

The law and management of public access rights vary widely between the four countries of the United Kingdom. Practical elements of the following advice apply in all of them but the legal requirements in Scotland and Northern Ireland may differ from those in England and Wales.

More advice is available on www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice.

IMPORTANT This guidance is general and does not aim to cover every variation in circumstances. Where it is being relied upon, The Society strongly recommends seeking its advice specific to the site.

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Definition

'Non-motorised user' and 'vulnerable road user' are terms which are frequently used but not defined in law, as are 'shared use', 'multi-use' and 'motor-free'.

The British Horse Society defines all these terms as inclusive of equestrians—riding, leading or driving a horse—as well as cyclists, pedestrians and users of mobility vehicles; that is anyone not using a motor vehicle. However, the terms are not always used by others with the same definition, so meaning must be checked each time for what use is included.

The non-motorised multi-user route which is defined in law is the **restricted byway**—a right of way by any means other than using a “mechanically propelled vehicle”, i.e. on foot; riding, leading or driving a horse; and with any cycle or other vehicle without a motor. A restricted byway presents best value as accommodating all those in need of routes free from motor traffic.

The horse is a means of Active travel for equestrians, many of whom may also have impaired mobility, so their horse or horse-drawn vehicle provides their mobility. However, the Department for Transport does not accept currently riding or carriage-driving as within their definition of active travel (more below) despite the efforts of the Society.

BHS statement

Most off-road routes (other than some footpaths which are physically limited to use on foot by their character and width) could accommodate all vulnerable road users—equestrians, cyclists, pedestrians and mobility buggy users—and therefore be truly (non-mechanically propelled) inclusive multi-user routes wherever possible.

None of these users should be excluded from a motor-free route and thus forced onto carriageways with the increased danger to them from motorists. All non-motorised vulnerable road users need motor-traffic-free routes, so it is inequitable and poor value to create a safe traffic-free route which excludes any non-motorised users. It is equestrians who are usually excluded, for unsubstantiated reasons, such as ‘horses being unpredictable animals and not always under control’, however, the same could accurately be said of dogs, yet there is never a move to exclude dog-walkers, despite there being a great many more of them, and therefore a higher risk, than equestrians.

The Society welcomes the UK Government’s policy,¹ expressed by Richard Benyon in 2011, that highway authorities and other providers should accommodate horse riders as well as cyclists and pedestrians on all off-road routes where it is practicable. However, the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 gave statutory access rights to most land for all users in Scotland and such an approach could be followed for cycle routes in England and Wales.

With the increasing attention to cycling and the advent of the government’s Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy, the BHS called for horse-riders and carriage-drivers to be included in any provisions for cyclists or pedestrians which could physically include equestrians. Equestrians are minority users but are heavily reliant on public bridleways and byways to allow them off the roads. Horse riders in England and Wales have access to only 22% of legally recorded public rights of way and carriage-drivers to no more than 6%, which means large areas have no off-road access at all. In addition, many of those

¹ 14 June 2011, Richard Benyon MP, the Minister for Natural Environment and Fisheries, letter to Anne Main MP

few bridleways and byways are inaccessible because they are obstructed, or are isolated by roads which are too unsafe to use.

It should be noted that:

- Routes which cater for all non-motorised vulnerable road users represent best value in public spend.
- Off-road routes reduce the number of vulnerable road users (including equestrians) on the roads, increasing safety for everyone and reducing delays for motorists.
- Ease of access for people with impaired mobility is increased by shared use paths. Many people who ride or carriage-drive could not walk or cycle.
- Equestrians, walkers and cyclists have comfortably shared use of paths in urban and rural environments for the last 150 years since bicycles became commonplace.
- If all routes are promoted as traffic-free shared use² inclusive of all non-motorised users, it creates acceptance of other users and consideration of all needs.
- Equestrians should not be excluded from the safe opportunity to take local utility journeys on or driving a horse instead of using a motor vehicle.
- The number of horses ridden or driven on motor-free routes will be few compared with cyclists and pedestrians, but the route may be crucial for those equestrians. They are likely to avoid times which are busiest for other users.
- Horse riding and driving have health benefits³ from open air exercise and recreation, just as from walking or cycling.
- The economic value of the equestrian sector was £5 billion in 2023.⁴

Active travel

Active travel was promoted by the UK government to replace motor journeys with foot, cycle or other 'wheeling' opportunities. The government repeatedly refused to include riding in its definition of active travel, on its assumption that horses were used only for recreation and exercise, and would rarely be used to replace a car journey.

Instances of horses used to transport someone to work or school are few, although the Society has examples of both, along with examples of people riding or driving a horse to deliver a parcel, collect an order, post a letter, go to the pub, vote, go to a farrier, physiotherapist or vet (rather than transport the horse or have the farrier or vet travel to

² Durham Railway Paths has an excellent [charter](#) for users and no history of conflict on 100 miles of path.

³ BHS Health Benefits of Riding 2010

⁴ British Equestrian Trade Association National Equestrian Survey 2023

them in a vehicle), that is, replacing local journeys which would otherwise be done by motor vehicle, as intended by the government's concept of 'active travel' for foot or cycle journeys. Therefore, the Society remains of the view that excluding equestrians from active travel provisions is discriminatory and unfair, and there is no logical reason or cogent evidence for their exclusion.

The UK government also accepted that a high proportion of pedestrians and cyclists on 'active travel' routes would be there for recreation or exercise, rather than replacing a car journey, but still refused to include equestrians in its definitions and provisions. The Society continues to lobby government in Westminster and Senedd for change, and meanwhile, gained concessions from ministers that horses were to be included 'wherever practicable'. Some councils have subsequently proved more willing than others to include equestrians in motor-free routes, see Examples of Active Travel Plans which include horses.

The latest Welsh Government Active Travel 2021 guidance includes provisions to ensure equestrians are not disadvantaged by active travel initiatives along routes which they currently enjoy and where there is high demand along a route from horse riders, the feasibility of accommodating them should be assessed.

Riding as physical exertion

Some studies and policies for active travel exclude riding as, "horse-riding is active travel for the horse, not the human."⁵ This view is untrue and could only be stated by someone who has not attempted to ride a horse. Should a rider not be active, the horse would not be in motion—proven by novices whose horse stands, sleeps or eats in preference to moving—or would be in uncontrolled motion. Therefore, it is only "the sustained physical exertion of the traveller [i.e. the rider, which] directly contributes to [the horse's] motion"⁶ exactly as it is for a cyclist. An observer being unaware of the effort is simply the mark of the rider's skill.

Riding a horse is a continuous effort of balance and uses every muscle in the body, a fact discovered by even fit people unused to riding when they experience the level of post-activity muscle soreness. The level of effort is evident to those who use a heart rate device which shows greater exertion to ride than to walk the same route.

⁵ [Science Direct](#) (the authors were contacted with the offer to assist in rectifying the error)

⁶ *ibid*

Health benefits

As from walking or cycling, there are considerable health benefits of horse riding,⁷ both physical and mental. Driving a horse may be less physically demanding, though preparing the horse for travel, balancing and constant vigilance all around while driving out require effort, and the mental benefit is as great as for any outdoor activity, particularly for those whose mobility is so impaired that this is their only opportunity to be outside and away from motor traffic.

Addressing common concerns

Concerns about whether to include equestrian users on 'active travel' routes are:

1. **Presumption of conflict** – Incidents of real conflict or nuisance are rare and on investigation are usually found to be perceived rather than actual conflict or arising from lack of understanding of who may use the route or lack of consideration for others.⁸ The solution is to better educate all users and promote understanding and tolerance by shared use on all routes. Signs and descriptions which make clear that all non-motorised users are welcome and to be expected would assist in removing conflict from misunderstanding.
2. **Width** – There are many bridleways which are less than 3 metres wide and shared by riders, cyclists and pedestrians without problems. Intermittent verges or occasional passing places or refuges may be feasible even if the whole length cannot be wider. There are unlikely to be so many horses as to make narrow routes impractical but including those equestrians who need the route could save lives.
3. **Cost of surface** – Surfaces suitable for all users can be provided at a lower cost than tarmac, and even a non-slip tarmac surface off-road is safer for equestrians than motor roads. Horses are unlikely to have a detrimental effect on a surface which would be provided for cycle use.
4. **Cost of barriers** – Barriers to prevent motor vehicular use but permit all other users are used successfully at relatively low cost. They must be legally authorised and comply with the British Standard. They should only be used where there is a genuine danger from motor vehicles and where the loss of accessibility of the path to all legitimate users is justified by that danger. The Sustrans 'Paths for Everyone' initiative aims to make paths accessible for all with a barrier removal programme in progress.
5. **Horses' droppings** pose no hazard to human health and quickly disperse. Where horse use is high, providing an unsealed surface for part of the width and encouraging

⁷ [The health benefits of horse riding in the UK – The University of Brighton](#)

⁸ Countryside Agency report CRN32, How people interact on off-road routes

riders to use it or to keep to one side can be effective so that the other side will be dung-free.

BHS policy on widths

Circumstances vary and every route must be considered independently on its own merits, taking account of location, use levels, 'normal traffic' and its potential for increasing safety by accommodating equestrians off roads.

A less than ideal width may be acceptable where a narrow off-road route is safer than the alternative road.

Passing places, attention to vegetation or adjacent hazards (e.g. barbed wire) and encouraging cyclists to slow down may be adequate mitigation to provide safety for all.

'Share With Care'

The BHS strongly advocates promotion of sharing and tolerance between all users. There are many examples nationally, including most bridleways and byways, where amicable shared use is normal.

It is very common that investigation of an alleged problem finds that it is only a matter of misperception or misunderstanding. It is essential to make clear to all users that horses are permitted and what behaviour is expected of all users—Be Aware, Take Care, Share. Promoting a route as a cycleway often leads to minority users being discriminated against and made unwelcome, even if it is a bridleway. This is morally wrong and there is no need.

Appropriate signs will help create the message that horses are welcome. The BHS has examples which are successfully in use to promote consideration (contact access@bhs.org.uk) and promotes its campaign to 'Be Nice, Say Hi'. The more that horse use of routes is normal, the better the cooperation will be between users, if the use is promoted for all. Social media and posters at local livery yards can be helpful in encouraging use.

Where a suggestion of conflict has occurred, it is most commonly where signs, furniture or surface provision have led cyclists to believe the route is a cycle track, and not a multi-user route open to all. Non-asphalt surfaces, signs and allocation of space are all important elements of design to help clarify the share-with-care message.

Design

Design of shared use routes is well covered in the government document [On the right track: surface requirements for shared use routes](#).⁹

An ideal surface has long been sought to accommodate horses where use with non-mechanically propelled vehicles is the majority traffic, so a sealed surface is desirable. Polymer-bound aggregate-rubbercrumb (50:50) is now available as an ideal solution. It has been successful on trails where all users have liked it. It uses a waste product (vehicle tyres) as well as being free-draining, non-ice or puddle forming and smooth to all wheeled users including pushchairs and mobility scooters. It is much more comfortable underfoot for pedestrians and horses than asphalt, and better for dogs as it does not heat in summer like asphalt.

Examples of routes shared by riders, cyclists and pedestrians

In addition to bridleways, byways and unclassified roads, the examples below show that shared use paths and trails for walkers, riders and cyclists are successful in rural and urban situations and continue to be developed. They may accommodate wheelchair and mobility scooter users subject to barriers.

- Monsal Trail and Tunnels, Peak District: 8.5 miles, opened in 1981 and extended in 2011, funded by the Dept of Transport, with a code of conduct.
- Chiseldon to Marlborough Railway Line, Wiltshire: approx. 7 miles in use since 1988.
- Railway Paths, Durham. Over 100 miles on 11 paths, in use since the 1990s, with a further four paths under development. Charter to encourage responsible use.
- The Camel Trail, Cornwall: 18 miles, 400,000 users each year. Through conservation areas (SSSI and SAC).
- The Meon Valley Trail, Hampshire: 11 miles with part also open to carriage-drivers.
- Pennine Bridleway: 280 miles in total with the Mary Towneley Loop 47 miles.
- The Derbyshire Greenways: 22 shared use trails.
- Great Northern Railway Trail, Bradford.
- Letchworth Greenway, Hertfordshire 21km trail around Letchworth.

⁹ England and Wales

- High Peak and Tissington Trails, Peak District, Derbyshire: 17 and 13 miles.
- Gellings Green Ways and Little Wood, Knowsley and Liverpool
- The Liverpool Loop Line and Halewood Triangle, Trans Pennine Trail
- The Dream and Mineral Line, St Helens and Halton

Many more examples are available from the BHS.

Examples of Active Travel Plans which include horses

- Cambridgeshire Local Transport and Connectivity Plan
- Essex Local Transport Plan
- Peterborough Local Transport Plan
- West Berkshire Council LTP Active Travel Plan
- West Lothian Active Travel Plan
- West Sussex Transport Plan

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