

NEWS RELEASE



**WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL**

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RAMBLERS AND COUNCIL JOIN FORCES TO OPEN WALKING ROUTES FOR ALL

Hikers of all abilities can plan their trips around the borough more easily thanks to an in-depth new online tool prepared by Wokingham Borough Council with help from Loddon Valley Ramblers.

The council has updated its definitive rights of way map in partnership with the charity, whose volunteers walked all 238 km (140 miles) of the borough's footpaths, bridleways and byways to record the location of all 84 stiles, 231 gates, 108 bridges, 21 benches and 876 signs.

Members of the public can visit the map on the council's website and search for the nearest routes in their area, then click on points of interest along the way to find out more.

If they encounter something not listed on the map while out walking, they can report it in the usual way and the council will aim to update the map or fix any faults as soon as it reasonably can. Visit www.wokingham.gov.uk and search for "find a public right of way" to find out more.

Making smart use of local knowledge

Not only has technology evolved since the previous version was published more than 20 years ago, enabling this forward-thinking project to take place, but the landscape and paths have changed a lot and a substantial amount of checking was needed on the ground.

This task was kindly done by Loddon Valley Ramblers' 15 footpath wardens, who monitor the network all year round and report problems. The council created a special map and survey for the Ramblers to record the information using their smartphones.

Their efforts were hugely appreciated as the council's officers were keen to produce this map but it would have been extremely difficult for them to find the time.

It will be especially helpful for those with limited mobility, who may struggle to negotiate stiles or may want to plan rest breaks along the way. The council and the Ramblers are also working together to replace as many stiles as possible with gates to further improve access.

Helping everyone to enjoy some fresh air

Cllr Ian Shenton, executive member for environment, sport and leisure, said: “We really appreciate the Ramblers’ role in helping us update the map and improve the amount and quality of information available. The benefits to everyone who lives in or visits the area are obvious, and we hope this will inspire more use of our beautiful borough’s public rights of way.

“This was a fantastic example of partnership working, tapping into the expertise of a dedicated local group for a task that would have cost us a great deal of time and money when we’re already facing unprecedented financial challenges.

“We’re committed to balancing our budget and saving money for the most critical services, like children’s and adults’ social care or tackling poverty, among others. Every little bit helps and we’re so thankful to the Ramblers for their contribution.”

Steve Vale, Loddon Valley Ramblers’ footpath officer, said: “We’ve always tried to work in partnership with the council as we have the same aims in many areas – in this case, widening access to the footpath network and checking its accuracy.

“We flatter ourselves that we did a very thorough job, and it is hard to see how anyone else could have undertaken the work our volunteers did, given their detailed and extensive knowledge of their own parishes.”

More green schemes in the pipeline

This project will inform the borough's definitive map and statement, its legal record of public rights of way. Further improvements are planned, including integrating the information with the National Street Gazetteer so the routes would appear on digital apps like Google or Apple Maps.

Meanwhile the council intends to protect and improve the borough's trees and other plant life, which will have a similar impact on biodiversity, by publishing a Tree Strategy. It recently consulted on this and will be announcing the next steps soon.

It is giving away free trees for residents, businesses and other organisations to plant on their land under its Garden Forest Scheme, generously supported by a £300,000 contribution from the Woodland Trust's Emergency Tree Fund.

Plans are also under way for more developer-funded nature parks in the borough's major new communities at Arborfield and North and South Wokingham.

For more about walking around Wokingham Borough, and to find out how to earn points and win prizes through the Innovation Valley Rewards smartphone app, visit the council's My Journey Wokingham page at www.myjourneywokingham.com.

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Further information:

1. For more information contact Cllr Ian Shenton, executive member for environment, sport and leisure, at ian.shenton@wokingham.gov.uk
2. More information about Ramblers at www.ramblers.org.uk