy A329 may well justify the utilisation of statutory public path creation order powers by the local authority.

7 - Streatley recreation ground:

The existing children's play area and recreation ground currency has a number of picnic tables - at the moment, none of these are designed to accessible standards, we recommend that they are replaced, or alternatively additional accessible tables (with appropriate accessible surfacing is installed. We suggest that there is an additional opportunity for a number of benches to be installed around the permitter of the recreation ground allowing those with limited mobility to rest while enjoying a short walk around the recreation ground.

8 - Footpath 21:

This section of path has been in poor condition for some time, and has, we understand, already been subject to much discussion locally. Our understanding from discussion with stakeholders is that repair of this path is now viewed as a priority by the local highway authority.

It is also our understanding that proposals exist for the potential future extension of an existing site of local nature conservation importance to the south of this path northwards, in which case this path would run down the middle. For that purpose, we would suggest that it is likely that both the local authorities section 40 biodiversity duty and their additional duty to seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing natural beauty (including flora & fauna) within designated National Landscapes are engaged on this site, and as such particular consideration should be given to how work at this site is carried out in order to support this work.

We suggest that two particular considerations fall into play here. Firstly, ensuring that any proposals do not lead to negative consequences on existing species, and secondly that future conservation efforts are enhanced by the proposed worked. We do not seek to be overly prescriptive about the correct solutions on this site, or impose additional/unacceptable costs on already strained rights of way maintenance budgets, however we will put forward three potential thoughts for consideration:

i) An aim of any works should be to avoid introducing materials which may carry future pollution risks or other environmental consequences - as such, the use of natural materials may be preferable to geotextile matting or synthetic products. One potential solution here may be the use of traditional 'floating' path construction that uses natural materials (wickets made of coppiced woodland materials or the use of reed/coppice bundles) to provide a resilient surface on which to place path materials (likely self-binding gravel). This may offer an exciting opportunity for local conservation volunteer groups to play an active part in a project that would provide long term benefits

ii) An expressed desire by some parties involved in the proposals is to ensure connectivity between the two potential sites, particularly for aquatic or riparian species. This may potentially be best achieved through the use of short sections of boardwalk in order to provide riparian channels underneath the path. This solution might ordinarily be dismissed as adding additional cost and maintenance liabilities to a path repair, although may, in this case, justify such an additional step. Again, this may be an appropriate opportunity for local conservation volunteers to play a part, which would be likely to reduce additional costs.

iii) Alongside repairs to the path surface as detailed above, we would recommend consideration of screening materials to both reduce visual impact of passing path users on wildlife and to prevent the egress of dogs from the footpath onto sensitive conservation areas. This might be best achieved through the use of wickets and possibly the use of dead hedging. There may also be an opportunity for a screened hide or viewing area (preferably with disabled/ wheelchair access) from which users can view wildlife on these ponds/wetland areas.

It is also noted that sympathetic improvement of this route would offer an interesting circular route from both the swan parking area at Streatley, and from the recreation ground and play area at Cleeve Court Road. This highlight the potential value of this route as an improvement to the local path network, particularly for users with disabilities or limited mobility.

9 - Cleeve Court Bridge:

The footbridge crossing the inlet at Cleeve court is in deteriorating condition and in need of extensive repairs or replacement - additionally, it is noted that the existing design of this bridge is unsuitable for most disabled users as the steep approach ramps and arched design of the current bridge make it impassable for wheelchair users and many users with limited mobility.

Notably, the fact that the bridge is on the Thames Path National Trail highlights the barrier that this facility offers to disabled National Trail users - We are therefore highlighting this issue as an important one for attention within our recommendations and as a priority for action.

We feel confident in recommending that any replacement design must be accessible for wheelchairs and mobility scooters, which leaves all parties with limited affordable options (though it should be noted that adopting an accessible design may carry significant benefits to all parties in opening up additional funding options, as the replacement design would clearly amount to an accessibility improvement rather than like-for like replacement or simple maintenance)

After reviewing the requirements for this site. We believe that the most viable physical designs for replacement of the current design with an accessible footbridge are either a swing bridge design (seen on a number of local canals) or a counterweighted tipping bridge design, as seen on the Oxford canal.

Image 4-6 - counterweight and swing bridge designs commonly seen on canal network (© Mike Todd, Geograph CC)

Both options would deliver an accessible “at grade” river crossing solution that offered minimal obstruction for path users, supported disabled (wheelchair or mobility scooter) access and retained access for boats to Cleeve court with limited interference. Of the two options, we believe a brief overview of the positives and negatives for each solution would be that:

Swing bridge:

+ Higher cost and additional engineering works
+ Accessible to wheelchair/mobility scooters
- Requires boat owners to disembark and operate the gate opening system
- Can only be closed from one side (which would cause significant difficulties for walkers accessing the bridge form the ‘wrong’ side

Counterweighted tilting bridge:

+ Lower cost
+ Accessible to wheelchair/mobility scooters
+Can be closed from either side by path users if open (by use of a chain)
- Requires boat owners to disembark and operate the gate opening system

Realistically, we suggest that both options would be likely to benefit from a retention/locking device keeping the bridge closed when not in use. An alternative to this would be a condition added to the definitive statement requiring boat users (ie. The residents of Cleeve Court) to close the bridge after use and to keep closed when not in use), we believe such a condition, either by agreement or, ultimately by order, is a viable option in accordance with highway authority powers under section 93 and 94 Highways Act 1980.

We recognise that either solution is likely to result in some level of inconvenience for boat users seeking to access the residential inlet, however given the limited number of boat movements expected, and the existing burden on boat users to pass through locks both upstream and downstream, we do not feel that this is an unfair or unreasonable additional burden given the number of path users using this National Trail or the level of disruption or cost caused by any alternative solutions. We believe a parallel can be drawn with the level of inconvenience experienced by farmers or residents who have to use manually gated railway level crossings to access their land.

10 - Streatley, Rectory Road/Ridgeway quiet lane designations and parking restrictions:

The section of road, nearly two kilometres long, leading out of town from Streatley and westwards along Rectory Road to is part of the designated Ridgeway National Trail. This route currently carries traffic to the golf club and residential addresses. National trail users are forced to share the carriageway with vehicular users. We assess that as being unacceptable. The legal designation of National Trails identifies that whole or the greater part of its length these routes should not pass along roads mainly used by vehicles[8]. We therefore recommend, first, that this section of road should have a Quiet Lane designation (as discussed in previous chapters) applied to its length, along with a reduction in speed limit to 20MPH over the full length of the route that is shared with pedestrians and other National Trail users (cyclists and equestrians).

Additionally, we suggest that it may well also be appropriate to apply parking restrictions along this route in order to prevent vehicles damaging verges and deter the use of the route by people seeking to park and walk (we are concerned that this may lead to increased levels of vehicular traffic along the route at popular times)

Finally, we also note the existence of a small number of parking spaces at the Western Terminus of the route (near post-box cottages, where the route joins the unsurfaced section of the Ridgeway NT. We recommend that, in order to reinforce this limitation and deter vehicular use over the shared-use section of the route, parking restrictions limit the use of this parking area to disabled users (ie. Blue badge parking spaces). This would also provide additional disabled parking spaces, in accordance with National Landscape accessibility targets, and ensure that disabled users had direct access to the off-road sections of the National Trail and to experience and understand the nearby prehistoric and Roman field systems at Streatley Warren

11 - Access Route to Cleeve Lock:

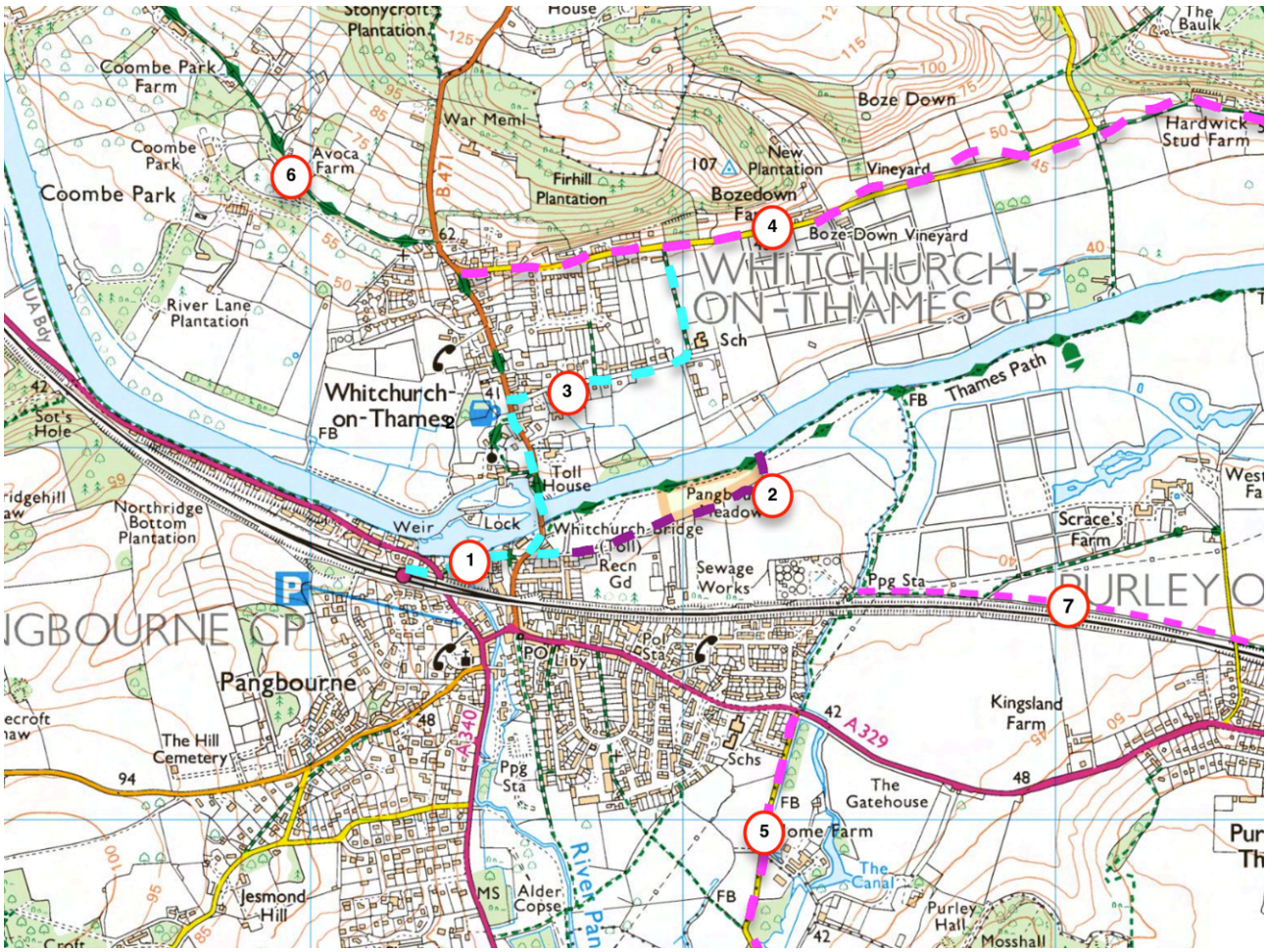
As detailed in the discussion section on ferries and recreational water access points, we believe that significant value exists for provision of additional access to this section of river, in accordance with existing Environment Agency recreational access duties.

We recommend the potential creation of a new public right of way along this easement, a well surfaced vehicular track. along with consideration of provision of parking spaces either at the gated access point, or closer to the river (both options would likely require purchase/proovision of land from neighbouring agricultural landowners) would offer significant opportunities for improved access.

Through this mechanism, there is also clear potential for an additional, well surfaced access route allowing disabled users to access the riverside and the attractive section of river and lock at Cleeve Lock, and potentially also provide a useful additional access route for recreational water users.

[8] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/12-13-14/97/section/51

Pangbourne & Whitchurch



Map 5: Overview of recommendations for Pangbourne & Whitchurch area

1 - Thames Path National Trail feeder route:

A well surfaced, way marked and promoted link route from Pangbourne Railway Station to the nearby National Trail is crucial for improving accessibility and supporting sustainable travel options. Pangbourne Station serves as a gateway to the Thames Path, attracting walkers, cyclists, and nature enthusiasts from a large surrounding area.

The importance of an accessible, clearly marked link route lies in its ability to ensure that a wider demogrphuic of visitors can enjoy the beauty and tranquility of the Thames, allowing those with mobility aids, and others with physical challenges to easily transition from Pangbourne Railway Station to the Thames Path. This would significantly improve inclusivity, making the area more welcoming for everyone to explore the natural beauty of the surrounding area.

Promoting a new link route also encourages sustainable travel. By improving access to the Thames Path from a public transport hub, more visitors can rely on rail travel rather than cars, reducing the environmental impact of tourism and promoting a more eco-friendly way of enjoying the countryside. Additionally, the route could contribute to the local economy by attracting more visitors to the area, supporting local businesses, and enhancing the overall visitor experience.

A significant part of this would be the provision of a safe road crossing on the A329 between the railway station and the pathways on the river side of the main road. Alongside this, some

resurfacing and vegetation management along the existing pathways connecting these locations is assessed as being desirable. Further details are contained in the annexed report.

2 - Pangbourne Meadows easier access route:

After careful consideration of available options at Pangbourne, and feedback from stakeholders we have elected to recommend the provision of an all-weather route linking from Pangbourne recreation ground to the nearby Meadows. The Recreation ground area offers a number of useful facilities, including parking, children's play area and public toilets, all of which are of significant value to a wide range of recreational visitors.

Of note, this proposal would require the resurfacing of sections of existing trackway and creation of an additional section of entirely new route, which may require further negotiation with neighbouring landowners, or the utilisation of statutory powers (details of which are provided in the overview and discussion sections of this report)

Consideration was given to the improvement of existing routes in this area, but this option has been dismissed due to the potential cost, and uncertain long-term viability of, riverside path improvements due to seasonal flooding and bank erosion.

Image 7 - Pangbourne Meadows (© Sam Jones)

As discussed previously in the report, the impacts of climate change, including expected impacts of increased storm activity and flooding provides consideration of climate sensitivity and longevity of any proposals in flood sensitive locations, therefore any improvements to the existing riverside route is assessed to be extensive and require significant and invasive construction works that are likely to be out of character and harmful to the sensitive location.

Instead the provision of an all-weather route would allow a ‘fallback’ option for national trail users in winter months, and a circular route option for existing meadows visitors. This will allow a wider range of users to access and enjoy the riparian zone close to the river, without significantly changing the nature or experience of the much loved riverside section of the meadows.

We would further add that the proximity of this route to the increasingly popular camping facilities at Meadow Farm may offer significant benefits (we would also recommend fencing this route from the sensitive wildlife sites in the woodland and scrub between this location and the river).

The potential extension eastwards of this route, via footpaths Pangbourne 9 and Purley 7, which would pass the sewage works and create a full circular route was considered as a highly desirable outcome, but realistically requiring a level of improvement and resurfacing (and resultant cost) that would be unviable for inclusion in our report. We would, though, continue to highlight the potential value of improvements to these routes and potential links eastward to

Full details of the proposed route and recommended works are contained in the annex to this report.

3 - Dolphin Centre to Whitchurch Maze easier access route:

After reviewing available facilities and routes at Pangboursne and Whitchurch, and in mind of our proposal at Pangbourne being reliant on the securing of consent for creation of a new all-weather route, we have identified an additional route proposal at Pangbourne that would offer further benefits.

Leading from the recreation ground and dolphin centre on the south of the river, there is significant opportunity for an attractive walk over the bridge and along a quiet route to connect into a quiet road and bridleway leading eastwards to Hardwick House and Mapledurham. This route then continues to offer a useful traffic free route to central Reading.

In addition, we have identified a potential location on this route that, with Parish Council support, could offer improved disabled parking (next to the school and cricket club) supporting the delivery of National Landscape targets. We would be careful to express a clear opinion that this site should only provide limited parking, open to disabled (blue badge) users only in order to prevent any negative effects from increased traffic close to the school or along a residential road.

4 - Hardwick Road strategic link/active travel route
5 - Sulham Lane Road strategic link/active travel route

These two routes are identified as vitally important strategic routes for both active travel use and for recreational walking, cycling and horse riding.

Hardwick road leads directly to Reading via an attractive and well-surfaced bridleway route, passing both Hardwick Estate and Mapledurham estate. Both locations are of very significant value as tourist attractions and clear potential exists for a promoted walking and cycling route attracting recreational use from Reading, and to this end we would recommend an integrated plan, in conjunction with neighbouring Reading Borough Council, to create a series of promoted routes encouraging people to engage with the countryside along this route - potentially including either physical interpretation of heritage features along the route or alternative multimedia promotion.

An additional note should be made that this route currently hosts the King Alfred’s Way promoted off-road cycling route, responsible for in excess of 2000 riders annually. Strava data reveals extensive use - in excess of 9000 trips by nearly 4000 individual riders in 2023 (this is just those using Strava and associated GPS apps, so overall use is inevitably significantly higher).

Analysis of Sulham Lane Strava Metro data, by way of comparison, shows approximately 5000 trips by 1000 unique users, again this is a very significant level of use, predominantly recreational, highlighting the importance of this route as both a leisure route and, taking into account potential improvements to the connecting route via Nunhide Lane (which comes out behind Ikea, before crossing the M4 via a shared use footbridge) also carries potential as a commuting and utility route between Pangbourne and Theale.

Taking into account the above, and our comments earlier in the report on traffic calming and use of quiet lanes designation on low-use vehicular routes, we strongly recommend this option for both routes in order to rebalance existing vehicular use and prioritise vulnerable road users. We recommend that both routes should be subject to 20mph speed orders as part of this process.

Further, we would also recommend consideration of a circular promoted recreational route connecting the above routes with the Kennet & Avon Canal and sections of the Thames in central Reading, in order to provide a 32km (approx 20 mile) low traffic and traffic free leisure route that could be promoted as an enjoyable way of exploring the countryside and connecting with nature either for cycling or as a walking route to be enjoyed as sections between railway stations

Delivery of this route, along with interpretation and waymarking would provide a useful flagship tourism route for local residents and visitors

Map 6: Potential circular promoted route connecting K&A canal to Thames

6 - Thames Path NT route from Whitchurch to Goring

As previously discussed, the route in this side of the river offers potential for a continuous almost traffic-free route from Reading to Wallingford (subject to upgrade and rationalisation of the section between South Stoke and Littlestoke)

As with the recommendations on strategic routes, this would offer interest to a variety of recreational users and draw visitors to the area, boosting local tourism. One potential improvement here, that has been discussed for some tome, is the replacement of the section of steep steps on the NT route with a bypass or bridge. We suggest that this remains a potential improvement, although is likely to incur significant expense. We suggest that, in the meantime, some minor repairs and improvment to the surfaces of the steps and approach routes might be a worthwhile investment as preventative maintenance.

Finally, within this section, we would mention that we assessed the option of accessible routes and improvements along the towpath on the south side of the river from Pangbourne to Beale Park and the National Trust site at Pangbourne.after significant consideration, we ruled out any proposals on this area out of concern over road safety on the A329 - in effect, all potential routes required either a crossing of, or travel alongside, the A329, which we felt was unacceptable from a safety point of view without significant capital spend on improved walking and cycling infrastructure. However, we recommend that potential exists for a package of work to improve Basildon Park as an acceptable destination, but that this would require close work with the National Trust as a dedicated package of work, taking into account their site management priorities.

7 - Potential cycle track linking to Purley

There is significant opportunity for the delivery of a shared cycle/pedestrian route (or Bridleway) leading from the railway underpass at Purley Field, eastwards (initially along footpath Purley 1) and leading along a currently well used permissive path, parallell to the railway, to Westbury Lane. This could potentially lead on to the railway bridges at Bridleway 3 and Purley Lane.

Delivery of a route along this alignment offers significant potential for active travel - directly connecting Pangbourne, Purley and potentially onward to Reading, allowing cycle and pedestrian users to bypass the busy (and unsafe) A329 at minimal cost. This would also improve accessibility to an enjoyable circular walking route, in conjunction with the Thames Path National Trail, that would offer clear benefits for local residents, both for active travel and leisure use.

We would strongly endorse any proposal to deliver a route along this alignment, either through permissive or statutory creation powers. As highlighted we believe a route between these locations would be a valuable active travel proposal and viable for funding through these channels,

Key considerations and discussion

The importance of access to the countryside:

Access to the countryside plays a vital role in promoting physical and mental health and well-being. Natural England, the government's advisor on the natural environment, has emphasized the significant benefits that outdoor environments, including rural landscapes, provide to individuals. Studies highlight that spending time in nature can reduce stress, improve mood, and increase physical activity levels, all of which contribute to better overall health.

Research published by Natural England underscores the positive impact of green spaces on mental health. A report from 2016 found that people living near natural environments experience lower levels of anxiety and depression. Engaging with nature helps to lower cortisol levels (the stress hormone) and improves cognitive function, enhancing individuals' ability to cope with everyday challenges. Furthermore, natural landscapes encourage physical activities such as walking, cycling, and running, which contribute to improved cardiovascular health and overall fitness.

Natural England's "People and Nature Survey" (2019) reveals that access to natural spaces is linked to greater well-being, especially when individuals engage in regular outdoor activities. Additionally, the research shows that time spent in rural areas has particular benefits for children, as outdoor play in nature fosters emotional and cognitive development. For older adults, access to the countryside has been shown to reduce social isolation and enhance cognitive health, with many studies indicating that time spent in green spaces lowers the risk of dementia.

The importance of access to the countryside for public health has become even more evident following the COVID-19 pandemic, with increased demand for local green spaces. As a result, the need for policies that ensure equitable access to natural areas is more critical than ever. Natural England's reports advocate for maintaining and improving access to rural environments to foster healthier communities and support well-being across all demographics.

We have identified below a series of key issues that came up for consideration during our work, and on which we have sought to detail not only some background to these issues, but also some discussion of the priorities and basis for our recommendations, including on relevant powers and potential sources of funding. These sections should be read in conjunction with the more detailed site specific recommendations in the relevant sections of the report to in order to fully understand our proposed interventions and improvements.

National Trails:

National Trails are formally dedicated long-distance walking, cycling and horse-riding routes, designated by the Secretary of State for the environment under the auspices of the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, and managed through a partnership framework between local authorities and Natural England.

The project area is unusual in having two National Trails passing through the area, both the Thames Path National Trail, which was inaugurated in 1996 as 184 mile path following the route of the river Thames towpath - currently promoted only for walking - and the Ridgeway National Trail, an 87 mile route, opened in 1973, which follows a number of ancient trackways. The western half of this route is promoted for walking, cycling and horse riding, the eastern half (beyond the river Thames) for walkers only, although a longstanding plan exists to provide a supporting multi-user route in order to allow all groups to enjoy the full route.

A significant consideration in the provision of improvements to both National Trails and feeder routes is the importance allocated in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) of access to the countryside and, in particular, National Trails - see paragraph 104 of the NPPF:

> 105. Planning policies and decisions should protect and enhance public rights of way and access, including taking opportunities to provide better facilities for users, for example by adding links to existing rights of way networks including National Trails.

We therefore recommend that parish councils/local planning authorities highlight the importance of the National Trail routes within their local planning policies, and in particular in the distribution of Section 106 and/or Community Infrastructure Levy funds (including through inclusion of National Trail infrastructure improvements in their regulation 123 lists and Infrastructure Funding Statements).

With regard to our proposals, there are three relevant proposals which we would highlight as adding very significant value to National Trail routes within the project area, all of which are described more fully elsewhere in the report, but listed here to highlight the importance of these proposals as strategic improvements connected to, and potentially funded by, local planning policies.

i) Our recommended link route from Cholsey Railway Station to the Thames Path at Ferry Lane/ Cholsey Meadows. This link would offer significant value to the Thames Path NT by safely connecting the route to both local businesses and communities (including accommodation options) and through better connections to sustainable transport options, and reducing the reliance on vehicular transport for visitors to the project area.
ii) Our recommended link route from Pangbourne Railway Station to Pangbourne River Meadows. This link would offer significant value to the Thames Path NT by safely connecting the route to sustainable transport options, reducing the reliance on vehicular transport for visitors to the project area
iii) Our recommended rationalisation of the National Trail route between South Stoke and Littlestoke. This would offer significant value to the Ridgeway NT by broadening the user base who could enjoy this section of the route, and would help deliver the long-term proposal for a multi-user riders-route. It would also make this section of the NT route accessible for wheelchair and/or mobility scooter users, who are currently unable to enjoy this section of the NT.

As such, we believe all the above recommendations deserve special attention for their additional value to supporting and facilitating the National Trail routes in the area. Additional recommendations which are also likely to benefit the NT routes, and thus may well be eligible for funding through Section 106 or CIL monies include:

iv) Improvements to Footpath 21 at Goring and the bridge over the river inlet at Cleeve Court, which would benefit the Thames Path NT by making access easier for disabled and/or limited mobility users.
v) Improvements to the Thames Path NT along the riverside towpath south of Goring bridge, which would make access easier for disabled and/or limited mobility users.
vi) Support for the ferry at South Stoke/Moulsford, which would benefit both Thames Path and Ridgeway NT's by offering an enjoyable circular route.

Ferries and recreational water access points (including slipways):

A 1947 memorandum published by the Thames Conservators identifies ferries operated by them at Chalmore Hole, Gatehampton, Roebuck/Mapledurham Lock and Roebuck Lower, and further privately operated ferry services at Little Stoke and South Stoke Ferries, both identified as having ceased operating at the time of the memorandum).

There is significant mixed feeling on the subject of Ferry services, a number of consultation respondents felt that the lack of ferry services left real gaps in the network, and that the lack of services led to increased vehicular journeys and disconnected communities. Others were more reticent, with some concerned that a ferry service would result in more visitors and increased parking problems. The reinstatement of a private ferry service between Moulsford and South Stoke appears to have been received well, and resulted in additional business for the pub that

operates this service, and it should be noted that this comes at a useful location, about halfway between the nearest alternative crossing points and - crucially - forming a potential enjoyable circular route of approximately five miles length, that would connect together both the Ridgeway and Thames Path National Trails.

It is of particular interest that the legislation governing National Trails, the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act makes specific provision for National Trails proposals to make recommendations regards ferries supporting long-distance routes, and previous Natural England policy documents on National Trails specifically identify the prospect of enhancements to NT routes through the provision of a "high quality short and circular walks and rides"[9]

After careful consideration of feedback from survey and stakeholders, we recommend that this ferry link should be seen as strategically important for both local communities and for the enhancement of the overall National Trail user experience, and that partner bodies should carefully consider supporting the ongoing provision of this service, at least on a seasonal basis at times of expected demand. It may be worth particular consideration whether appropriate investment could support making this ferry more accessible for disabled users.

Paddle UK (formerly the British Canoe Union) were consulted on river access points and current access provision along the River Thames. Further discussion with local stakeholders has identified a number of issues with slipway access, one of these, the access point at Ferry Lane, Cholsey, is discussed in detail in the relevant section of this report.

The slipway opposite this, at Littlestoke Manor Farm offers an interesting location that could potentially spread the load from other locations - however at the moment the track leading to this access point is recorded as a Public Footpath on the Definitive Map and Statement, whereas on the county adopted highways mapping is identified as carrying full carriageway status. It is suggested that clarity is needed regarding this status (one would reasonably expect the route to carry the same status both sides of the river, in order to facilitate access to ferry passengers). A further question exists at this point about surfacing of the route, which appears to have been treated, at some point, with loose gravel. The current surface is likely to exclude a number of lawful users from accessing the river at this point, and it is suggested that the highway authority should investigate the background of this surfacing given both the recorded classification of the route, and the effect of this surface on potential users.

Feedback has also been received that the slipway at South Stoke is in need of attention, with some deterioration of the path approaching the slipway and vegetation growth.

There was general feeling that water egress/access points at locks could be better signposted, particularly for canoeists/kayakers.

An additional comment was received over the access route to Cleeve lock, which is currently a gated access road leading off the A329 at SU593815. This gated route carries signage deterring public access and indicating no public right of way exists.

This highlights a question over the possibility of securing access to the attractive location in and around the lock for visitors and recreational users. Published statutory guidance[10] indicates that the Environment Agency (who carry the responsibility for management of the River Thames as successors to the Thames conservators should carefully consider public access improvements where possible, and in particular that:

- reasonable account should be taken of the need for public car parks, toilets and picnic sites
- promote access for everyone, particularly beside, to and on water, while encouraging safe and responsible behaviour among those taking part
- use sporting and recreational activities as a way of increasing awareness of, and appreciation for, the environment and to increase support for its protection

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[9] "The New deal" Management of National Trails in England from April 2013: Natural England

[10] Code of Practice on Conservation, Access and Recreation: Guidance for the Environment Agency and Water and Sewerage Undertakers - published under the Environment Act 1995 & Water Industry Act 1991

It is our professional opinion that this site could offer significant value for improved access and accessibility for recreational users, either through offering public access to the river via securing access rights along the existing track, or through the provision of improved parking facilities nearby. We suggest that the situation here needs close review, in conjunction with relevant stakeholders, to consider whether and how improved access - at the very least for walking & cycling - could be provided at this point, given the statutory responsibilities placed on the Environment Agency regards public access.

Strategic Link & Active Travel Routes:

Particular attention in our overall vision and recommendations for improved access in the project area has been given to the importance of strategic links that would carry significant value for both active travel and leisure purposes. Active travel, in this context, is generally understood to refer to walking, cycling and other non-motorised travel choices for commuting and utility purposes, although in reality these routes generally also carry significant value for leisure and recreation purposes as well.

As a matter of note, the report author currently sits on a national level consultation group with Active Travel England over upcoming rural guidance, and the insight gained on this has been applied in order to appropriately balance and future-proof our recommendations.

Experience has shown that in the context of rural areas, routes which connect together communities in a manner which is contextually appropriate and sensitive to the locality is seen as offering significant additional value to active travel projects, and that through offering attractive and engaging routes, well away from existing road corridors, additional benefits for both biodiversity and health and wellbeing can be delivered.

In particular, National Landscape designation carries significant importance in the choice of route and appropriate surfacing, in order to avoid concerns over urbanisation and potential impact on the purposed of conserving and enhancing natural beauty.

Review of existing routes and available data (including strata data) showed a number of key corridors with significant levels of use, and through local consultation and data analysis, a number of additional desire lines were identified. In particular:

i) The need for a continuous, safe, active travel corridor from Goring to Wallingford. At the moment the two choices for this route are either the main road, the A329 - which would clearly be unsafe, or require disproportionate spend in order to deliver a segregated roadside verge route - or a somewhat disjointed minor road route up the B4009. Review of this route witnessed significant levels of traffic and high speeds, and published crash analysis data reveals a number of road traffic incidents involving vulnerable users over the past ten years.

ii) The need for a continuous, safe, active travel corridor from Cholsey to Wallingford. The current direct route here, along Wallingford road, concentrates use onto a narrow shared-use roadside path, which could not realistically be described as particularly safe or attractive. Crash analysis reveals, again, a number of recorded serious road traffic incidents along this road, including a cyclist fatality in around 2015. Discussions with parish council saw significant demand for improved active travel links in this area, including the idea of onward connections to Aston Tirrold and Blewbury

iii) The opportunity to enhance existing routes from Pangbourne to Reading and Pangbourne to Sulham (and onward to Theale) - in particular for a promoted/natural heritage route connecting the Thames and Kennet and Avon canals, and as a circular heritage route.

All the above can be seen as strategic recommendations, and are likely to require significant external funding, most likely from central government active travel funds. The recommendations we include in this section should therefore be seen as primarily directed towards the inclusion of these routes in local plans, cycling & walking investment schemes and local transport plans -

although inclusion in future Rights of Way Improvement Plans, in accordance with existing guidance[11] is also likely to be beneficial.

A number of potential solutions exist for the creation of active travel routes, including Public Right of Way Creation orders and Cycle Track orders (converting existing Public Footpaths for shared use), however given the imminence of updated guidance on this issue from Active Travel England, we do intend to seek to set out extensive detail on options for delivery.

Quiet Lanes Designation:

Integrated within our proposals on strategic links and active travel routes, we would highlight the opportunity to use existing quiet lanes regulations[12] to improve the recreational and active travel value of a number of key routes in the shorter term, without the need for significant additional funding.

Quiet Lanes are a designation for certain roads that have been subject to a traffic order under the *Quiet Lanes and Home Zones Regulations 2006*[13]. These regulations were introduced to provide a solution to the growing concerns about road safety, particularly in rural areas where narrow roads often see a mix of motor vehicles, pedestrians, cyclists, and horse riders. Quiet lanes are intended to create a safer, more peaceful environment for all road users by restricting traffic speeds and limiting the volume of motorised vehicles.

The key aim of Quiet Lanes is to reduce the dominance of motor traffic on roads that are unsuitable for high-speed travel, enhancing the safety and enjoyment of vulnerable road users. These lanes are typically located in rural or semi-rural areas, where traffic volumes are generally low but the roads are often narrow, winding, and without pavements, making them hazardous for walkers, cyclists, and equestrians. By lowering vehicle speeds, these lanes create safer conditions for non-motorised transport, while also maintaining access for local residents, businesses, and agricultural activities.

The Quiet Lanes Regulations enable local authorities to introduce measures such as traffic calming, signage, road markings, and sometimes even legal restrictions on through traffic. These measures can vary, but they generally include prominent signs that indicate the area is a Quiet Lane, alongside lowered speed limits (often 20mph or 30mph). In some cases, certain routes may be restricted to local traffic only, or motor vehicles may be discouraged altogether in favour of non-motorised users.

By promoting sustainable transport options, Quiet Lanes contribute to a reduction in carbon emissions and improve the quality of life for communities. These measures also encourage outdoor activities such as walking and cycling, fostering a stronger connection between people and the natural environment.

The principle of a quiet lane is described in the Highway Code as:

> *Some minor rural roads in England and Wales may be designated as Quiet Lanes. These are appropriate for shared use by walkers, cyclists, horse riders and motor vehicles. You should drive slowly and carefully and be prepared to stop to allow people extra time to make room for you to pass them in safety.*

This is reinforced through the use of signage, authorised by traffic signs regulations, in order to reinforce a message of shared space, and can be supported, where necessary, though the use of traffic calming measures such as chicanes and width restrictions

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[11] LTP and ROWIP integration: Natural England

[12] https://www.cpre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/quiet_lanes_1.pdf

[13] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2006/2082/contents/made

Image 8 - Quiet Lanes signage (TSTGD diagram 884a)
(© Neil Owen, Geograph CC)

A number of existing sections of minor road are assessed as being likely to benefit from this level of intervention, namely:

- Ferry Lane (Cholsey)
- Sulham Lane (Pangbourne to Sulham)
- Hardwick Lane (Whitchurch)
- Rectory Lane, Streatley (Ridgeway NT)

All of which are either dead-end routes or subject to very-low levels of traffic, and would, in our opinion, benefit from a clear message that vehicular traffic should give way to vulnerable road users along this stretch of carriageway. We suggest that, dependent on success of these proposals, additional sections of road in the local area may also be seen as suitable for quiet lane designation in the future.

The path to introduction of a Quiet Lane is set out in the 2006 quiet lanes and home zones regulations, and requires a traffic order from the Highway Authority (we would strongly recommend the inclusion of a speed order, reducing speed limit to 20mph, provision of which is is encompassed in the same regulations)

Public Path Creation Powers:

Creation of Public Rights of Way by Agreement:

Section 25 of the Highways Act 1980 deals with the creation of public rights of way by agreement. This provision allows local authorities to negotiate agreements with landowners to create a new public footpath, bridleway, or restricted byway on their land. This is a voluntary process, and the landowner's consent is required for the creation of the right of way. These agreements can be made without the need for a formal order or public consultation, making it a more flexible and cooperative approach to expanding the public right of way network. However, the authority must be satisfied that the creation of the path will serve the public interest.

Compulsory Creation of Public Rights of Way:

Section 26 Highways Act 1980 provides local authorities with the power to make a compulsory public right of way order. This is used when an authority believes it is necessary to create a right of way across private land, but the landowner does not agree to do so voluntarily. Under Section 26, a Compulsory Public Path Creation Order can be issued by the authority, which will then lead to the creation of a public right of way even in the face of landowner opposition. Before the order is confirmed, the authority must follow statutory procedures, including public consultation and considering any objections raised. If the order is confirmed, it is legally binding and establishes a right of way in perpetuity. Section 28 of the Act allows landowners to seek compensation if their land is adversely affected by the compulsory creation of a new public right of way.

The powers under Section 25 and 26 detailed above are exercisable by local authorities - including county and district councils, however it is also notable that additional powers exist for the dedication of public rights of way by agreement between landowners and Parish Councils. This is a less formal process, enabling a landowner to dedicate a path as a public right of way, which is then accepted by the parish council. This process is entirely voluntary for the landowner, and the local council's involvement is primarily in recording the dedication.

Inclusive Access:

A specific consideration within the project and recommendations has been consideration of, and suitability for, disabled and less-abled users, including both physical disability and use of mobility aids (eg wheelchairs/mobility scooters etc.) and other forms of disability such as visual impairments, neurodiversity and other limitations.

Proposals seeking to deliver an inclusive and accessible countryside for all do not mean that every country park, nature reserve or pathway must be capable of accommodating all disabled people at all times. This would be unrealistic economically, and probably undesirable environmentally, however much can be done to accompany and facilitate a wider range of users, including people living with disabilities, less-able bodied visitors and older or less capable visitors who do not identify as being disabled. It also includes and facilitates countryside access for whose with young children, who are likely to be reliant on pushchairs or buggies, and children scooters or bicycles. Inclusive design opens up access for a wide variety of users who, at the moment, find significant difficulty accessing outdoor spaces, so should be at the centre of our work. In simple terms, a countryside for all means that where good access can be provided, it is; and where it can't, everything possible is done to avoid restricting people unnecessarily. Everyone working to provide public access to the countryside has a responsibility to do so without discriminating against disabled people,

We have considered this at both initial gateway assessment stage (including assessing accessibility and suitability of facilities, refreshment and facilities) and following stages, including consultation and feedback from disability user groups, design of promoted routes and recommendations on facilities and infrastructure.

Guiding documents for consideration of outdoor accessibility within the development of our report has been the 2023 Outdoor accessibility Guidance issued by Paths For All and the Sensory Trust[14], along with additional guidance from the Countryside for All Good Practice Guide, published by the Fieldfare Trust[15]

We have also had specific consideration of the 'access chain' whereby the initial stages of a journey begins at home, and there is a requirement for communicating information and options in order for users to make an informed choice about the nature and suitability of a route for their use, bearing in mind the nature of their disability, the facilities needed and, of course, their own comfort and level of challenge.

[14] Outdoor Accessibility Guidance

[15] Countryside For All

We strongly recommend that a key consideration in any communication of facilities or routes is that the relevant authorities view their primary role as one of providing adequate, reliable, information to the user in order for them to make their own decision as to suitability rather than a form of 'gatekeeping' where particular routes are labelled as being 'suitable' or 'not suitable' for disabled people. Every person living with a disability is different and the disabled 'community' should not be seen as homologous.

Taking into account these cautions, it is also reasonable to lay out a number of guiding principles that are likely to maximise suitability for disabled and less-abled users, and also offer benefits for wider diversity considerations - such as ensuring that facilities are accessible and usable by both older and younger members of the community. Previous research carried out by the principal contractor has highlighted the importance of access to toilets for both older visitors and to women, and also the importance of seating close to car parks for older visitors who may be less active, without identifying as disabled.

In consideration of these factors, a key consideration in our site assessment and recommendations has been the provision of:

- Disabled car parking spaces
- Accessible Toilets
- Seating and/or accessible picnic benches
- Gates, Stiles, steps and other potential barriers to access

It is also notable that recent targets for National Landscapes include improvements to number of these items within the Protected Landscapes Targets and Outcomes Framework[16]

Within our recommendations is, once again, specific consideration of the 'access chain' upon arrival at a gateway site. We have chosen to facilitate this through a concept identified as 'zones of influence' based upon established mobility criteria utilised by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) in the Personal Independence Payment assessment criteria - namely whether a person can:

- stand and then move more than 200 metres, either aided or unaided
- stand and then move aided or unaided more than 50 metres but no more than 200 metres
- stand and then move (aided or unaided) more than 20 metres but no more than 50 metres
- stand and then move more than 1 metre but no more than 20 metres, either aided or unaided

Whilst recognising the somewhat arbitrary nature of these distances, they do provide us with a useful framework and consistent frame of reference from which to base the provision of accessible facilities and proximity of facilities to car parking spaces. A simple example and explanation being that if the DWP classify people who are unable to stand and walk more than 20 metres as being eligible for higher rate PIP mobility (as a qualifying benefit for Motability vehicles) then the maximum distance we should consider placing facilities such as toilets or picnic tables, in relationship to accessible parking spaces, is 20 metres. It also strongly suggests that the initial 200 metres of any route is likely to be a vital area for enhanced provision of benches and rest facilities, and that those should be no more than 50 metres apart (depending on locality).

Therefore, where we have discussed gateway locations, we believe that a necessary part of implementation of the scheme and provision for disabled and less-able visitors requires consideration of seating (or the improvement of existing seating) in the area in and around any parking spaces, including in particular the provision of accessible picnic tables. Specific areas where this would apply is in the potential for additional seating and accessible picnic tables near any children's play areas (for example Cholsey, Pangbourne and Streatley recreation areas). Previous discussions have shown that this provision is particularly popular with families, either through creating a more enjoyable journey in general, or through improving the opportunities for families with elderly relatives to spend and enjoy time with younger children in an open-air setting.

[16] Protected Lansdcapes Target and Outcomes Framework

Accessible Car Parking Spaces:

Well-surfaced disabled parking spaces are crucial for ensuring that individuals with mobility challenges can fully enjoy the countryside. Accessible parking is a key component of inclusive design, allowing everyone, regardless of physical ability, to experience the natural beauty of rural areas. Inadequate or poorly maintained parking spaces, such as those with uneven surfaces, potholes, or inadequate width, can make it difficult or even impossible for people with disabilities to access outdoor spaces. This can create a barrier to participation, limiting their opportunities to enjoy nature, participate in outdoor activities, or simply experience the tranquility of the countryside.

When parking spaces are well-surfaced, they provide a safer, more comfortable environment for people to park, exit their vehicles, and access pathways that lead to trails, viewpoints, or picnic areas. This can significantly enhance the quality of their experience, enabling them to engage more fully with the environment. Furthermore, the availability of accessible parking fosters a sense of inclusivity, promoting equality and ensuring that the enjoyment of natural spaces is available to all, regardless of physical ability. In a time when accessibility is becoming an increasing focus in outdoor tourism and recreation, investing in quality disabled parking spaces is an essential step toward making the countryside accessible for everyone.

Accessible Facilities:

Accessible picnic benches and seating are important for ensuring that outdoor spaces are inclusive and usable for people with a wide range of abilities, including those who use wheelchairs, mobility scooters, or other mobility aids. These specially designed benches aim to provide a comfortable, safe, and practical seating option for everyone, regardless of mobility restrictions.

Key features of accessible picnic benches include a clear, level space underneath to accommodate wheelchair users. This ensures that a person in a wheelchair can approach the bench and sit comfortably without obstruction. The height of the table is also adjusted to allow for easier access, often with a lower tabletop and a wider gap beneath to fit a wheelchair or scooter. Seating and benches may also feature armrests or backs that provide additional support for individuals with limited strength or mobility.

An important aspect of accessibility is the surfacing around the benches and seating. To ensure that people using wheelchairs, walkers, or other mobility aids can approach the tables safely, accessible picnic benches should be placed on smooth, stable, and slip-resistant surfaces. This generally means using materials such as compacted gravel in order to provide firm and even ground. Surfaces should be wide enough to allow for easy manoeuvring of wheelchairs or scooters, with clear pathways leading to the picnic area. Proper surfacing is critical not only for ease of access but also for ensuring that those with mobility challenges are not hindered by uneven or unsuitable ground conditions.

Accessible picnic benches are an important part of creating inclusive public spaces that welcome all people, fostering social interaction and outdoor enjoyment for everyone, regardless of their physical abilities. When paired with thoughtful design and suitable surfacing, they ensure that outdoor areas remain accessible, equitable, and enjoyable.

Our recommendations include the replacement or upgrade of a number of existing picnic benches with accessible facilities, along with the provision of new benches or seating at a number of locations that will offer a more inclusive and

Similarly, accessible toilets are crucial facilities in public spaces, providing people with disabilities the ability to use restroom facilities safely and comfortably. Designed to meet the needs of individuals with mobility challenges, these toilets typically feature wider doorways, grab rails, lower sinks, and emergency alarms to ensure that users can independently access and use the

facilities. The layout of accessible toilets allows for easy maneuvering of wheelchairs or mobility scooters, with enough space for a person to enter, close the door, and turn around without difficulty.

However, while standard accessible toilets meet basic needs, there is an increasing push for facilities that go beyond the minimum requirements, offering more comprehensive support for individuals with severe physical disabilities. This is where “Changing Places” toilets come in. A Changing Places toilet is a specially designed restroom that provides additional equipment and space for people who need extra support, such as those with profound and multiple learning disabilities, or people who may require assistance with changing or personal care.

Changing Places toilets are equipped with features such as a height-adjustable changing table, a hoist for transfers, and more generous space to accommodate carers alongside the user. They often include an adult-sized changing table, which is critical for those who cannot use regular toilets and need assistance with changing clothes or other personal care activities. These upgraded facilities ensure that individuals with severe disabilities can access essential services without the need for external assistance or uncomfortable alternatives, such as being changed on the floor.

While, in some cases, accessible toilets can be upgraded to Changing Places toilets by expanding the space and adding the necessary equipment. Other sites may need replacement with a bespoke or prefabricated changing places facility. Upgrading to a Changing Places facility improves accessibility for a broader range of individuals, promoting dignity, independence, and inclusion for all users, regardless of their physical needs. This upgrade is becoming an essential consideration in the design and renovation of public buildings, transport hubs, and other public spaces**.**

As such, we believe that there are opportunities to set out medium to long term recommendations on the replacement or upgrade of existing public toilet facilities to changing places facilities at a number of sites that would support the delivery of mend the gap and national landscapes accessibility goals, namely:

- Wheel Orchard car park (replacement/upgrade of existing public toilets)
- Pangbourne recreation ground (replacement/upgrade of existing public toilets)
- Cholsey village hall & recreation grounds (new facilities)

Realistically, we recognise that delivery of projects such as these would require significant amounts of external funding, however improved facilities at these locations would carry relevance not just for public access and accessible routes, but be of wider community benefit, particularly for inclusion of disabled people in sport and outdoor recreation, and the provision and suitability of play areas that were suitable for disabled children, we therefore believe that laying out a clear rationale for this sort of strategic improvement, maximising wider community benefits, and which can subsequently be considered in light of wider long-term plans by relevant authorities is worthwhile and a relevant proposal for inclusion in our reports.

Accessible Routes:

From the consultation and site survey analysis, and through feedback from discussion with partners.

In each case, we have identified a short to medium term achievable accessible route, and series of a more far-reaching accessible route improvements that, in our opinion, would offer, significant value to both local communities and visitors.

following sections of this report discuss specific proposals for promoted accessible routes in detail, based on the identified guidance and established principles of different types of accessible routes, generally identified as:

The guidance on accessibility issued by the Sensory Trust (see footnote 4) identifies a series of management zones, based on the categorisation of the landscape and local area, with different expectations for routes depending on the context of the location and its classification as and Urban/formal setting (eg, near visitor centres or recreational hubs), a more rural landscape (eg land with public rights of way, country parks and urban fringe locations or, finally, wilder, less managed landscapes and open country.

The zones also broadly align with the Miles Without Stiles scheme that uses categories based around ‘access for all’, ‘access for many’ and ‘access for some’, assessed mainly on gradients and surface conditions, namely:

Access for all:

- Suitable for everyone, including pushchairs and people operating their own wheelchairs
- Gradient: No more than 1:10
- Surface: Tarmac or smooth, compacted stone with a diameter of 10 mm or less. Path width will be a minimum of 1 metre with passing places

Access for many:

- Suitable for assisted wheelchair users and families with more robust, all-terrain type buggies
- Gradient: Existing gradients no more than 1:10, although newly built gradients can be up to 1:8
- Surface: The path surface will be rougher stone of 4 cm diameter or less

Access for some:

- Strong and confident wheelchair users and helpers may find routes 'for some' within their abilities. May be suitable for off-road mobility scooters
- Gradient: Gradients are not limited, but slopes greater than 1:8 will have improved surfacing, or handrails
- Surface: There may be some low steps or breaks in the surface up to 10 cm in height. Stone surface material may be up to 10 cm in diameter.

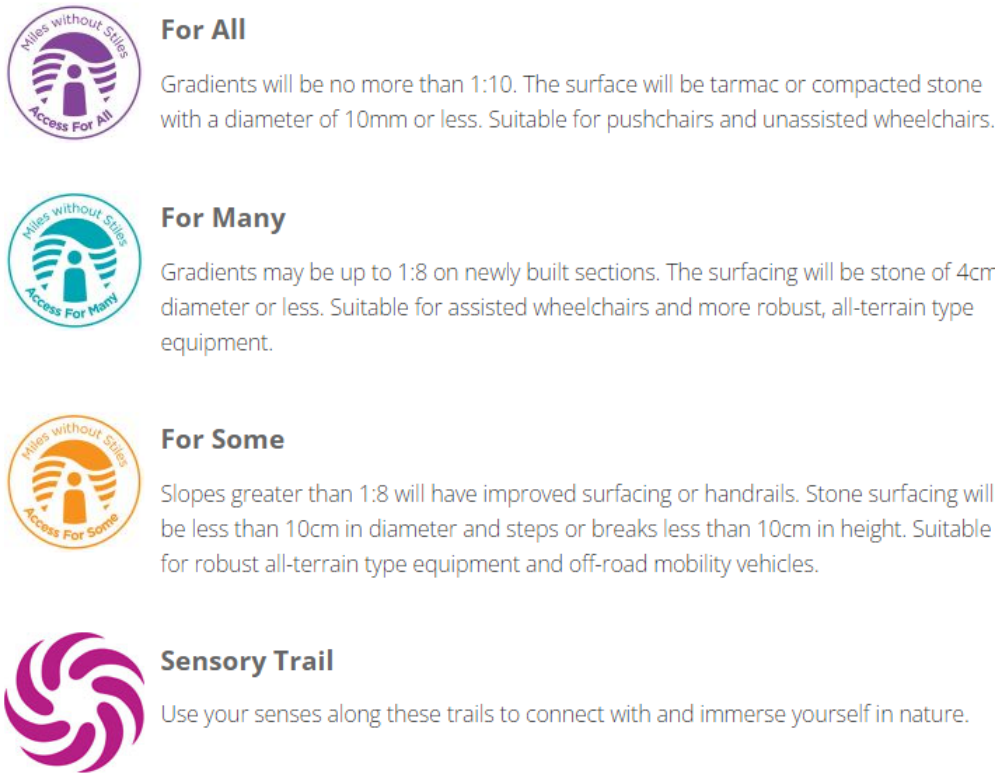


Image 9 - Access for all waymarking imagery (© Sensory Trust)

However, as previously discussed, all the above are set out as guidance, and the provision of detailed information in order to facilitate informed decisions should be seen as a key stage in communicating suitability rather than the imposition of hard or fast rules, or any form of 'gatekeeping' that deters use.

As a result, and after discussion with the report sponsors, we recommend this framework as an appropriate model to adopt for use within the Mend the Gap area in order to successfully promote and communicate accessible routes associated with this project.

Within this analysis, it is also worth commenting that equestrian users and cyclists are also much less well provided for than walkers. The rights of way network available to riders and cyclists is much less comprehensive than the footpath network, and only a relatively small proportion of access land is available to them. Although they generally have good access provision within Forestry Commission woodlands, continuing increases in traffic volume have made many minor roads less suitable for recreational use, particularly for the inexperienced. In addition, the fencing of commons where there are horse riding rights has caused difficulties for some Riders. As such, it should be seen as beneficial that improvements to routes also, where possible, benefit all user groups, including through provision of improved access for different user groups. Our recommendations include route upgrades to provide better accessibility for a wide range o& users, particularly along the Ridgeway National Trail

Accessible gaps, gates and stiles:

A particular trend has been noticed over recent years with the replacement of stiles with kissing gates. In the mend the gap area this has frequently been achieved through the instillation of

circular metal kissing gates, not all of these replacement gates are designed with wheelchair accessibility (generally achieved through the instillation of a radar key based ‘bypass’ which allows the gate to be opened fully to allow wheelchair accessibility. It is also notable that on a number of these gates, the locking mechanisms may be difficult to operate for disabled people and/or visually impaired users. Attention is drawn to current guidance (BS5709/2018) which contains key recommendations over gapes, gates and stiles, including the important principle of always fitting the least restrictive option, and discussion on the use of ‘trombone’ release handles and use of contrasting colours to highlight gate release mechanisms. It is also notable that at a number of sites there is a pronounced area of heavy wear and/or muddy ground in proximity to gates and (including kissing gates) and other access infrastructure.

We recommend that, in future, particular attention is paid to the fitting of appropriate, BS5709 compliant barriers at boundary/entrance locations, and that surfacing improvements are also made in and around any newly installed gates to prevent this problem of heavy wear and/or muddy ground in order to ensure all users can safely utilise these access points. We recommend that all gates should have an appropriate compacted gravel or hard surfacing to a distance of at least 1.5 metres on both sides.

Image 10 - Poor surfacing in and around gateways can make accessibly designed gates unusable (© Sam Jones)

Communication of accessible routes & facilities:

As previously identified, a key consideration in the delivery of improved access provision is the ‘access chain’ whereby potential users become aware of suitable locations and facilities and are equipped to make informed choices about suitability both prior to their journey and on arrival at the start location.

A number of important considerations can be applied to communication of routes to users, both on site and in any published or online information.

1. **Use Clear and Inclusive Language**: Describe routes with terms like "wheelchair accessible", "mobility aid-friendly", or "suitable for all abilities." Avoid vague terms and highlight any challenges such as steep gradients or uneven surfaces.

2. **Provide Detailed Terrain Information**: Clear explanation of surface types (e.g., gravel, tarmac), path width, gradients, and any potential obstacles like steps or gates, along with location of accessible rest points along the route, and nearby facilities (nearest cafe, nearest toilets, public transport etc.). These details also help users assess if the route meets their needs.

3. **Use of 360° Photography and uploading routes to Google Street View**: The use of 360° cameras to capture immersive views of routes, allowing users to virtually explore the terrain before visiting, and to highlight accessible features such as rest areas, seating, and other facilities.

4. **Offering Multiple Accessible Formats**: Provision of route information in accessible formats like large print, or screen reader-friendly digital files. Ensure maps are clear and easy to interpret with contrasting colours. Text on signage should be of a consistent tint and spacing in order to be read by camera phone devices.

5. **Highlight Available Support**: Provision of information to potential users about assistance options, like volunteer guides, equipment hire (e.g., all-terrain wheelchairs), and booking systems. In particular we recommend that additional conversations should take place with the National Trust about opportunities for potential provision of Trampers, including possibility of facilitating tramper provision at less visited rural sites through organised events or a booking system.

6. **Provision of Contact Information**: Considering provision of an email address for users to inquire about specific accessibility needs, or signposting to local groups who would be suitable and willing to offer advice and support to disabled users.

7. **Promote Safety Information**: Communicating postcode/grid reference of location, nearest point accessible to road vehicles for rescue or recovery & nearest hospital.

An additional advantage of the proposed “Gateway site” approach - recommending accessible routes from specific locations - is the opportunity to provide information to visitors at these locations. A popular method for this is the provision of ‘totem’ signage that details the existence of accessible routes alongside additional visitor information and maps as detailed above.We recommend that this is seen as a key element of our proposals, and that signage and information provision at these locations is seen as a key link in the ‘access chain’. An additional advantage of

Image 11 - Totem signage in-situ in Yorkshire Water car park (© K Foster)

the ‘Totem’ approach is the opportunity for different panels to display types of information tuned to particular user groups on different panel - eg. Walkers, cyclists or wildlife watchers. An example information totem in Yorkshire is detailed in the photograph below:

In addition to this possibility (which would, in our assessment, likely work best if focused on a wider programme of communicating National Trail information, with a dedicated panel included detailing accessible facilities and routes), success has been witnessed from route information markers at key access points on accessible routes, showing a map and detail of the route:

Image 12 - Route information boards including Mapping, as part of Cycle Surrey Hills Project (© K Foster)

It is also possible for QR codes to be added to these in order to link to a downloadable leaflet or Electronic GPS file of the route, which can assist users in following the route.

One final possibility to discuss is the issue of waymarking. Previously research has showed the value of waymarked routes for inclusion and in order to help novice users more comfortable in exploring new routes. At the same time, concerns have been raised over a proliferation of waymarked routes having a potential cluttering and urbanising effect in rural areas, and that this may not be in keeping with protected landscapes. A balancing exercise is required here, although it is our opinion that recent developments in technology, including the widespread accessibility to GPS software in modern smartphones, has shifted the balance in such a manner that traditional physical waymarking is likely to be unnecessary on many shorter walks in lowland areas, instead preferring ‘gateway’ signage linking potential users to downloadable GPS based routes.

A key option, which we have successfully used in the past is the development of ‘rich content’ smartphone/web content such as Arcgis Storymaps and Komoot tours, which serve to explain and communicate the route, along with map, photo and text content:

https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/28a8a59301784c628a3f3154c020125a

https://www.komoot.com/tour/1526996528

In both formats, high quality and accessible route content, along with additional media and mapping (including downloadable GPS data) can be distributed to users by utilising existing web infrastructure at minimal (or potentially no) ongoing cost to the parent organisation.

Komoot benefits from integrated GPS guide software that will help up users navigate the route with directions on any smartphone, and individual routes can be hosted as part of a dedicated

easier-access route collection, as has been done with a series of routes in the Surrey Hills National Landscape:

https://www.komoot.com/collection/2983756/accessible-beauty-easier-access-routes-in-the-surrey-hills

As such, we would strongly recommend this option, in conjunction with supporting physical signage at gateway sites and linked from national landscape and other relevant websites as being the best option for communicating a collection of accessible routes to potential users, and the report authors are happy to assist in the development of appropriate content to support this after recommended improvement works have been carried out.

Summary & Final Conclusions:

This Mend the Gap Access Report outlines potential access improvements in the Mend the Gap area (funded by Network Rail) and aimed at enhancing public access to, and enjoyment of, nature and landscape by linking the Chilterns and the North Wessex Downs, and in support of Mend the Gap's core focus of mitigating the visual and ecological impacts of the Great Western mainline's electrification, while promoting inclusivity and accessibility for all users.

Key Highlights:

1. **Vision:**
   - Enhance landscapes between the Chilterns and North Wessex Downs for wildlife, residents, and visitors.
2. **Project Goals:**
   - Improve physical access (e.g. gates, surfaces, facilities).
   - Upgrade information and interpretation for inclusivity.
3. **Assessment and Recommendations:**
   - Focused on "gateway locations" and routes for accessibility upgrades.
   - Suggestions for enhanced parking, seating, toilets, signage, and pathways for disabled and less mobile users.
   - Highlights the need for better public transport links, strategic "active travel" routes, and safer pathways.
4. **Consultations:**
   - Stakeholder input identified improvements in infrastructure, accessibility, and route connectivity.
   - Strong emphasis on "inclusive access," considering various disabilities and broader usability needs.
5. **Strategic Routes and Facilities:**
   - Priority areas include paths between major towns (e.g., Goring to Wallingford) and the enhancement of National Trails (e.g., Ridgeway and Thames Path).
6. **Actionable Proposals:**
   - Replace stiles with accessible gates.
   - Upgrade picnic benches and toilets to meet modern inclusivity standards like "Changing Places."
   - Promote routes using immersive tech (360° imagery) and detailed accessibility data.

This comprehensive report recommends policies, funding mechanisms, and infrastructure improvements to make the countryside accessible and enjoyable for all. Including interventions in order to improve accessibility for disabled and less-able visitors, both at a general level and with site specific recommendations.

The overall site based project is more difficult than some other areas due to the constraints of the terrain, nature of the local area and land ownership - there are few sites under single ownership and those that do exist are distanced from nearby public transport and path networks, including through the existence of busy A-roads that act as significant barriers to safe access

Site specific recommendations are focused around the selection of gateway sites, with provision of facilities that in each of the three gateway sites should deliver a higher quality, and more easily communicated, user experience. We have also included (see annex) an audit of existing tracks and paths on a selection of priority routes, along with detailed recommendations for improvements in order to deliver a network of easier access routes.

Further recommendations set out ideas on the use of both physical and internet based communication and interpretation of routes to potential users.

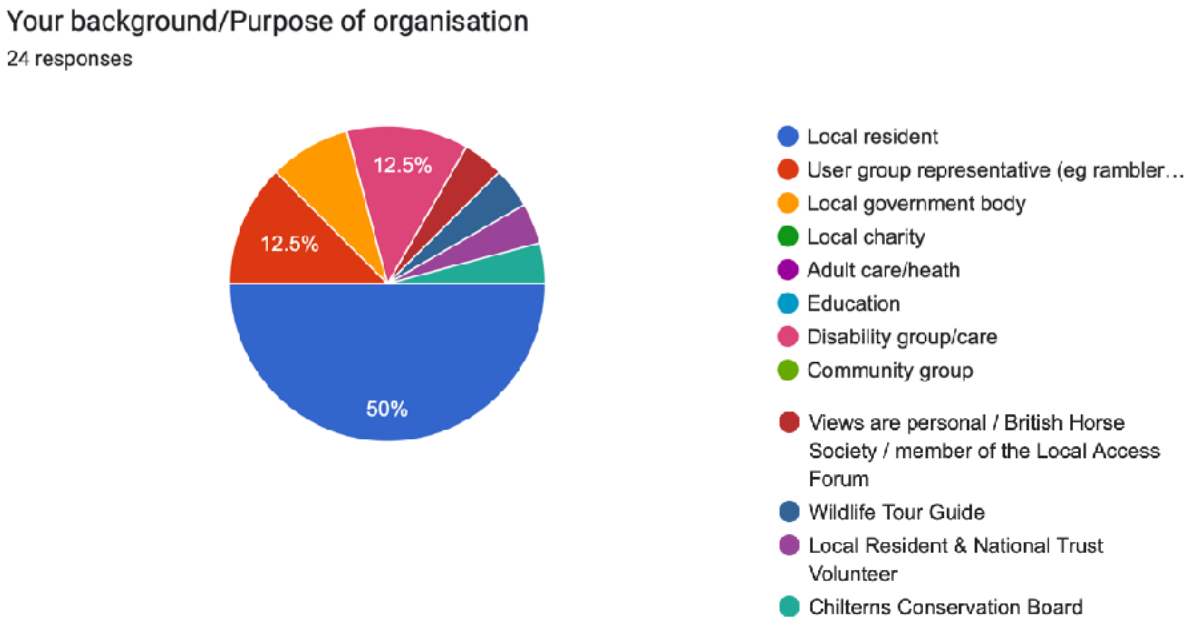
We hope you find the report useful, and are happy to discuss our recommendations with any interested parties.

Annex 1: Consultation & stakeholder engagement methodology & results

Consultation was focused on two main streams, both personal engagement with relevant stakeholders - including a series of groups input and separate individual discussions with relevant stakeholders, and a separate questionnaire that was circulated to a variety of local stakeholders. We collated and analysed responses from a variety of individuals and organisations, with backgrounds and purposes including:

- **Local Government Bodies** – Several responses from local government representatives, including parish councils.
- **Local Residents** – a number of responses from individuals living in the area.
- **Chilterns Conservation Board** – A response from an environmental organisation focused on conserving the Chilterns.
- **National Trust Volunteer** – Input from a volunteer with the National Trust.
- **User Group Representatives** – Responses from members of groups like the British Horse Society (BHS), Ramblers, and the Local Access Forum, advocating for various user groups.
- **Disability Group Representatives** – Responses from those representing or involved in disability care and support.

Questionnaire responses (in addition to stakeholders):



Overall, the responses reflected a range of perspectives, including local residents, advocacy groups, conservationists, and government bodies, with a focus on accessibility, outdoor activities, and environmental conservation.

52% of questionnaire respondents were local residents. 13% were representatives of user-group representatives (including Ramblers and British Horse Society). The dominance of local responses offers some caution in extrapolating responses to out-of-area visitors.

73% of respondents identified themselves as daily countryside users. 21% weekly. Of these, 47% reported enjoying the countryside for walking without a dog, 26% with. This compares well with

data from the Natural England's People and Nature Surveys for England (PANS), which identifies 27% of adults visiting a green and natural space to walk a dog

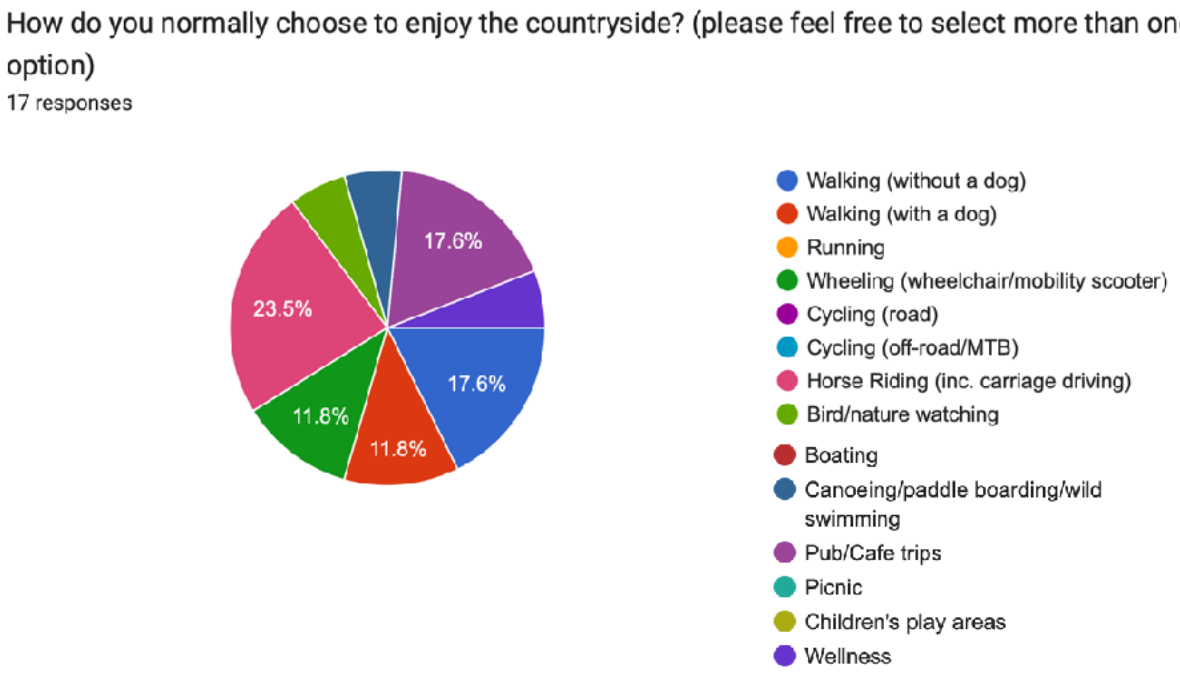
61% reported mainly travelling to the countryside from their front door, 17% by car - again this compares well with PANS data, which reports 66% of people used active travel in their most recent visit to a green and natural space (i.e. they went on foot, by bike, or by mobility aid). Again, The dominance of local responses offers some caution in extrapolating responses to out-of-area visitors, and wider experience should be applied in consideration of this issue.

Interestingly, of those who do travel by car, 28% reported parking in urban car parks rather than rural, and 21% reported parking at the roadside or lay-bys. This suggests that lay-bys and urban spaces offer significant value, at least for local communities who visit the countryside by car. Caution remains relevant here that this may not apply to out-of-area visitors. Specific comments were noted form equestrian users over the lack of suitable parking areas for horse-wagons.

17% of responses reported some level of physical disability that limited their activity. A number of these reported that benches or rest stops were of value in helping them access the countryside.

Activities:

Consultation respondents identified a range of activities and interests, The most common ways to enjoy the countryside include walking, cycling, pub/cafe visits, and nature watching, often in combination. Horse riding, wellness activities, and water sports like canoeing or swimming also feature. There's also a notable focus on accessibility, with some respondents highlighting the importance of options for wheelchair or mobility scooter users.



1. **Popular Activities**:
   - Walking (both with and without a dog) is the most common activity.
   - Cycling (both road and off-road/MTB) is also frequently chosen by respondents.
   - Pub/Cafe trips are popular among many respondents, often combined with other activities.
   - Bird/nature watching is another common choice, often paired with walking or cycling.
   - Horse Riding (including carriage driving) is selected by several respondents.
   - Wellness activities are enjoyed by some, often combined with walking.

- Canoeing/paddle boarding/wild swimming appears as a choice for some, particularly in nature-focused areas.
- Wheeling (wheelchair/mobility scooter) is specifically mentioned by a few respondents, emphasising accessibility.
- Boating is selected by a small number, often along with other activities like walking.

2. **Common Combinations**:
   - Walking (with or without a dog) is frequently combined with other activities such as cycling, pub visits, nature watching, and horse riding.
   - **Pub/Cafe trips** often accompany outdoor activities like walking, cycling, or nature watching.
   - Activities like **cycling**, **nature watching**, and **horse riding** are frequently mentioned in combination with walking.

3. **Special Considerations**:
   - **Wheeling** (wheelchair or mobility scooter use) is mentioned as a key activity, reflecting the need for accessibility options.
   - **Children's play areas** are noted by a few respondents as part of their countryside enjoyment, especially in combination with other activities like walking or cycling.

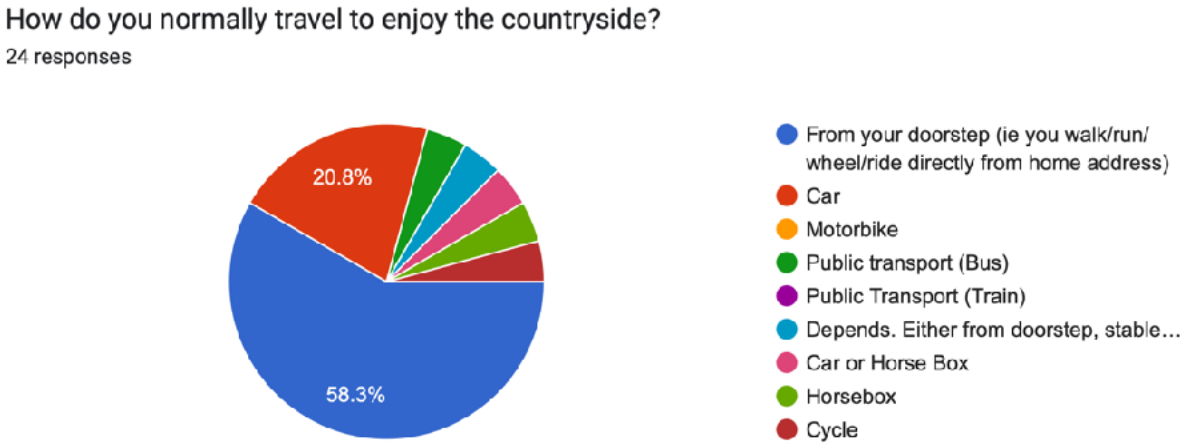
Priorities:

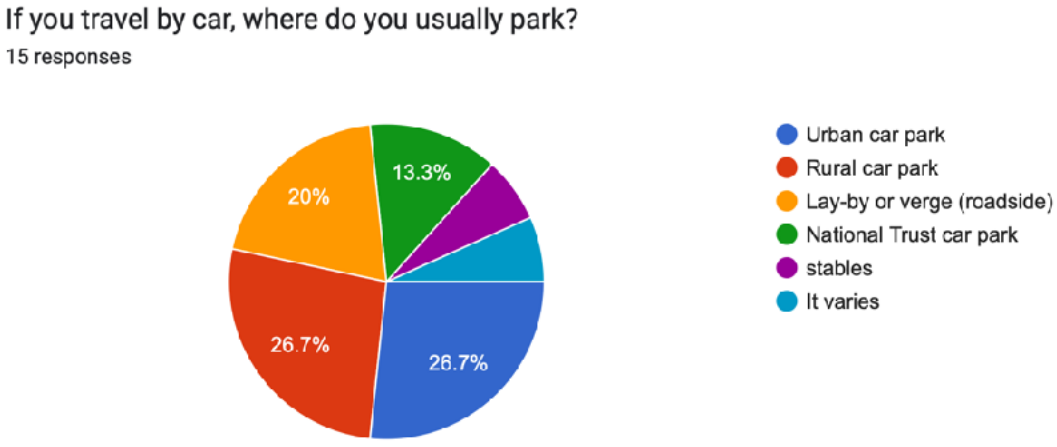
In response to a specific question over how to improve local provision for access, survey respondents identified:

1. **Path Conditions**:
   - Respondents highlighted the need for improved path surfaces, particularly in areas with mud, erosion, or uneven terrain (e.g., Thames Path, Goring, Streatley, and Moulsford).
   - There are concerns about accessibility, especially for wheelchair users, and the need for resurfacing to make paths more durable and future-proof.
2. **Access Improvements**:
   - Requests for clearer signage, better interpretation of points of interest, and safer access to high points, especially on the Streatley side with gentler gradients.
   - A few areas require urgent repairs (e.g. damaged paths at Purley on Thames, Gatehampton to Hartslock) and safety fixes, such as dangerous holes, eroded surfaces, and overgrown branches.
3. **Horse and Cycle Infrastructure**:
   - Need for designated horsebox parking and better-maintained bridleways.
   - Improvements for cyclists, including safer, off-road routes and new cycling paths, especially between South Stoke, Little Stoke, and Wallingford, to avoid busy roads.
4. **Additional Requests**:
   - Suggestions for reducing road access to certain stretches, improving connections for circular walking or cycling routes, and making paths wider and less slippery.

Overall, the responses emphasise improving path quality, safety, accessibility, and infrastructure for walkers, cyclists, and horse riders.

Transport and Parking





Due to the nature of consultation, responses were weighted towards the local area, with many respondents regularly accessing the countryside direct from their home locations, without the need for travel, however additional value was found in a number of broader conversations with stakeholder, and analysis of travel patterns from Strava identifying a number of key 'hotspot' locations where people tended to gravitate to as locations to explore the wider area.

With regard to parking locations, respondents identified:

1. **Specific Locations**:
   - Compton, Aldworth, Pangbourne, Cholsey.
   - The Swan and Rectory Road at Streatley
   - The Wheel Orchard car park, Goring.
   - On-street parking in Pangbourne and Goring.
2. **General Areas**:
   - Compton for horse box parking, often at Churn Road.
   - Parking locations directly connected to the Ridgeway NT
   - Informal off-road parking locations.

Overall, the responses mention a mix of formal car parks, street parking, and informal off-road areas, particularly for horse riders. Additional comments were made over the poor condition of parking locations at Pangbourne recreation ground.

Disability Access

Regards access improvements for disabled people and people with limited mobility, respondents identified the following factors:

Survey responses suggest a range of improvements to enhance access to the countryside, focusing on inclusivity and usability for people with mobility impairments:

1. **Accessibility Improvements:**
   - Gates and Stiles: All stiles should be replaced with accessible turnstile gates or kissing gates, with enough space for wheelchairs.
   - Rest Areas: Benches with backrests and armrests are recommended, as well as picnic tables designed to accommodate wheelchair users.
   - Path Surface: Paths should be made from bound gravel or infilled grid gravel, ensuring they are firm, flush, and free-draining.
   - Drainage: Improved drainage for pathways and access routes.
2. **Maintenance and Facilities:**
   - Regular clearing of Rights of Way and maintenance of pathways, waste, and dog waste bins should be part of maintenance contracts.
   - Blue Badge Parking: Designated parking spaces close to accessible routes, picnic areas, and viewing points.
   - Signage: Directional and locational signage should meet RNIB standards, ensuring accessibility for people with sight impairments.
   - Trails with maps and distance indicators to improve navigation.
3. **Additional Facilities:**
   - Support for accessible toilets and "Changing Places" facilities, as well as off-road wheelchair or tramper hire options.
4. **Personal Experience:**
   - A respondent shared a personal experience of struggling to push a wheelchair-bound individual along the Thames Path due to a steep, hump-backed bridge near Cleeve Court, highlighting the need for smoother, accessible paths.

Overall, the responses stress the importance of improving physical access to the countryside for people with mobility and sight impairments, with specific attention to infrastructure, facilities, and signage.

Additional Comments:

Additional comments were also received discussing:

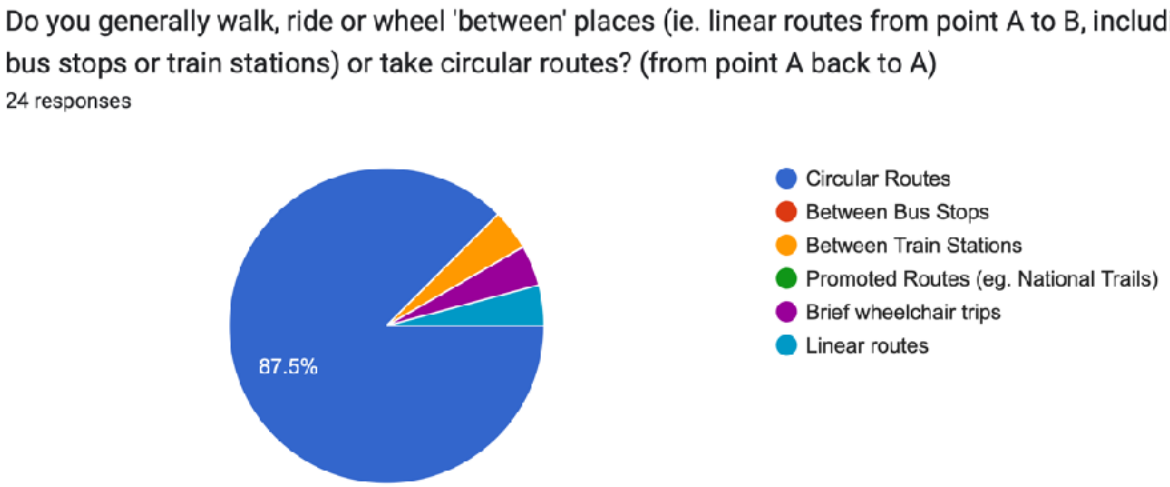
1. **Improved Connectivity for Cyclists and Horse Riders**:
   - Need for an alternative route for cyclists and horse riders where the Ridgeway meets the A417 at Streatley, crossing to the A329 and then down to Streatley Church, to avoid the busy A417.
   - The Ridgeway NT does not cater for cyclists and horse riders east of the river, with the Swan's Way running along the B4009 north of South Stoke being deemed unsatisfactory. A safer path behind the fence/hedge should be created to take riders off the road.
2. **Access and Pathway Improvements**:

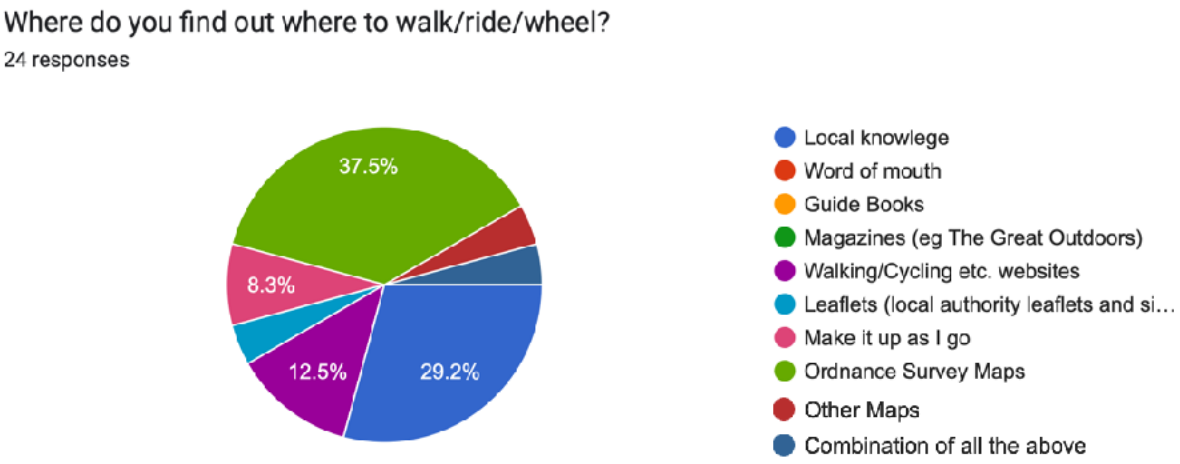
- A request for a less steep approach to high ground, especially where recent works on the eastern face of Common Wood have resulted in accessible views. A feasibility study is suggested to improve the gradients at the foot and top of the slope to make it more accessible.
- A suggestion to improve existing paths (e.g., Thames Path) rather than opening new ones, especially highlighting that Footpath 21 in Streatley is often flooded and doesn't offer good value for money.

3. **Maintenance and Engagement**:
   - Complaints about access requests not being addressed.
   - Emphasis on maintaining existing paths, such as those in the Thames Path area, and improving horse box parking near trails, as roads are seen as too dangerous for riding.
4. **Support for Resources**:
   - Offer to share resources such as a book from the West Berkshire Countryside Society and links to accessible picnic bench options for wheelchair users.
   - The importance of connecting with local Access Groups and organisations like MIGWAL, MIGGS, Unlimited Oxfordshire, and the Fieldfare Trust.
5. **Specific Requests for Better Infrastructure**:
   - Clearer, safer cycle routes are needed between Goring, Cholsey, Wallingford, and Pangbourne, as current options are either muddy and hilly or dangerous due to traffic.
   - Parking for horseboxes is seen as essential to reduce the danger of riding on busy roads.

In summary, the responses focus on improving connectivity and safety for walkers, cyclists and horse riders, particularly around busy roads, and road crossings, as well as enhancing access to countryside areas through better pathways, parking, and maintenance. There is also strong support for ongoing efforts to make these areas more accessible for people with mobility impairments.

Additional Questions:





The additional questions highlight both the importance of circular routes for peoples user experience (though with the caution that the existing linear National Trail routes likely have a different user base and appeal from that encountered in the questionnaire) and also the continued importance of Ordnance Survey Maps as a route finding tool (37.5% of respondents reported this as their primary route finding source.