

# Advice on Width, area and height in England and Wales

**The law and management of public access rights varies between the four countries of the United Kingdom. This advice note applies to England and Wales only. There is an equivalent factsheet for Scotland..**

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In providing specifications for equestrian ways and facilities, the British Horse Society considers all equestrian users, which may result in a high specification which might not be appropriate in all circumstances. The recommendations should be read with this in mind. **If the specification seems inappropriate in a situation, the Society strongly advises consultation with its local representative to establish what may be acceptable at a particular site.**

Riders and carriage drivers, like walkers and cyclists, come in all sizes, with considerable variety in their interests, skills, needs and preferences and this should be considered in providing or improving paths used by equestrians.

## Width for new routes

The intention of the widths recommended here is to provide a *useable* width of minimum three metres at all seasons, irrespective of whether a path is bounded by a hedge or fences, or may become bounded by such in future. A useable width is likely to require at least an additional half a metre to each side to avoid a rider catching a foot in a fence, or being snagged by barbed wire giving an overall width of four metres. More than half a metre may be required where hedge growth must be accommodated, particularly for fast-growing hedge species or where the hedge is not cut each year.

A common difficult situation is where an unenclosed bridleway with a recorded width of two metres becomes fenced as a two metre wide corridor, resulting in a useable width of only one metre in the middle because vegetation and debris may occur close to the boundaries and users naturally avoid passing close to a fence, wall or hedge in case of being snagged or knocked against it.

Observing users pass one another on an unenclosed bridleway makes it clear that two metres is rarely the actual used width, most people will choose to give one another more space. Two pedestrians may comfortably pass each other within a two metre width, but two horse riders, or any

combination of riders, cyclists and pedestrians may prefer not to pass so close to one another. Passing is feasible where users are prepared to stop to allow others to pass.

Larger horses, which are commonly ridden, need more than three metres in which to turn easily. A corridor that is less than four metres wide makes turning potentially hazardous so any new route or reduction in width should ideally be more than three metres or provide turning/passing places.

The Society recognises that the circumstances for all new bridleways (and diversions) vary and on occasion, particularly to gain a route away from motor vehicles, a width less than the recommended standard may be accepted as better than using a motor vehicular road. For situations where a lesser width is considered because the standard is not possible, advice and agreement should be sought from the BHS.

## **In Modification Orders**

The Society will 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 path 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 in excess of 5 metres.

## **In Diversion Orders**

The Society encourages Order Making Authorities to adopt a recommended standard of 5 metres width for diverted bridleways.

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

## **In Creation Orders**

The Society encourages Order Making Authorities to adopt a recommended standard of 5 metres m width for new bridleways whenever possible but recognises that a lesser width may be necessary in order to create any path in some cases.

For greenways and those considered to be of strategic importance, more than five metres allows comfortable space for different types of user. If segregation is thought necessary in a particular circumstance then the greater width makes this possible. Where available, a width greater than five metres also allows for the provision of trees and hedges and benches for resting to increase the attraction of the route for all users.

## For general maintenance or enforcement purposes

Where there is no substantive evidence of a path's width, the Society will request that a width of no less than three 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 three metres if bounded on one or both sides, two metres if open, based on the provisions of the Rights of Way Act 1990 for arable field paths).

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 for barbed wire and avoided along or across bridleways.

The width between gateposts (Highways Act 1980 Section 145) should be 1.5 metres on a bridleway, three metres on all byways and roads.

Where bollards are considered to restrict vehicular access, the minimum width should be 1.5 metres on a bridleway, 1.6 metres on a byway. Kent Carriage Gaps (see BHS Advice on Gates and Vehicular Barriers) can be used to reduce the width from 1.6 to 1.5 metres if they are installed correctly but poor installation can be dangerous so the specification must be followed precisely to be safe.

## Area

Where it is necessary to turn a horse (in order to close a gate, for example), the area of manoeuvring space should ideally be no less than four metres by four metres; large horses may require more than 4 metres to turn easily. The absolute minimum space required is a diameter of 3 metres on clear, flat ground with no protrusions or overhanging vegetation. This will be too restrictive for some horses and could result in injury should a horse panic at being so constrained. It allows no leeway at all for a horse being startled by a sudden movement or sound, perhaps from wildlife in a hedge, or for coping with temporary conditions such as standing water. 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.

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 and Vehicle Barriers. The recommended area for manoeuvring 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 greatly 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. Please see BHS Advice on Electric Fencing.

## 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 but a gate cannot be installed on the end of the bridge. For any enclosed area it is recommended that:

- Clear manoeuvring space of 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.
- 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 and Vehicle Barriers).

If an area is likely to need to accommodate more than one horse, such as a waiting area to cross a road, then more than 4 metres length or width 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)

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 (S.164 Highways Act 1980).

Metal palisade security fencing with spikes on top, commonly seen by railways, should never be used alongside bridleways as the injuries that would be incurred by a rider falling onto the fence if thrown from a horse could easily be fatal.

Electric fencing should never be used alongside or across bridleways except where proper provision has been made at gates (see BHS Advice on Electric Fencing).

## Height

### Overgrowth

The average height of a mounted rider is 2.55 metres above ground level, tall riders on large horses will be close to 3 metres. Overhanging branches, overgrowth from the sides and any other obstructions should be cleared to a height of 3.4 metres on all routes.

### Underpasses

Where underpasses are constructed to enable riders to cross below a road or railway, the ideal height is at least 3.7 metres (minimum 3.4 metres) preferably higher and width 5 metres (minimum 3 metres).

While the Society seeks the desirable height for underpasses, in exceptional circumstances a lower height may be tolerated to retain 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. The absolute minimum in these circumstances only would be 2 metres.

When a lower height for an underpass is locally agreed as acceptable, riders would be expected to dismount although those on smaller horses may choose not to do if they are comfortable with the clearance. When the lower height is provided, a mounting block should be provided at either end (see BHS Advice on Mounting Blocks).

The reason for asking for more than 3m is to provide a safety margin should a horse be startled and jump or rear and, for an underpass, to make the environment more appealing in what could potentially be a situation with additional hazards. A horse may be reluctant to enter under a low ceiling, especially in a dark environment because their eyes do not see easily into a dark space from a light one, and they are more likely to be distressed by other factors such as a train overhead.

## Other Advice

BHS specifications and standards are also available at [www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice](http://www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice).