

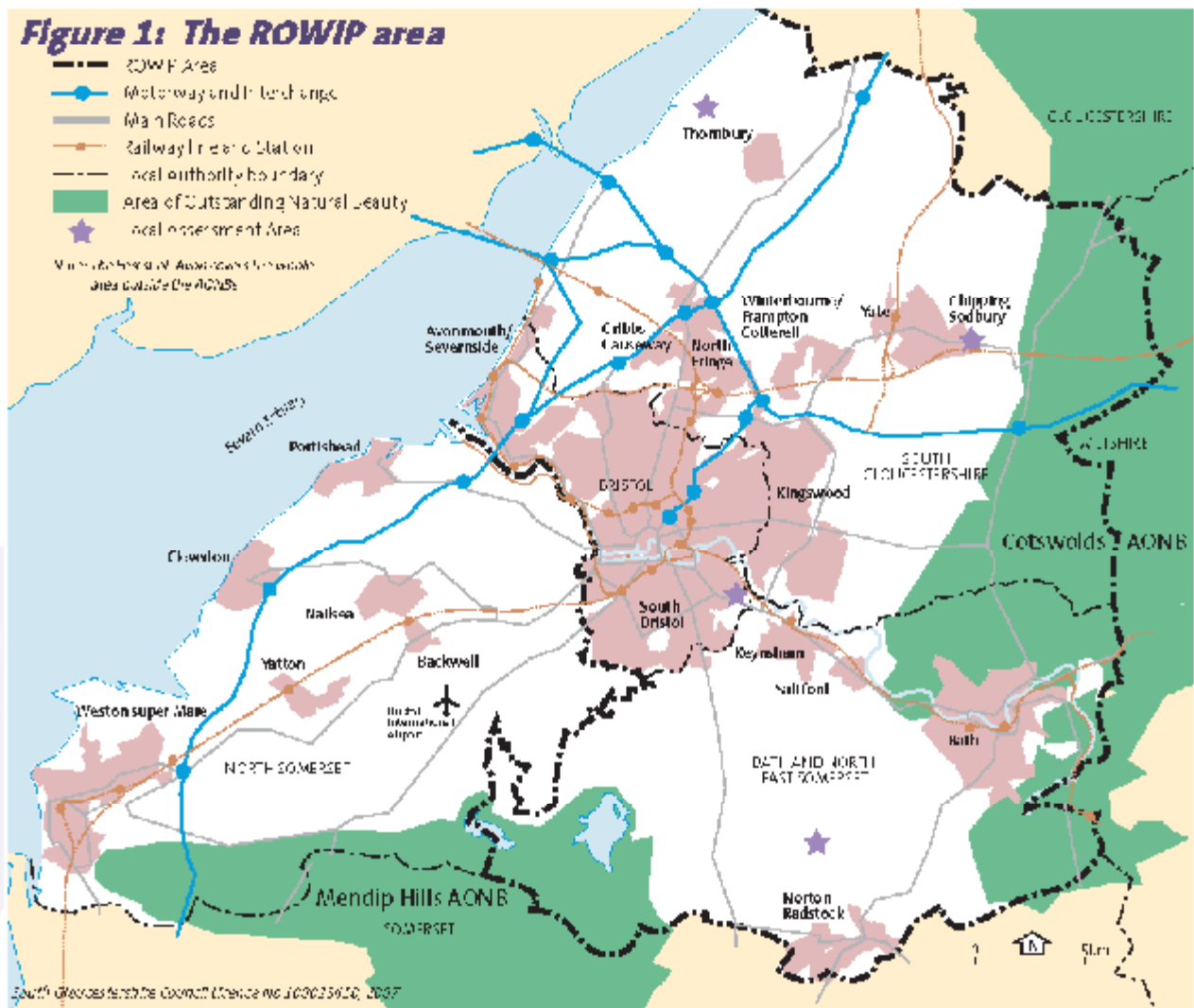
## 1. Introduction

### Our area

- 1.1 This Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) covers the council areas of Bath & North East Somerset, Bristol City and South Gloucestershire, totalling almost 100,000 ha. The population is almost 800,000 with 527,000 of these living in Bristol and the adjoining urban area within South Gloucestershire. Other significant settlements are Bath (pop. 84,000), Chipping Sodbury with Yate (pop. 34,000) and the three towns of Keynsham, Norton-Radstock and Thornbury (combined pop. 50,000). About 100,000 people live in our rural areas in a variety of large and small villages, hamlets and in isolated properties in the open countryside.
- 1.2 Drained levels adjacent to the Severn estuary rise towards the limestone Cotswolds escarpment bordering the



east of the area and the Mendip Hills plateau to the south. Between is a rolling landscape of ridges and river valleys. The rural areas are characterised by a range of villages and hamlets, mixed farming and mostly small woodlands. An extensive part is within the Mendip Hills and Cotswolds Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the remainder is in the area of the Forest of Avon Community Forest: see Figure 1.



## Purpose and scope of the ROWIP

1.3 As local highway authorities we are required by section 60 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000 to prepare a ROWIP. ROWIPs have to make an assessment of:

- The extent to which local rights of way meet the current and likely future needs of the public;
- The opportunities provided by local rights of way for exercise and other forms of open-air recreation and the enjoyment of their area
- The accessibility of local rights of way to blind or partially sighted persons and others with mobility problems

1.4 As defined in the CROW Act 2000 local rights of way focus on footpaths, bridleways, byways, restricted and byways: these form the Public Rights Of Way network (PROW). The Act also includes cycle tracks, routes that have been upgraded from public footpaths using the Cycle Tracks Act 1984. There are very few of these in our area and for the purposes of this ROWIP we include them as part of the PROW network. The PROW network does not include footways, i.e. pavements or other paths that form part of a road mainly used by vehicles. We look at the legal definitions further in Chapter 4.

1.5 This ROWIP builds upon our duties as highway authorities:

### 1A - Highway Authority Duties

As highway authorities we have a duty

- to keep and maintain the legal record of public rights of way;
- to ensure that routes are adequately signposted, maintained, free from obstruction and fit for purpose;
- to assert and protect the rights of the public.

Government guidance suggests that ROWIPs 'should build upon this work and not conflict with these existing duties or reduce the effectiveness with which they are carried out'

1.6 In our assessment we have also looked at other means of 'outdoors access' such as paths in parks and woodland, permissive routes and 'access land' under the CROW 2000 Act. We have looked in detail at four areas (see Figure 1) to give us a greater insight into typical issues; these 'local area assessments' focus on:

- Brislington, within the City of Bristol - a community on the urban fringe;
- Oldbury-on-Severn - a small village community in the north of our area;
- Sodbury - a small market town and rural area close to the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty;
- Timsbury - a large former mining village between Bath and Norton-Radstock.

## Joint local access forum

1.7 The Joint Local Access Forum (JLAF) is a statutory body established by the three councils in July 2003 to provide advice on the 'improvement of public access to land for the purposes of open-air recreation and enjoyment of the area'. Currently meeting three times a year the JLAF has 20 members comprising one Councillor from each authority and 17 voluntary members representing a variety of interests, including those of land managers and users. The JLAF has played an important part in guiding us in preparing this ROWIP.

## Our approach

1.8 We have decided to work together to prepare a joint ROWIP and this has several advantages:

- It builds on existing joint working, such as through the JLAF, Joint Local Transport Plan (JLTP) and the Forest of Avon (FoA);
- It recognises the strong recreation and transport links between urban areas and countryside in the area;
- It has allowed people across the whole area to have a say in the improvement of access where they live and where they might visit;

# Joint Rights of Way Improvement Plan

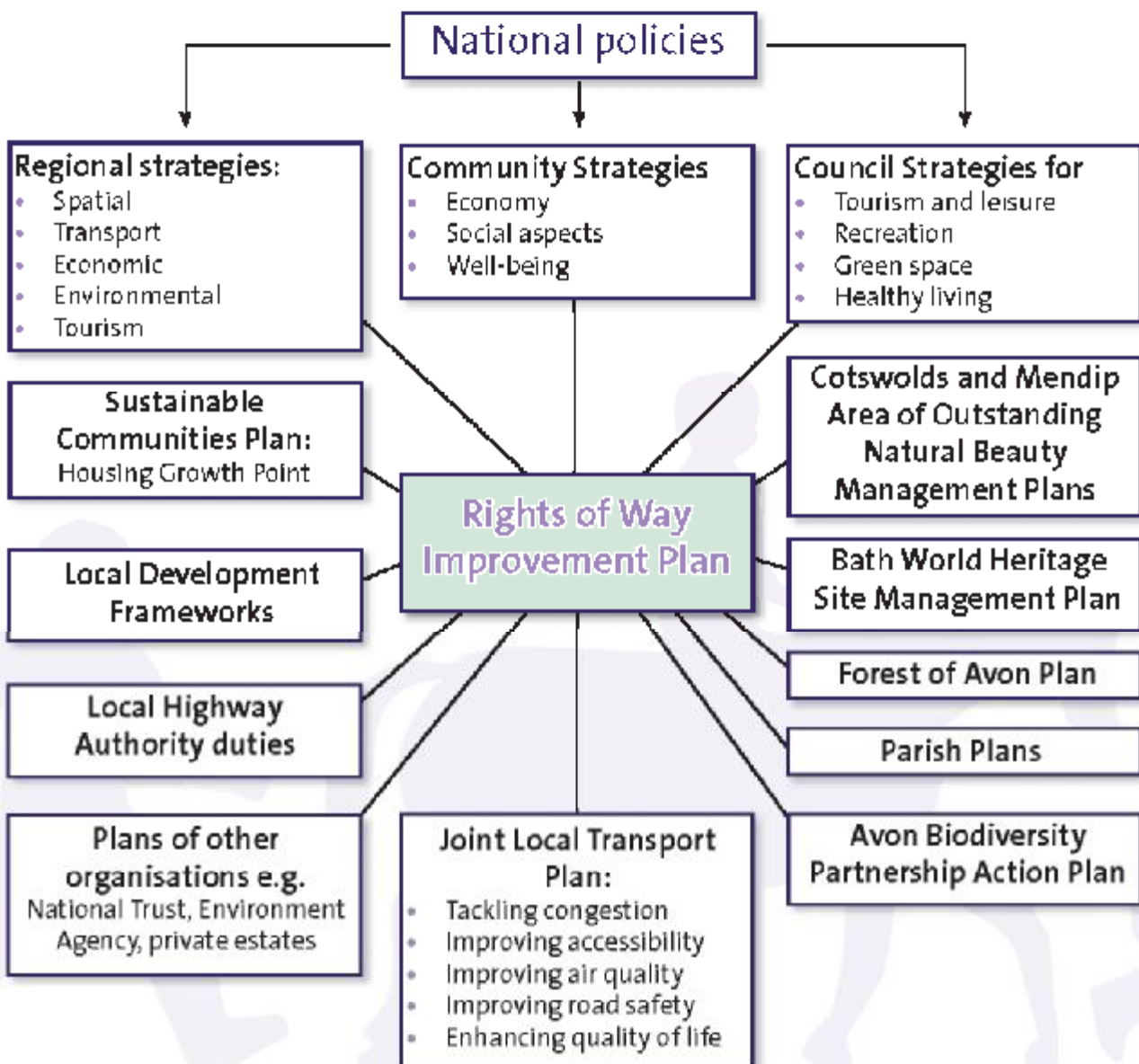
- It recognises that the PROW network, and the public perception of it, is continuous across boundaries;
- It identifies the potential for increasing partnership working and for pooling expertise for cross boundary projects;
- It increases the potential of the councils and our partners to gain funding for improvements.

1.9 North Somerset Council is developing a separate ROWIP but we anticipate that the two plans will come together as part of our work on the rolling forward of our JLTP for the period 2011-16. We will then have a single ROWIP for the West of England.

## Policy context

1.10 The ROWIP has been prepared in the context of a range of policies and strategies and we expand on these in Chapter 4: see Figure 2. We have taken into account the national policies of Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), Department for Transport (DfT), Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and other Government Departments as well as the aims and initiatives of Natural England (NE), the Environment Agency (EA), Forestry Commission (FC), British Waterways Board (BWB), Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) and others.

**Figure 2: Policy Context**



- 1.11 Significant housing and employment growth is planned for our area in the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) and there are other regional initiatives on the environment, the economy and tourism that are likely to increase demands on the PROW network. PROW also feature in our community strategies and these have informed preparation of Council corporate strategies. The councils' JLP recognises the crucial role of the PROW network in facilitating sustainable transport in both urban and rural areas and contributing to a range of other objectives.
- 1.12 Our Local Plans (LP) and emerging Local Development Frameworks (LDF) set the local land use framework. Influential on the PROW network are the management plans of the Mendip Hills and Cotswolds Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) as well as the Forest of Avon Plan and the Avon Biodiversity Partnership's Action Plan. In and around Bath we have taken into account the World Heritage Management Plan. Across the area 'Green Spaces Strategies' have a bearing on the ROWIP and we have worked with Parks and Leisure staff to build a corporate approach to both PROW and open spaces. Outside Bristol Parish Plans are locally important and provide further 'building blocks' for the ROWIP.
- 1.13 Last but by no means least are the policies and plans of bodies like the National Trust, Woodland Trust; and those of major estate landowners as well as individual farmers.



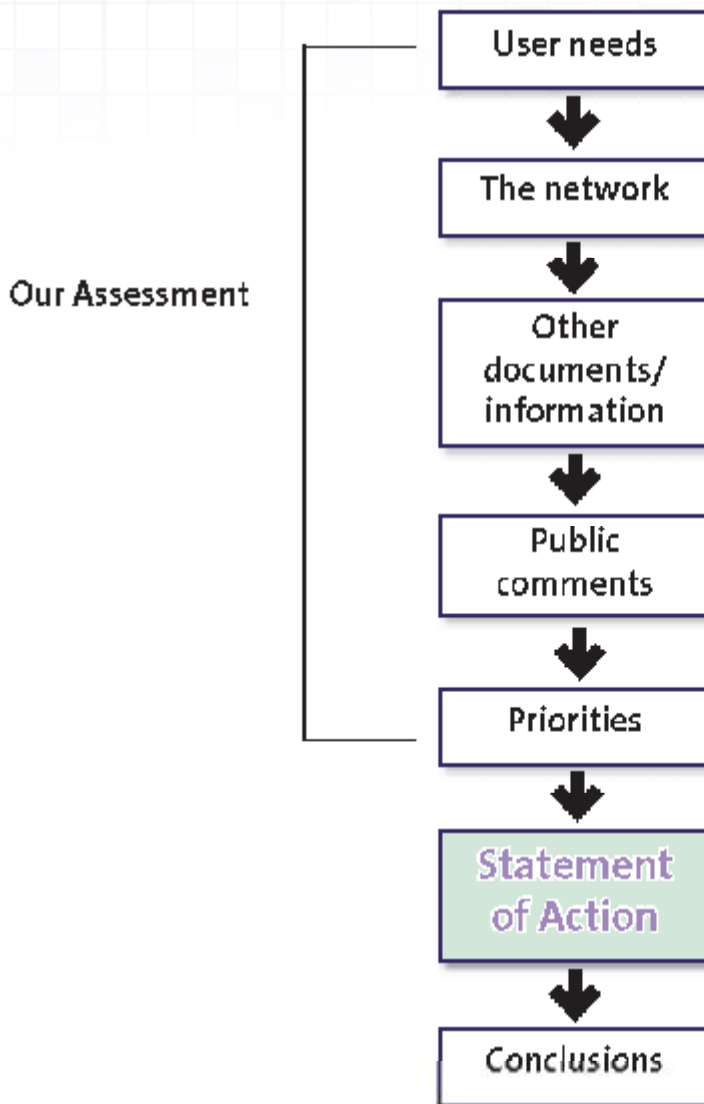
## Vision

- 1.14 The ROWIP vision is to increase the use of PROW by developing a network of safe and attractive routes which
- improves opportunities for sustainable access to essential services and facilities; and
  - meets the present and future recreational needs of all members of the community, including those with visual impairment or mobility problems.

## Structure of the report

- 1.15 We have prepared this report in the light of the statutory guidance published by DEFRA in November 2002. The structure is as follows:
- Chapter 2 assesses the needs of different groups of users - what do they look for from the PROW and wider access network?
  - Chapter 3 assesses the extent of the current PROW and wider access network - how does it measure up to what users need?
  - Chapter 4 takes into account other sources of information on PROW - what do other plans and documents say?
  - Chapter 5 summarises the comments of the public - what do people think about the PROW and wider access network?
  - Chapter 6 draws together the results of Chapters 2 to 5 - what are the priorities for action?
  - Chapter 7 puts forward our Statement of Action.
  - Chapter 8 sets out our conclusions - next steps: consult more widely with the public.
- 1.16 Figure 3 shows how our assessment leads to our Statement of Action.

**Figure 3: Assessment Leading to Action**



*What do you think of our vision?  
Let us know by filling in the  
questionnaire at the end!*

