Hitchin Forum Footpath Survey Report

Contents

Executive Summary

The Footpath Survey arose from the Forum's contribution to the Local Plan in which a need to promote safe and healthy alternatives to car use was identified. Using a checklist, Forum members were invited to assess local paths within Hitchin during the summer of 2013. In all 41 paths were assessed by checklist with members and others contributing comments on a further 4.

Key issues

- Pockets of neglect and poor maintenance exemplified by vandalism, graffiti and litter or fly tipping, coupled with lack of surveillance which would discourage use, especially by children and after dark.
- Poor signage and a failure to indicate how paths could be linked to provide walking routes to important destinations.
- No evidence base for footpath use in Hitchin.
  Recommendations
- Make paths more attractive by promptly dealing with problems of vandalism, graffiti and fly-tipping notified by a network of **Footpath Wardens.**

- Make **signage** more informative, both for local inhabitants and visitors, and create and publicise a network of walking routes throughout the town.
- Improve the quality of evidence of footpath use in order to assess the effectiveness of actions and to enable the setting of targets.

Main Report

Background

There are no surveys of footpath use in Hitchin that we can find. The HCC Rights of Way Improvement Plan 2011/12 – 2015/16 of April 2011 provides some general statistics based on research, some of which took place as long ago as 2003 but its overall focus is on rural rights of way, and is largely targeted at recreational use. This survey mainly focuses on the condition of urban footpaths within the boundary of the Hitchin HOOP.

Of the 46% of children in Hertfordshire who walk to school, only 30 % say that this is their preferred mode of transport[1]. The national average distance travelled to school in 2011 was 2.5 miles[2]. Given the relatively small size of Hitchin, few children would need to travel that far unless travelling to schools in nearby towns. We can find no figures for children walking to school in Hitchin, but we would hazard a guess that the percentage walking to school would be lower than for the county as a whole. Among the reasons for this are the congested nature of Hitchin and the relatively high speeds of traffic on its two gyratory systems at peak times. As a result, parents perceive walking to school to be dangerous, and prefer to deliver their children to the school gate. Such fears are compounded by anxiety about quiet footpaths and general fear of crime. Car use has become a habit.

The declaration of the Air Quality Management Area in Stevenage Road is a wake-up call for the town. The measures in the Draft Action Plan suggest that a reduction in car use and improved facilities for pedestrians in the area could be part of a solution. This is not the only part of the town to suffer from congestion, and increases in traffic could easily lead to air quality problems in other areas.

The County Travel Survey of 2009 states '……………… walking is a strong mode of transport for residents in Hitchin, and that *there is scope to increase the mode share of walking and help to minimise the number of vehicle trips on the network*.'

Hitchin has a large number of footpaths for its size, and these have the potential to provide safe alternative pedestrian routes that could help to reduce road traffic and increase the fitness level of the population. Unfortunately, it is correct to say that some of Hitchin's paths are poorly maintained, unattractive and, in the extremes, bear evidence of petty crime and vandalism which deter use. This survey is an attempt, with limited resources, to make an assessment of a sample of Hitchin's paths, and to make recommendations about how to rectify the problems highlighted.

Methodology

This report is based on a collection of completed checklist (see appendix 1) and text responses on __paths in Hitchin compiled during July, August and September 2013. The checklists were completed predominantly by Hitchin Forum members who used 3 completed checklists which acted as exemplars. These exemplars were completed by Bill Sellicks, and moderated by a team of Hitchin Forum Planning Group Members (Adrian Gurney, Chris Honey and Ann Heymans) which also examined the Checklist for its fitness for purpose. The paths are often, but not exclusively those identified in the 'Around Hitchin' map (appendix 2) on the Forum's website. Some paths surveyed do not appear on the Council's Definitive Map and yet are well-known and used.

A majority of individual surveys are available in electronic form for inspection. A number of surveys were completed by hand and copies of these may be provided on request.

Key findings

NB All paths are identified, as far as possible, by their number on the HCC Definitive Map. Although this map has recently been updated, some numbers may be incorrect, particularly where there are several paths in close proximity.

1. Ease of use and value.

1.1 Signage of footpaths in Hitchin is invariably poor, reducing chances that visitors, or even less confident residents might opt to use them. There are

- Relatively few examples of paths whose length and destinations are displayed. An exception is Maxwell's path (FP18) which has a signpost at its western end only.
- No examples of paths being seen as part of either a route to a specific destination or a network (see 1.2).
- No examples of signage where the course of a path is interrupted and where its onward route is unclear (e.g. FP71 Riddy lane where it crosses Willoughby Way)
- Few examples of information boards, except where the path is close to a nature reserve (e.g Herts and Essex Wildlife Trust noticeboards on paths in the Purwell Meadows Nature Reserve area).
- No opportunities taken to inform pedestrians of significant historical, architectural or cultural features.

1.2 In terms of connectivity, many of Hitchin's paths were, and have the potential to be again, part of a network of paths and quiet roads providing convenient pedestrian routes. These could serve as an alternative to car use. Examples (see map appendix 3) are

- Hitchin town centre to Ickleford (via Elmside walk, Bearton Avenue, Footpath 12, Old Hale Way, Ickleford)
- Hitchin town centre to the HOOP path (via Lyles Row, Kershaws Hill, Riddy Lane, Manor Crescent, Aston Rise)
- Samuel Lucas School to Priory School (via Chalkdell Path, Union Path, Westmill Road, un-named path opposite Freemans Close, Wellingham Avenue, pedestrian crossing on Bedford Road)

There are routes which are rendered less safe by unforeseen changes. The main example here involves two paths (FPs 70 and 94) which are part of the HOOP and which are separated by a stretch of road (Wymondley Road to the east of the railway bridge / St Michael's Road roundabout). Only part of this has a pedestrian footway. It appears that the farmer has expanded the boundary of the field bordering the road, forcing pedestrians to walk along the road on what is a narrow and relatively busy minor road with poor visibility for oncoming vehicles. There are no warning signs to inform motorists of the presence of pedestrians.

1.3a Many of Hitchin's paths are attractive, taking the pedestrian through pleasant surroundings, past attractive, architecturally important or historic buildings. Examples are

- St John's Path (FP 62) Chalkdell path (FP17) – attractive houses and cottages
- Gypsey Lane (FP94) – access to Purwell meadows Nature Reserve
- FP 38, 39 and 40 – all in farmland in Priory Park and all affording panoramic views to the SW, and very well-used

1.3b A few of Hitchin's paths are neglected, devoid of interest, their purpose sometimes forgotten. Examples

- Union path (FP 20) – passes along backs of garages and industrial units. No points of interest, but a useful connection avoiding roads
- FP 89 which starts in Wilbury way and finishes on the Stotfold Road with no onward track. This path is totally overgrown.

2. Health, Safety and Security

2.1 Surfaces.

Most surfaces of paths surveyed are acceptable. The most common surface material is tarmac. As such, the most frequently encountered problem is damage due to tree roots. For instance, FP 122 after it leaves the bridge under the bypass and heads east towards Charlton Road. This path would be hard to negotiate for somebody who had difficulty walking. In some cases, organic material may cause the surface to become hazardous when wet, especially on steep

paths (e.g. St John's path FP62). Some paths have a compacted earth or gravel surface. These can be much more uneven, e.g. FP 30 between Offley Road and Pirton Road. Towards the edge of town, grassy paths are more common and appropriate, since they are recreational walks rather than utility paths e.g. FP 70 along Ippolytts Brook. Paving slabs are relatively rarely encountered. A section of Riddy Lane (FP 71) near to Willoughby Way is an example, and here there are some points where slabs are uneven or insecure.

2.2 Boundaries

The majority of paths have well-maintained fences, hedges or walls on one or both sides. In most cases, these are in adequate states of repair, although many are subject to graffiti, especially if they are brick or concrete walls. We have not found examples of racist or offensive graffiti. There are examples of graffiti which suggest to many that the area may be used by gangs or drug dealers (e.g. in the old hospital grounds at the W end of Maxwell's path (FP 18)). Graffiti also occurs on furniture located close to paths, for instance on seats on Windmill Hill close to the more northerly path (FP 58). Due to the location of the path (which also suffers from vandalism to its fences and graffiti on walls near Hitchin Girls School) this particular example would be one that will convey a poor image of the town to visitors. Where vegetation forms the boundary, there are few examples of overhanging branches, although maintenance can be intermittent (e.g. FP 30 between Pirton Road and Offley Road). Among the worst boundaries is that of Union path (FP 20) where some of the fencing is leaning over, unsuccessfully restrained by thick wire netting.

2.3 Wheelchair access

Many urban paths are accessible by wheelchair users, although the often-favoured style of barriers at the ends would require some manoeuvring. Surfaces are generally sufficiently flat, but there are points where the gradient would limit use. In some cases, uneven tarmac caused by tree roots would cause problems, and would also do so for less confident walkers, and particularly those using walking aids. On the edge of town, some paths may be unsuitable in wet weather, but paths such as that alongside Ippollytts brook (FP 70) would be negotiable in periods of sustained dry weather. An exception is Gypsey lane (FP 94) which is open to vehicles and is rutted. These paths are, however, rural in character and their surface is acceptable in that context.

2.4 Barriers

In many cases, kerb-mounted barriers to prevent children running onto busy roads at the end of paths are present. An exception is Braunds Alley (FP 23) which has no barrier where it meets the busy A600 Old Park Road, and which is likely to be used by children as it passes Smithson playground. FP 30 between Pirton Road and Offley Road has no barrier at either end, and is of concern because the exits from the path at both ends are downhill, although it is probably less frequently used. Often paths merge into quiet roads before joining a major road, so such barriers are inappropriate (e.g. Elmside Walk FP 18).

Barriers to prevent access by vehicles are often present. Whilst these are capable of preventing access by cars, they can consist of quite widely spaced bollards, and are therefore unlikely to prevent access by motor cycles. Reporters do not highlight this as an issue, however.

2.5 Cycling

It is often hard to be sure whether cycling is permitted. In many cases, the use of paths by cyclists is commonplace, and often cyclists are considerate to pedestrians. Cyclists can pose a danger particularly when there are blind bends, which are relatively unusual. An example is the path through Ransomes recreation ground (not identified on the Definitive map) where it turns a corner as it passes the changing rooms. In this case, there are clear lanes to segregate cyclists and pedestrians.

2.6 Lighting

In most cases, lights are positioned every 40 yards or so. However, there are paths where the gaps between lights are inexplicably much greater – for example FP 81 as it passes the NHC playing fields. In most cases, checklists were completed during daylight, so it is not possible to comment on whether the lights work or not. Paths with less frequent, or inoperative lights are obviously unattractive at night.

2.7 Visibility

The importance of passive surveillance is emphasised by the vast difference between Chalkdell Path (FP17) and Union Path (FP20) which are separated by a very short distance. Chalkdell Path is lined by a row of cottages on one side. There is no graffiti on the wall which forms the opposite boundary of the path. By contrast, Union Path is hardly overlooked at all. It is one of the least attractive paths in the town, with graffiti, copious litter and poor fences.

Instances where paths turn blind corners are relatively rare, although there are plenty of paths where there are long, curving stretches. Riddy lane (FP71) has examples of both, and although well-illuminated, might give potential walkers pause for thought at night. It is, nevertheless, overlooked throughout much of its length. Again, Union Path (FP20) would be avoided at night by many.

3. Litter and Vandalism

In most cases, paths are clear of large quantities of litter, but there are exceptions e.g.

- FP 30 between Pirton Road and Offley Road where a pile of undelivered local newspapers was abandoned perhaps 2 years ago, and is in an advanced state of decay. An office chair and a collection of beer bottles have recently been removed
- Union Path (FP 20) with a fly-tipped mattress in the sub-station at the southern end
- FP 81 between Cambridge Rd / Meadowbank roundabout and Chaucer Way – particularly affected by large quantities of coffee cups and drinks cans
- Gypsey Lane (FP 94) close to the recycling bins at the northern end – at the time of inspection a fly-tipped motor-bike frame had been dumped in the ditch

Dog excrement occurs relatively rarely on paths in central Hitchin, although FP12 is frequently subject to fouling. On more rural paths, it is encountered with greater frequency. Some owners seem to regard its collection in a plastic bag as sufficient – it is not unusual to find these hanging from the branches of trees rather than having been placed in the bins if provided. The provision of bins seems to be random, with a bin at one end of a path, but not the other. There are many paths where there is no provision at all.

Vandalism occurs in small pockets, and invariably where a path is not overlooked. A seat, made of recycled plastic and inexplicably installed near the northern end of Gypsey lane (FP94) at a point with no obvious view, is falling apart having been set on fire.

Conclusions

Hitchin has an extensive historic network of paths which could be more frequently used both by Hitchin residents and visitors. The majority of paths

- Pass through pleasant surroundings with historical or cultural significance and often present opportunities to see wildlife
- Have acceptable surfaces
- Have adequately kept borders
- Form part of a network which would enable pedestrians to make journeys between key locations in the town
- Are reasonably free from litter and dog-fouling
- Are not significantly affected by vandalism

Some paths are unattractive. Reasons are often associated with a lack of surveillance leading to multiple and mutually reinforcing problems such as

- Graffiti
- Litter, fly-tipping and dog-fouling
- Fear of the threat of crime, exacerbated at times by inadequate lighting, isolation, corners and bends
- Poor maintenance

Key issues (in order of decreasing priority)

Maintenance
- Lack of a simple system for local people to identify and rectify problems and to know what action has been taken.

Signage and connectivity
- Inconsistent signage which conveys little useful information to residents and is meaningless to visitors.
- Failure to see the footpath system as a network of routes which can link important points and areas of the town.

Increasing use
- Lack of data on footpath use making it hard to evaluate the effects of actions taken

Recommendations (in order of decreasing priority)

Maintenance
- Implement a simple and transparent system to facilitate reporting of problems with footpaths and establish a **Footpath Covenant** which commits to a minimum service standard for responses to notified problems.
- Work with community organisations to establish a network of **Footpath Wardens** who would take responsibility for notifying problems and possibly even the clearing of minor litter.

Signage, connectivity and information
- Identify, in consultation with community groups, a set of **Pedestrian Routes** (possibly identified by colours) designed to link key areas of the town and points of interest and importance (appendix 3 gives examples).
- Install (colour coded?) signs at both ends of each pedestrian route which gave details of key destinations and distances to them, and intermediate way-markers at frequent and regular intervals throughout the route.
- Use the facilities of **Google Maps** to identify these routes on the Hitchin map, allow information to be uploaded and enable access via mobile internet. Prepare leaflets on routes with similar information

Increasing use
- Require **School Transport Plans** to identify relevant walking routes for its pupils and to monitor the mode of pupils' journeys to school.
- Develop **Footpath Use Metrics** and use these to set SMART targets (appendix 4 gives possible examples).
- Prepare an **Annual Report** assessing the use of walking routes against these targets and identifying new priorities and recommendations for a **Footpath Action Plan**

References

1. Hertfordshire's Sustainable Modes of Transport Strategy 2012/13
http://www.hertsdirect.org/services/transtreets/schtravel/smots/
2. National Travel Survey 2011 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-travel-survey-2011

Appendix 1

Footpath Checklist

Footpath name or location _____ (see 'About Hitchin' map)
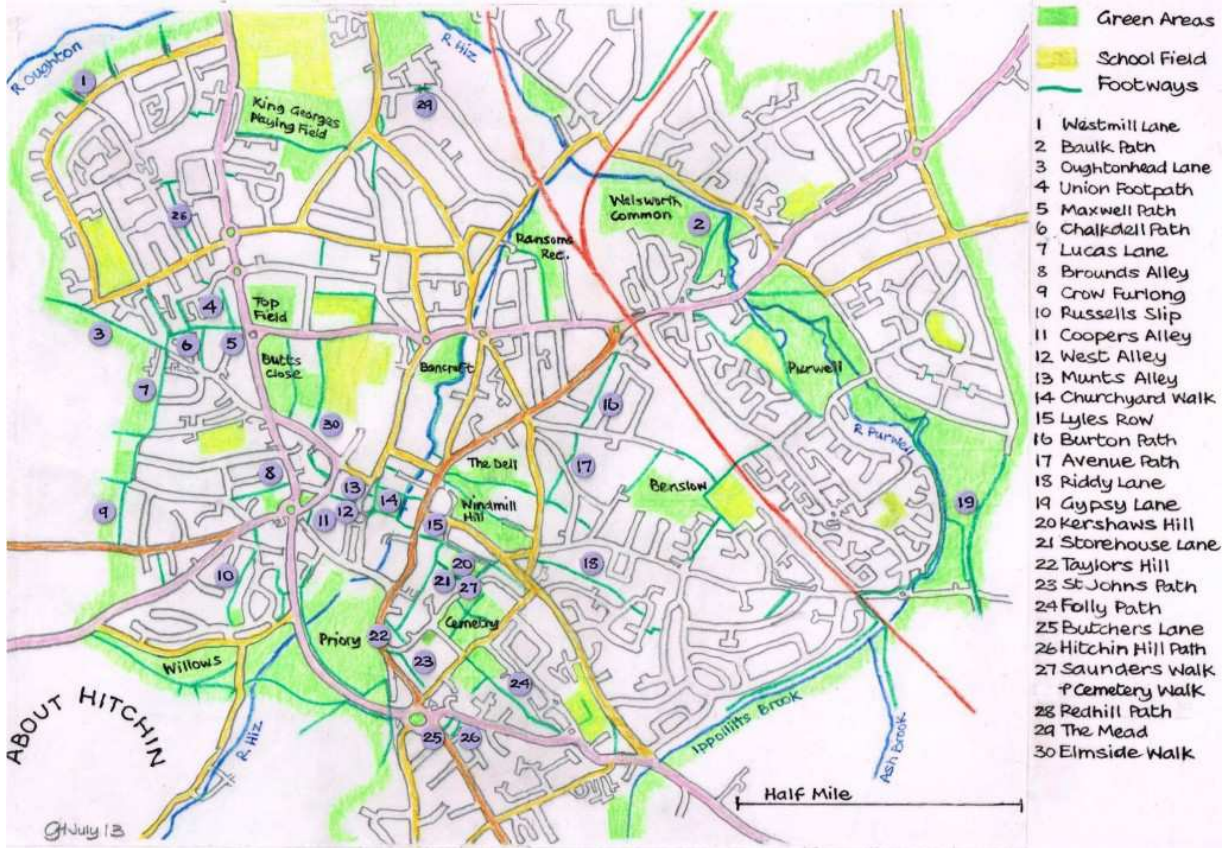
Estimated length _____ (see list)

Scores 1 = poor, 3 = acceptable, 5 = excellent, NA = not applicable

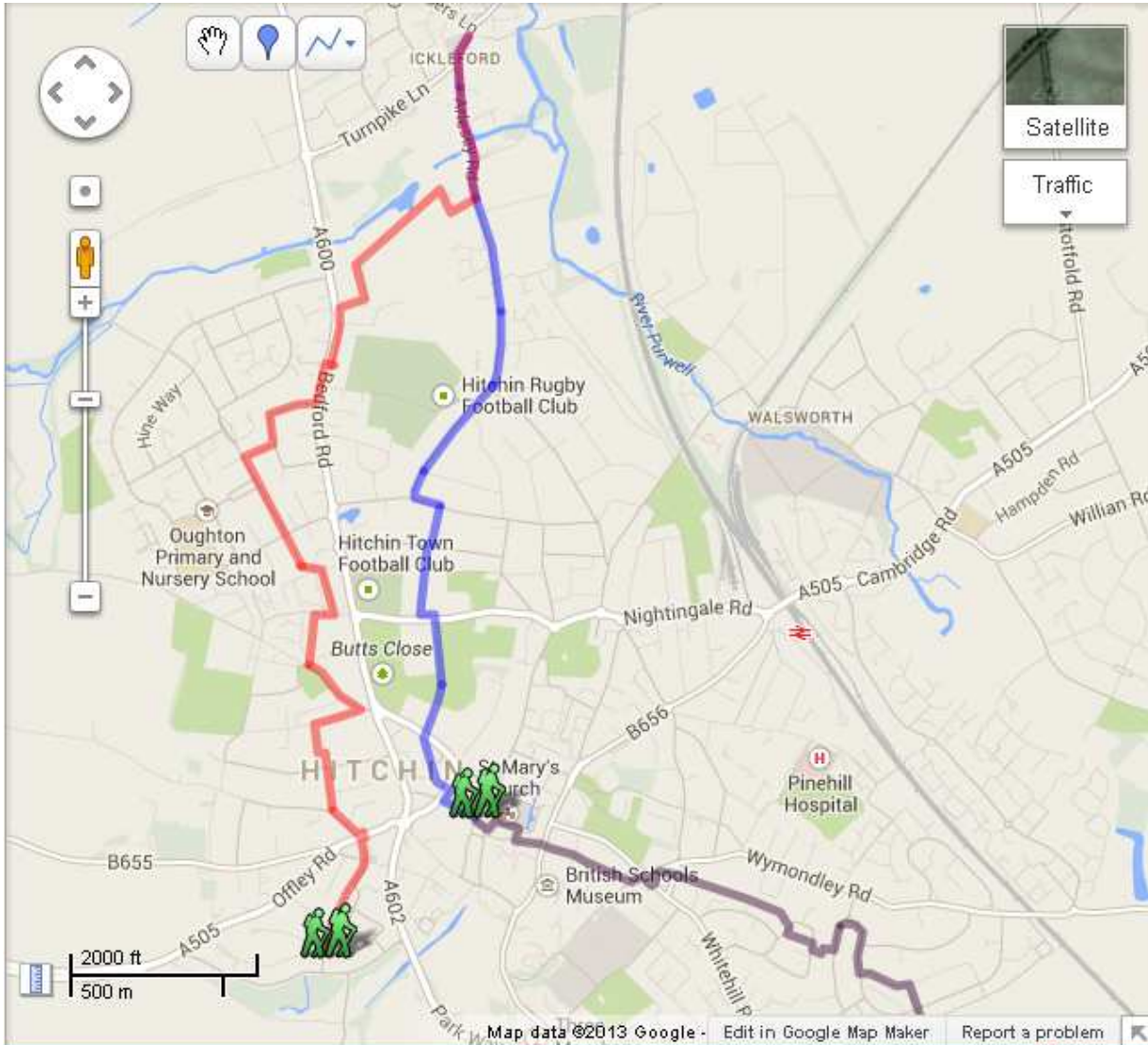| Criterion and examples	Score	Comment
Is the path made easy to use and is it worth using?		
Signage (legible, accurate and useful statement of destination, distance, any hazards, not vandalized?)		
Connectivity (is the path useful in connecting locations, providing a shortcut or alternative to a road journey? Does it avoid dangerous roads?)		
Attractiveness (are there points of interest, pleasant surroundings, wildlife opportunities, freedom from noise – e.g. of factories)		
Health, safety and security		
Surface (evenness, potholes, evidence of recent maintenance, dry and not muddy, where paving slabs, are they secure and even?)		
Boundaries (are they in good repair, clear of graffiti or other vandalism, overgrown where hedges, is the path free of over-hanging branches?)		
Wheelchair access (wide enough, suitable surface and gradient, steps?) This may be NA for rural paths.		

Criterion and examples	Score	Comment
Health, safety and security (continued)		
Barriers to prevent children running onto busy roads at ends?	Y/N	
Barriers to prevent access by motor vehicles? (are they broken or have they been removed / damaged?)	Y/N	
Cycling – do cyclists routinely ride, do they pose a danger?		
Lighting (distance between, does it work? NA for rural paths)		
Visibility (is there passive surveillance, are there bends or corners which would raise perceived crime threat?)		
Litter and vandalism		
Is there evidence of **vandalism, litter and / or fly-tipping** (both on path and in visible surroundings) Is litter 'offensive' – e.g. syringes / condoms?		
Litter bins – are there any and have they been emptied?	Y/N	
Dog fouling – recent?	Y/N	
Dog excrement bins – are there any?	Y/N	
Conclusions		

Recommended action

Appendix 2 About Hitchin Map

Green Areas
School Field
Footways

1 Westmill Lane
2 Baulk Path
3 Oughtonhead Lane
4 Union Footpath
5 Maxwell Path
6 Chalkdell Path
7 Lucas Lane
8 Brounds Alley
9 Crow Furlong
10 Russells Slip
11 Coopers Alley
12 West Alley
13 Munts Alley
14 Churchyard Walk
15 Lyles Row
16 Burton Path
17 Avenue Path
18 Riddy Lane
19 Gypsy Lane
20 Kershaws Hill
21 Storehouse Lane
22 Taylors Hill
23 St Johns Path
24 Folly Path
25 Butchers Lane
26 Hitchin Hill Path
27 Saunders Walk
P Cemetery Walk
28 Redhill Path
29 The Mead
30 Elmside Walk

Half Mile

1. Blue route: Hitchin town centre to Ickleford (via Elmside walk, Bearton Avenue, Footpath 12, Old Hale Way, Ickleford)
   Distance 1.8 miles. Indicative Calories (11 stone male) 210 (8 stone female) 153
2. Mauve route: Hitchin town centre to the HOOP path (via Lyles Row, Kershaws Hill, Riddy Lane, Manor Crescent, Aston Rise)
   Distance 1.25 miles. Indicative Calories (11 stone male) 146 (8 stone female) 107
3. Red route: Samuel Lucas School to Priory School (via Chalkdell Path, Union Path, Westmill Road, un-named path opposite Freemans Close, Wellingham Avenue, pedestrian crossing on Bedford Road)
   Distance 1.1 miles. Indicative Calories (11 stone male) 124 (8 stone female) 107

Appendix 4

Possible Footpath Use Metrics

1. Information which could be gathered via school travel plans

- Number of children walking to school at least 3 times each week, every week.
- Number of children using walking buses at least 3 times each week, every week.
- Number of children travelling by car at least 3 times each week, every week.
- Length of journeys walked by children.
- Lengths of journeys travelled by car.

Targets

- Increase of x% year on year of children walking to school.
- Decrease of y% year on year of children being driven to school.
- Increasing number of children using walking buses.
- Provision of new walking bus routes to satisfy demand.

The curriculum

Encourage ways to integrate travel plans into the curriculum e.g.

- Maths / Stats / English pupils to design and carry out surveys and analyse results
- Science / PE calculate energy consumed in walking compared to energy from food
- English / Art – adverts and posters to promote walking / healthy lifestyles
- History / Geography / Biology – projects on buildings, natural features, wildlife associated with routes to school

2. Direct surveys (carried out by volunteers or even schoolchildren?)

- Regular counts (e.g. first weekday of month) of all users for two 1 hour periods in a day.

Questionnaires

- starting point
- destination
- reasons for use
- journey time
- comment on footpath – maintenance etc

Targets

- Increase of x% year on year of footpath users.