

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.

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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Definitions

'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 mechanically-propelled 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 which may be electrically assisted, but is not propelled by a motor or engine without human activity. A restricted byway presents best value as accommodating all those in need of routes free from motor traffic.

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 inclusive multi-user routes for all non-mechanically-propelled traffic.

None of these users should be excluded from a motor-free route and forced onto busy roads with the increased danger to them from motorists. This is what happens to equestrians who are excluded from 'foot-cycleways', with the additional risk of being passed on their near-side by cyclists at the same time as motorists on their off-side.

All non-motorised vulnerable road users need routes free from motor traffic, so it is inequitable, discriminatory and poor value to create a safe motor-free route for some while excluding others. It is equestrians who are usually excluded, for unsubstantiated reasons, such as 'horses being unpredictable animals', 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 from riders. IN addition, pedestrians and cyclists have been sharing routes with equestrians for well over 150 years; a problem only arises if any one type of user assumes they have priority or fails to consider other users. The 'Share With Care' message should be widely promoted.

With the increasing attention to cycling, and 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%, and there are large areas with no bridleways or byways at all. In addition, many of the 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 use¹ 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 benefits² from open air exercise and recreation, just as from walking or cycling.
- The economic value of the equestrian sector was £5 billion in 2023.³

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.⁴ The solution is to better educate all users and

¹ Durham Railway Paths has an excellent [charter](#) for users and no history of conflict on 100 miles of tracks.

² BHS Health Benefits of Riding 2010

³ British Equestrian Trade Association National Equestrian Survey 2023

⁴ Countryside Agency report CRN32, How people interact on off-road routes

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 if non-slip tarmac is deemed the most appropriate surface for the majority use. Horses are unlikely to have a detrimental effect on a surface which would be provided for cycle use, just as they do not affect the surface of roads.
4. **Barriers to antisocial use** – Barriers to prevent motor vehicular use but permit all other users must be legally authorised and comply with the British Standard. They should only be used where there is a genuine risk and where the loss of accessibility of the path to all legitimate users is justified. Barriers will always inconvenience legitimate users, often with no reduction in antisocial or illegal use. A barrier to a horse will also be a barrier to other users, and cost or difficulty of design to include horses is not justified.
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 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](#).⁵

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 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

⁵ England and Wales

asphalt, and better for dogs as it does not heat in summer like asphalt. It is low to zero maintenance and long-lived, even with heavy use on slopes.

Where different surfaces, soft and hard, are an option to cater for all preferences, splitting the available width at the midpoint to have half hard top and half soft is far superior to the common 'road' result of central asphalt and soft verges, which is unsatisfactory for many reasons. Half-and-half at the midpoint is better because both type of surface have a reasonable width available, so users can travel side-by-side and the soft surface users are not disadvantaged by part of their narrow allotments being unusable as alongside a fence or hedge. importantly, the equal split in surfaces provides subliminal messaging that all users are equal, whereas the central strip engenders a road user mentality of priority to the fastest user, which is unsafe and intimidating for others. The half-and-half solution can also be easier to construct and to maintain.

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 device 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

More examples are available from the BHS.

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