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Active travel – BHS summary

British Horse Society's view is that active travel includes horse riding, as held by Parliament,

Active travel covers any journey that is made by physically active means, and covers such diverse activities as **horse riding**, skateboarding, roller skating, and riding a scooter.¹

¹ *Active travel increasing levels of walking and cycling in England Eleventh Report of Session 2017–19* (House of Commons Transport Committee below)

And that the definition of active travel is travel which is physically active.

A horse-rider is active because it takes physical effort to remain in balance with a horse, and to direct and control its movement, as on a bicycle (Riding as physical activity below).

Riding a horse on bridleways, byways or roads and other places with equestrian access is travel, a journey, usually for exercise or recreation, but sometimes for local utility tasks such as to a farrier, vet or physiotherapist, to post a letter, collect a package, in paid work or as part of a business.²

Active travel reduces car journeys and increases the health and wellbeing of individuals and the planet. Being able to ride a horse from home reduces the need to transport horses by vehicle to a place from which it is safe to ride or for treatment.

Feeling unsafe among motor traffic is the most common reason cited for not travelling on a horse, just as for cycling and walking. Therefore, the first requirement for increasing active travel is provision of facilities segregated from motor traffic for all non-motorised users, which includes horse-riders.

Segregating active travellers facilitates motor vehicle journeys by removing slower travellers and improves the safety of motorists by reducing potential for collisions.

Horse-riding is a minority activity compared with cycling or walking, but that is no reason to exclude riders as active travellers. No special provision is needed, only the intention to be inclusive.

Publication of Active Travel England's Active Travel Rural Design Guide in August 2026³ has taken inclusion of horse-riders forward and is supported by BHS.

Although this guidance is not a comprehensive manual for designing equestrian route, it recommends that, wherever possible, routes should be **made accessible for horse-riders** [page 8] ...

People riding horses **should not be purposefully excluded** from rural active travel routes through inattentive design. Traffic-free paths and quiet country lanes can also be attractive and safe for horse riding as well as walking, wheeling and cycling. In this way **new active travel routes may fill gaps** in

² Riding out is part of training racehorses and many professional competition horses and riding schools, trekking centres and livery yards will need to use roads for their business purpose.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designing-accessible-rural-active-travel>

the existing equestrian network improving their safe access to the countryside. Elsewhere, improvements to the active travel network may be along routes on which pre-existing rights for equestrian travel exist. As such, horse-riders are generally considered throughout this document as potential **users of any proposed route**, although it may not always be possible to accommodate their needs on all new facilities. [Page 16] [our emphasis]

Active Travel Plans and schemes in rural and semi-urban areas fail this intention if horse-riders are not included.

The problem

Although the original government vision for active travel included all non-motorised travel (House of Commons Transport Committee

'Active travel increasing levels of walking and cycling in England Eleventh Report of Session 2017–19', together with formal minutes relating to the report (London, 2019) para.6 states (our emphasis in bold) that:

Active travel covers any journey that is made by physically active means, and covers such diverse activities as **horse riding**, skateboarding, roller skating, and riding a scooter.

Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy

The government's Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy Safety Review says:

1.2 But safety has particular importance for vulnerable road users, such as walkers, cyclists **and horse-riders**. All road users have an equal right to use the road, and safety and the perception of safety are key factors in determining how far people use these modes of transport.□ The safer they feel, the more they will use these active modes of travel. The more people who use Active Travel, the fitter and healthier they will be, and the more their communities will benefit from lower congestion and better air quality, among a host of other benefits (Jesse Norman, p 4) [our emphasis]

Unfortunately, Government guidance on *'Active Travel, Working Together to Promote Active Travel A briefing for local authorities'* is one of the resources which is inconsistent with that view and does not mention horses.

Ministers' responses to questions in **Error! Not a valid bookmark self-reference.** (below), demonstrate that the Government intended horse-riders to be included.

Parliamentary reference to equestrian inclusion below), the initial focus of councils assumed utility journeys—commuting, school run, shopping, health appointment—on foot or cycle. The failure to define active travel as including recreational use resulted in councils, and Active Travel England, treating active travel as 'active commuting'.

Horse-riders were dismissed from this vision as utility journeys by horse are less common, but now the Rural Design Guide (RDG)⁴ includes use for recreation and exercise, the view of utility journeys only is increasingly recognised as counter to government intention.

Although data on purpose of use is not collected, some routes have more recreational use than utility journeys and may even become recreational destinations. To distinguish whether use of a route is for utility or recreation purpose would be contrary to the legal principle of highway, use for any purpose, therefore the RDG is correct to treat utility and recreational use equally.

The Society considers that active travel includes ALL non-motorised journeys, whether for utility, exercise or recreation and therefore must encompass all non-motorised means of travel, including horse-riding. That view is being adopted by enlightened councils and other bodies (Inclusion in Active Travel Plans).

⁴ Active Travel England publication August 2026

Inclusion costs nothing

Including horse-riders in active travel routes costs nothing. The BHS accepts the focus on cycling and walking in urban areas and that surfaces in this environment will favour use on wheels but there is no cogent reason to exclude horse-riders from such routes. They will be in low numbers, at times when other use is quietest, and need no special provision, simply inclusion on signs so that all users expect to occasionally see horses.



Signs should also promote the 'Share With Care' message which is of benefit to all users.

In semi-urban and rural areas, there should be equal provision for use not on wheels particularly when annexing natural-surface bridleways or byways to increase cycling.

Horse-riders will welcome softer surfaces, and people running or walking are also likely to prefer surfaces with more deflexion ('give') than tarmac and which, unlike tarmac, do not freeze in winter or reach high temperatures in summer. Non-tarmac surfaces are better for biodiversity and have lower carbon footprint. Splitting surfaces between tarmac and softer surfaces at the midline of the path gives everyone a choice, and nature a chance.



Figure 1: Good practice 50:50 bridleway surface, Hertfordshire

Exclusion is expensive

The BHS considers horse-related traffic accidents to be significantly under reported, to it, to the police, or any other body.⁵ In 2025, Road Traffic Incidents reported on BHS horseaccidents.org.uk included:

- 2,810 road incidents involving horses
- 59 horses died
- 82 horses injured
- 86 people injured
- 83% of incidents occurred because a driver passed too close or too fast

Horses are not included in government data on road collisions, casualties and road user types so horse-riders are disregarded from the view of increasing safety.

The cost of fatal road incidents is estimated as over £2million and even a non-injury incident may be over £20,000.⁶ Road incidents involving horses frequently result in the death of the horse because it takes most of the impact, and life-changing injuries to a rider. Cost of death or injury of their horse may be tens of thousands of pounds, but this is ignored in road incident costs.

Inclusion of horse-riders on ATE funded routes

A common misunderstanding within councils is that ATE funding is not available when horses are included. This has been confirmed as wrong by ATE. Examples of ATE funded routes which include horses are:

- Pier to Pier Cycle Route, Somerset
- Tarka Trail, Devon
- East Leeds Orbital Road, Leeds
- Buck Lane, Bradford
- Jocks Lodge, East Riding of Yorkshire

ATE's [Rural Design Guide case studies](#) showing that inclusion of horses only needs intention:

⁵ [Hospital Episode Statistics](#) reported 2,516 episodes in 2024-25 requiring treatment in hospital for 'animal-rider or occupant animal-drawn vehicle injured in transport accident'

⁶ [DfT September 2025 table RAS 4001](#)

- Strawberry Line, Somerset
- A27 East of Lewes, East Sussex
- Exeter Green Lanes, Devon
- Saints Trails, Cornwall
- Jersey Green Lanes, Jersey
- Lias Line Greenway, Warwickshire
- Trans Pennine Trail, Warrington
- M55 to Heyhouses Link Road, Lancashire
- Mere Way Waterbeach New Town, Cambridgeshire
- Leigh Guided Busway, Greater Manchester

Inclusion in Active Travel Plans, Local Plans etc

Local Plans, Local Transport Plans, Active Travel Plans and Rights of Way Improvement Plans should all include active travel as they are revised. Active travel should be fully inclusive of all non-motorised travel, which means riding or driving a horse.

Inclusive active travel definitions

- Hampshire "Horse riding is recognised by Hampshire County Council as a form of active travel."⁷
- Oxfordshire "all non-motorised travel"
- Yorkshire Dales National Park "all, or part of the trip has involved some form of physical activity ... include ... horse riding"

Complete plans including horses

- West Berkshire [Active Travel Plan](#)
- Lewes District Council draft [Local Plan January 2025](#)
- Cambridgeshire [Local Transport and Connectivity Plan](#)
- West Sussex [Transport Plan](#)
- Peterborough [Local Transport Plan](#)

⁷ Countryside Access Plan 2025-2035

- [East Leeds Orbital Route](#)
- Essex [Local Transport Plan](#)
- West Northamptonshire [Local Transport Plan](#)

Appendix

House of Commons Transport Committee

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⁸ British social attitudes survey (ATT03)

Parliamentary reference to equestrian inclusion

House of Commons debate on Road Safety, 5 November 2018

Jesse Norman:

We should be clear that the cycling and walking strategy may have that name but is absolutely targeted at vulnerable road users, including horse-riders.

And:

Horse-riders are vulnerable road users — there is no doubt about that, and there never has been — and they have been included in the work we are doing.

Active Travel debate Westminster 9 July 2019

The Active Travel and local walking and cycling infrastructure plans debate contained the following statements in respect of equestrian access:

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis)

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing this popular debate about active travel, local walking and cycling infrastructure. I am delighted to have had the opportunity to hear the contributions of hon. Members from across the House, who spoke about how cycling improves productivity, health and even one's love life, according to the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). I need to do more cycling for all those reasons, all of which are acknowledged. I was also pleased that my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) mentioned equestrianism. Active travel includes horse-riders and bridle paths—this debate includes them.

Robert Courts

I am grateful to my hon. Friend and neighbour for making that point. He is right. Those of us who are lawyers know that expunging a footpath is, rightly, one of the hardest things to do in the law. Footpaths are protected, and I agree that they must remain so when new developments are built, to ensure that our latticework of footpaths continues to exist. I would extend that to bridleways as well, which similarly have an historical provenance. I ask the House to bear in mind that, although we tend to think of cycling and walking in the context of the strategy I mentioned, horse-riders in areas such as mine and my hon. Friend's are also vulnerable, and ought to be thought about in the context of active travel as well.

Dr David Drew (Stroud)

It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing the debate.

Let me start by mentioning horse-riding. I have to say this, because my horse-riders have been on to me. Pat Harris of the Mid Cotswolds Tracks and Trails group tells me that there are 2.9 million regular horse-riders and half a million carriage users. They do not like being left out of debates about cyclists and pedestrians, because they feel they are an important part of the group of non-motorists.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on securing this popular debate about active travel, local walking and cycling infrastructure. I am delighted to have had the opportunity to hear the contributions of hon. Members from across the House, who spoke about how cycling improves productivity, health and even one's love life, according to the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). I need to do more cycling for all those reasons, all of which are acknowledged. I was also pleased that my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) mentioned equestrianism. Active travel includes horse-riders and bridle paths—this debate includes them.

I welcome the contributions from hon. Members during our all too brief debate. I welcome the ideas proposed. As I stated at the outset, the Government are committed to increasing cycling and walking and to making our roads safer for vulnerable users such as cyclists, pedestrians and equestrians. As we start to develop the next phase of the cycling and walking investment strategy, I welcome all ideas for how we can achieve our collective ambition. In my view, there is a cross-party, non-political, collective ambition to make cycling and walking the natural choice for short journeys, or as part of longer journeys, across the country.

Cycling and Walking, question by Dr David Drew 15 July 2019

To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, whether he plans to include (a) horse-riding and (b) horse-drawn carriages in his Department's support for the development of active travel and local walking and cycling infrastructure plans.

Answered by Michael Ellis

The Government's Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan Guidance notes that local authorities should consider the needs of equestrians where they have access to walking and cycling infrastructure such as off-carriageway routes. However, the Government does not intend to specify that all measures

to support active travel must include a horse-riding or horse-drawn carriage element: decisions on this are a matter for local authorities. Nevertheless the Government does encourage local authorities to support equestrians in their active travel plans.

Transport Links: Nottinghamshire debate 23 July 2019

Minister of State (Department of Transport) Michael Ellis

Her Majesty's Government—this Government—are investing vast sums in cycling, pedestrian access, equestrianism and all forms of active travel, and have invested many billions of pounds in road maintenance. When this Government created the national pothole action fund and invested in it some years ago, I played a part in that. This Government have made significant investments in transport, because good transport links are a key enabler of growth, employment, access to education—all aspects that are doing extremely well in this country—skills training, and seeing our friends and family. Transport is a key link in all those areas.

Riding as physical activity

Some studies and policies for active travel exclude riding as, "*horse-riding is active travel for the horse, not the human.*"⁹ This view is demonstrably 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, fidgets, sleeps or eats in preference to moving—or would be in uncontrolled motion. It is only "*the sustained physical exertion of the traveller* [i.e. the rider, which] *directly contributes to* [the horse's] *motion*"¹⁰ exactly as for a cyclist. An observer being unaware of the effort required is simply the mark of the rider's skill and the observer's lack of knowledge.

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 at an equivalent pace.

⁹ [Science Direct](#) (the authors were contacted with the offer to assist in rectifying the error)

¹⁰ *ibid*

This is demonstrated in research by the University of Brighton.¹¹ When a horse was walking, the rider expended metabolic equivalent (METs) of 2.5 and 6.5 when trotting, compared with walking MET of 3.0 and cycling at less than 10mph of 4.0.¹² This will vary by horse and rider, depending on conditions and level of exertion necessary, and for many, the MET will be exceeded, just as some will exceed the average while walking or cycling.

Health benefits

There are considerable health benefits of horse riding,¹³ both physical and mental, just as from walking, running or cycling. Driving a horse may be less physically demanding than riding, but preparing the horse for travel, balancing, and constant vigilance all around while driving the horse 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 independently mobile.

Physical inactivity costs UK healthcare £1.2 billion each year and the wider economy a further £1.5 billion each year.¹⁴

Gender bias excludes women from physical activity

Equestrianism is an activity predominantly enjoyed by women therefore excluding horse-riders from active travel routes selects against women accessing publicly funded infrastructure in safety. If the government is committed to reducing the gender gap in physical activity, ignoring horse-riders is contradictory. Two Sustrans/'Walk Wheel Cycle Trust' reports highlight that:

- Inadequate infrastructure and safety concerns are major barriers to female participation in active travel.¹⁵ Only 12% of women cycle at least once a week compared with 24% of men. 79% of women support building more protected routes to improve safety.
- The transport sector is heavily dominated by men. Women hold only 6.25% of senior positions within public sector transport.¹⁶ Lack of female

¹¹ [The health benefits of horse riding in the UK — The University of Brighton](#)

¹² [Ibid](#) Table 4.3 page 17

¹³ [Ibid](#)

¹⁴ Physical Inactivity and Sedentary Behaviour Report, British Heart Foundation, 2017

¹⁵ Women: reducing the gender gap, Bike Life (Sustrans), June 2018

¹⁶ Are we nearly there yet?, Sustrans, February 2018

representation means that infrastructure design frequently fails to prioritise the specific travel needs of women along with their journey patterns and safety concerns.

The [Women's Budget Group](#) reflects that government spending on active travel is diverted away from activities dominated by women.

Walking, Cycling and Horse Riding Assessment and Review

A Walking, Cycling and Horse Riding Assessment and Review (WCHAR) is required as part of any changes to trunk roads. It is logical that the same approach should apply to all roads except motorways where vulnerable road users, including horse-riders, have a right to travel safely.

Local Cycling and Walking Improvement Plans

A Local Cycling and Walking Improvement Plans (LCWIP) is a form of transport plan. They naturally focus on increasing cycling and walking for utility journeys, however, in semi-urban and rural areas, where equestrian travel can be expected, it is important that projects do not impair equestrian amenity and safety. This has happened where rural bridleways and byways have been annexed as 'cycle tracks', which has destroyed their amenity for other users.

Surfaces

A sealed surface is preferred by most cyclists, unless using an off-road cycle and desiring the challenge of uneven surfaces. It should only occur outside towns where the width of the bridleway or byway can accommodate it alongside an unimpaired natural surface for horse-riders and pedestrians of no less than half the width.

The Society advocates splitting the available width at the centre line, so one half is sealed and one half natural maintained grass (reinforced with some stone if necessary.¹⁷) Where the width is insufficient for both surfaces, either additional width must be obtained to provide the cycle track or polymer-bound rubbercrumb-grit is used, providing equivalent to asphalt for wheels but free-draining and with some deflexion for the benefit of horses and pedestrians.¹⁸

¹⁷ BHS Advice on Constructing or reinstating a natural surface www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice

¹⁸ BHS Advice on Bound rubbercrumb-grit www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice

If this is a saved or printed copy, please check www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice for the latest version (date top of page 2).