

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 countries but the legal requirements in Scotland and Northern Ireland may differ from those in England and Wales.

More advice is available on 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 recommends seeking advice specific to the site.

Definition

'Multi-user' is a commonly used term, along with 'shared use', 'non-motorised user' and 'vulnerable road user' but none are defined in law. 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. The horse is a means of active travel for all equestrians, many of whom may also have impaired mobility so their horse or horse-drawn vehicle is their mobility.

The non-motorised multi-user route 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 or leading a horse and with any cycle or horse-drawn vehicle.

BHS Statement

The majority of off-road routes could and should accommodate all non-motorised vulnerable road users—equestrians, cyclists, pedestrians and mobility buggy users—and therefore be truly (non-mechanically propelled) multi-user¹ routes.

None of these users should be excluded from a motor-free route and thus forced onto carriageways with the increased danger to them and to motorists. All non-motorised vulnerable road users need off-road routes so it is inequitable and poor value to create a safe off-road route which excludes any non-motorised users.

The Society welcomes the Government's policy,² 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. The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 gave statutory

¹ Multi-user has no legal definition and is often confused in its meaning but generally means all non-motorised users, not only pedestrians. The BHS defines it as including equestrians.

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

access rights to most land for all users in Scotland and such an approach should be followed in respect of 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 calls 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, an increasing number of those few bridleways and byways are physically unavailable or inaccessible.

It should be noted that:

- Routes that 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 possible routes are promoted as traffic-free shared use³ (not as 'cycling routes', as on Ordnance Survey leisure maps) inclusive of all non-motorised users, it creates acceptance of other users and consideration of all needs.
- The number of horse riders on most cycleways is likely to be few compared with cyclists and pedestrians but the route may be crucial for those users. They are likely to avoid times which are busiest for cycling.
- Horse riding and driving have considerable health benefits⁴ and equestrians should not be prevented from enjoying open air exercise and recreation by failure to provide safe routes.
- The economic value of the equestrian sector was £4.7 billion in 2019⁵

Addressing Common Concerns

Concerns about whether to include equestrian users on cycleways are:

1. Assumption of Conflict – Incidents of real conflict 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

³ Durham Railway Paths has an excellent [charter](#) for users and no history of conflict on 100 miles of path.

⁴ BHS Health Benefits of Riding 2010

⁵ British Equestrian Trade Association National Equestrian Survey 2019

the route or lack of consideration for others⁶. The solution is to better educate all users and promote understanding and tolerance by shared use on all routes.

2. Width – There are many bridleways which are less than 3m 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.
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 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 should be considered independently on its own merits and potential benefits for increasing safety by taking 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 a great 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.

⁶ Countryside Agency report CRN32, How people interact on off-road routes

Appropriate signs will help considerably in passing the message that horses are welcome. The BHS has examples which are successfully in use to promote consideration (contact access@bhs.org.uk). 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](#).

The dilemma of what surface to use to accommodate horses where cycles are the majority user and desire a sealed surface can be met by using polymer bound aggregate-rubbercrumb (50:50). This has been successful on a number of trails where it has been liked by all users. 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 also better for dogs as it does not heat in summer like asphalt.

Examples of paths 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.
- 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.

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