

Advice on Dimensions: width, area, height



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 law in Scotland and Northern Ireland may differ from in England and Wales.

Riders and drivers of horses are referred to generically as equestrians.

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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Width

There is no default width for a bridleway or byway. Some rights of way have a width shown in their Statement,¹ but may be inaccurate if they described a beaten earth path rather than the width used, or they fail to recognise the space used when people pass one another. This leads to a difficult situation where an unenclosed bridleway or byway has an unreasonably narrow width shown in the Statement, for example six feet,² and becomes fenced as a six feet (1.8m) wide corridor, resulting in a useable width of only a metre. The useable width is less than the fenced width because users naturally avoid passing close to a fence, wall or hedge which could snag them.

It is clear from observing users pass one another on unenclosed land that while pedestrians may pass each other comfortably within a 2 metre width, two riders, or any combination of riders, cyclists, carriage-drivers and pedestrians (especially with dogs) will not pass so close to one another by choice and are more likely to allow at least a metre between them, therefore using around 3 metres or more.

Width for new routes

If the new way is alongside or between a hedge, fence, wall, watercourse or other hard boundary, a **useable width** of 3m will require an additional half a metre alongside the boundary, giving an overall width of 4 metres (bridleway) or 5 metres (byway) between fences or hedges. This is because any user will avoid the ground immediately adjacent to the boundary, particularly adjacent to barbed wire or thorny plants or where ground vegetation will build up and could hide debris, trip hazards or dog mess, or where the rider could be snagged or scraped by a fence or wall.

Alongside or between hedges will require a width sufficient for keeping the hedges cut. More than half a metre may be required where hedge growth must be accommodated for fast-growing hedge species or where the hedge is not cut each year.

¹ The Definitive Map and Statement is conclusive evidence of the rights and details shown on it but without prejudice to any rights not yet shown. Widths are commonly not recorded or are inaccurate.

² Most unreasonable widths are those recorded in the 1950s, in feet, when there was inadequate briefing of what to record or awareness of historical evidence of width. Widths arising from more recent legal orders are likely to be more accurate.

Where vigorous hedges are present, the width is best set out as being 'from the normally maintained face of the hedge', rather than the root of the hedge, as the root could be more than a metre from the maintained face of the hedge.

On a byway where the surface may become rutted, a driver of a horse-drawn vehicle may need to avoid ruts created by motor vehicles as they could be too deep or widely spaced so a greater width could be required.

The Society recognises that the circumstances for all new bridleways and byways (including diversions) vary, and on occasion, particularly to gain a route free from motor traffic, a width less than the recommended standard may be better than using an all purpose road. A lesser width may be acceptable where users are prepared to stop for each other to pass and where use level is low enough for this not to be an inconvenience. For situations where a lesser width is considered because the recommendation is not possible, advice and agreement should be sought from the BHS.

Width in Diversion Orders

The Society encourages Order Making Authorities to adopt a standard width of 5 metres for diverted bridleways and byways. 5 metres allows for a commodious width remaining if a route is 'corridor fenced' of a route even if use increases and to allow ease of access for maintenance. It also allows for the increasing popularity and speed of cycling, which may require segregation of users for pedestrian and equestrian safety.

The Society will usually object to bridleway or byway diversion proposals where the width of the replacement way is less than 4 metres unless exceptional circumstances apply.

Width in Creation Agreements and Orders

The Society encourages Order Making Authorities to adopt a standard of 5 metres width for new bridleways and restricted byways whenever possible but recognises that a lesser width may be necessary to create a way in some cases.

For 'greenways' and routes considered to be of strategic importance, more than 5 metres allows comfortable space for different types of user, particularly if use by cyclists at speed is anticipated. Where segregation and / or different surfaces are

planned, dividing the available width at the midpoint provides a more equitable environment than a central hard strip and two 'verges'.³

If segregation is thought necessary to accommodate fast users, then the greater width makes this possible. Where available, a width greater than 5 metres also allows for the provision of trees and hedges and benches for resting to increase the attraction and health benefits of the route for all users.

Width for maintenance or enforcement purposes

Where there is no substantive evidence of a right of way's width, the Society will ask that a width of no less than 3 metres is cleared. If the Definitive Statement includes a width, then a minimum of that width should be reinstated so long as it is wide enough to be practical (minimum 3 metres if bounded on one or both sides, 2 metres if open, based on the provisions of the Rights of Way Act 1990 for reinstatement and crop clearance on arable land).

A 3m width allows 'spreading room' so that users are not confined to a narrow poached path, and the spread of wear can reduce the need for maintenance of the surface, whether mowing or improving a poached strip.

The Highways Act 1980 Section 164 provides that the presence of barbed wire by a right of way can constitute a public nuisance. Users of the way should be protected from the barbs by a flat rail on the side of the right of way. A greater width may be required to provide sufficient passing space clear of the barbed wire.

Electrified fencing should be treated as barbed wire and avoided along or across bridleways and byways.

In Modification Orders

The Society would object if the width stated is less than that for which there is substantive evidence, or if a single whole route width is stated where there is evidence that the right of way is wider in places.

If evidence relies on an inclosure-awarded width of more than sixteen feet, the Society may, depending on local circumstances, be open to subsequent extinguishment of width greater than 5 metres provided that the remaining width

³ See [BHS Advice Constructing or reinstating a natural surface](#) (for bridleways, byways or shared use routes)

is of a surface and character which is resilient to use. Whether this is acceptable will be specific to a case.

Width of gaps and 'corridors'

The width between gateposts (Highways Act 1980 Section 145) should be no less than 1.525 metres on a bridleway, 3 metres on all byways and roads.

Where bollards are considered to restrict vehicular access, the minimum width should be 1.525 metres on a bridleway, 1.8 metres on a byway where a Traffic Regulation Order is in place (see [BHS Advice on Vehicle Barriers](#)).

The law is silent on minimum width for a 'corridor' gap longer than a gateway, and on the frequency and positioning of gaps. Where a chicane is constructed, a 1.525m gap throughout the U shape is an obstruction for horses, which may not be able to bend within that U. The tight chicane may feel like a trap and cause a horse to react, with potential injury. Therefore, while a gap of 1.525m is acceptable on a bridleway, there should be a straight approach on both sides of at least 2m. On a byway open to horse-drawn vehicles, the straight approach on both sides must be no less than 4m.

Area

Where it is necessary to turn a ridden horse (to close a gate, for example), the area of manoeuvring space should ideally be no less than 4 metres by 4 metres; large horses may require that area to turn easily. The absolute minimum space required is a diameter of 3 metres on clear, flat ground with no protrusions or overhanging vegetation. A greater area is preferred to avoid potential of injury on fencing, gates or other structures and if ground is uneven or there is overhanging vegetation.

Horse-drawn vehicles are likely to need to turn only if there is an obstruction which prevents them continuing, which could present a problem if an area less than 5 metres (depending on size of turnout). Although in an emergency, a horse can be unhitched and the vehicle turned separately, this is not a task to be considered normal or convenient for a highway user.

The more that area is restricted, the more important it is that the surface is firm, level and even and kept clear of overgrowth.

Space and safety at gates

See [BHS Advice on Gates](#). The recommended area for manoeuvring a ridden horse at a gate is 4 metres by 4 metres, incorporating 1.2 metres in line with the gate beyond the clapper post. Manoeuvring a horse through a gate is particularly hazardous for riders and any obstacle or impediment within or close to the manoeuvring space and gateway increases the difficulty of operating the gate safely. The manoeuvring space must be on firm, level and even ground without trip hazards or overgrowth.

Electric fencing near gates can present a particularly serious hazard if it is possible for the horse, rider or gate to contact the electrified wire. See [BHS Advice on Electric Fencing](#).

Drivers of horse-drawn vehicles are likely to be accompanied by another person who will open and close a gate. Additional space is not required except at a roadside where a gate should be set back by at least 5 metres to avoid putting horse and vehicle at risk from road traffic while waiting for the groom to open or close the gate.

Fenced enclosures for waiting areas or separation pens

There is sometimes a need for enclosed areas, perhaps at road crossings, or at the end of a bridge where stock security is required where the bridge is less than 3 metres wide, so a gate cannot be installed on the end of the bridge because there is not enough space on the bridge for a horse and rider to operate the gate. For any enclosed area it is recommended that:

- Clear manoeuvring space of at least 4 metres by 4 metres is required within the pen.
- All fencing should be post and rail wooden fencing, no wire, wire netting or barbed wire. If barbed wire is required for stock control, it should be shielded on the bridleway side by a plain rail.
- The ground throughout the structure should be firm, level and free from deep mud or vegetation that would reduce the useable area.

All other recommendations for gates, catches and surroundings apply (free of protrusions, barbed wire and so on, see [BHS Advice on Gates](#)).

If an area is likely to need to accommodate more than one ridden horse, such as a waiting area to cross a road, then more than 4 metres length or width will be required. For driven horses, a minimum of 6 metres length will be required.

Fencing

As a general guide the following types of fencing are suitable for horses and can be used safely alongside rights of way, in order of preference:

1. Post and rail wooden fencing
2. Posts with impact resistant plastic rails
3. Posts with flexi-rails (PVC or rubber-coated webbing)
4. Vertical close board fencing has been used at roadside locations in waiting pens for light controlled crossings but while it may help horses feel safer while waiting, it will limit sightlines for equestrians (and potentially road users)

Wire fencing (both straight and barbed) is less desirable and potentially injurious. This is more likely if it is not well installed and maintained with firm upright posts and fully tensioned wire. If barbed wire is proved to be a nuisance it is illegal alongside a right of way (Section 164 Highways Act 1980).

Electric fencing should never be used alongside or across bridleways or byways except where proper provision has been made at gates and the way is wide enough between the fencing (see [BHS Advice on Electric Fencing](#)).

Standard livestock fencing is between 1,100 and 1,200mm high.

Height

The height of horses ridden on bridleways and byways (or driven on byways) varies tremendously, from a small child's pony at 1m (unlikely to be unaccompanied by an adult) and a very large horse at 2m. Taking an average is not helpful given that range. Informal research indicates that an 85th percentile of a random sample of horses which are ridden on bridleways and byways is around 1.6m (to the top of the shoulder above the front leg), but the height of ridden horses in Britain has been rising steadily since Norman times (the tallest Norman

war horse known was 1.52m) and is still rising, so although 1.9m is currently unusual, it appears that heights are likely to continue increasing.

Overgrowth

The average height of a mounted rider is around 2.5 metres above ground level, tall riders on large horses could be near 3 metres. Overhanging branches, overgrowth from the sides and any other obstructions should be clear to 3.4 metres on all routes to allow for comfortable clearance of branches even in wind, or sagging branches in rain or snow, and to remain clear.

Horse-drawn vehicles vary in height but clearance to accommodate riders will also give clearance for drivers as models of vehicle with a driver mounted higher than a rider are unlikely to be used as exercise vehicles on byways.

Underpasses and tunnels

Where underpasses are constructed to enable equestrians to cross below a road or railway, the recommended height is 3.7m and a width of 5 metres. The longer the underpass, the more desirable it will be to meet the ideal height or width; however, all situations should be judged individually as there are many factors to take into account.

While the Society seeks the desirable height and width for underpasses, in exceptional circumstances a lower height or width may be tolerated for a crossing of a road or railway which would be unsafe to cross at grade and where there is no option to increase the height, such as where the water table is high.

When a lower height for an underpass is agreed by BHS as acceptable, some equestrians would expect to dismount although those with smaller horses and low horse-drawn vehicles may choose not to if they are comfortable with the clearance. It should be left to the rider's/driver's discretion as they are unlikely to risk themselves or their horse and are the best to judge what is appropriate for them. When a lower height has been agreed, a mounting block should be provided at either end (see [BHS Advice on Mounting Blocks](#)) for those who are forced to dismount.

There are many examples of equestrian use of disused railway tunnels and long underpasses, such as under motorways; there is no reason to exclude horses from them. Examples include several on the Monsal Trail in Derbyshire and the

Denstone Trail in Staffordshire, both disused railway lines, and the Trans Pennine Trail at Thurgoland. Some tunnels/underpasses are quite narrow, but it is not an issue so long as all users know to expect others and to pass with care and consideration. Signs are important on shared use trails to make clear to all users to expect horses.

Horses and their riders or drivers are highly variable. While some will never tackle a tunnel or underpass, others will do so easily. It depends on temperament and training of both horse and handler. There is no reason to exclude all horses on the basis that a few may not wish to use a tunnel or underpass.

Lighting in underpasses or tunnels depends very much on the site. Horses can see better than humans in the dark, but have greater difficulty with sudden changes in light, such as moving from bright light into an underpass, their eyes adjust more slowly, which may cause a horse to be reluctant to move forward, however, the light level needed to mitigate is not great and no more than would be normal for a pedestrian route. If it is deemed unnecessary to have lighting for pedestrians, then there is no need for additional provision for horses, whose riders will slow or stop while the horse's eyes adjust.

British Standard BS 5489-1:2020 section 7.4.7 gives requirements for lighting 'subways'. BS 4589-1 suggests that daytime lighting should be double that required during darkness hours, however, where an underpass is part of a rural route that is unlit, this may be excessive.

Standards do not refer to requirements for horses, but it may be assumed that provision for pedestrians is appropriate.

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