

# Cycle Routes



## **This note provides guidance to BHS Access and Bridleway Officers in supporting equestrian use of cycle routes.**

The British Horse Society (BHS), together with the membership of its Affiliated Riding Clubs and Bridleway Groups is the largest and most influential equestrian charity in the UK. The BHS represents the interests of the 4.3 million people in the UK who ride or who drive horse-drawn vehicles.

The BHS works for safer on- and off-road riding and carriage driving through an improved public rights of way network, and seeks to create new opportunities of lawful off-road riding and carriage driving, and safer use of our roads by all road users.

The BHS works in partnership with other user groups including Sustrans, local and central government, to make rights of way and other access areas useful and open to all, and our roads safer for all users.

The length of the public right of way network in England currently amounts to 188,700km; comprising 146,600km of footpaths, 32,400km of bridleways, 3,700km of byways and 6,000km of restricted byways. Horse riders therefore currently only have access to 22 percent of public rights of way and horse-drawn vehicle drivers only five percent.

The length of the public right of way network in Wales currently amounts to 33,000km; 79 percent are footpaths (26,070 km), 15 percent are bridleways (4,950 km), and the other six percent of the network are byways (1,980 km). Horse riders therefore currently only have access to 21 percent of public rights of way and horse-drawn vehicle drivers only six percent.

Many rights of way are now disconnected from each other because the roads that should connect them are no longer safe for equestrians to use due to the speed and volume of motorised traffic on them, leaving many equestrians without a safe local route to use.

The National Cycle Network (NCN) is now in excess of 20,921 kilometres long. The Network is not formally designated as part of the highway network, although it does in places coincide with minor highways and public rights of way.

The NCN could make a significant contribution to the safe off-road riding that is available to equestrians, who, like cyclists, are vulnerable road users. This would, in many instances negate the need for equestrians to use heavily trafficked roads to access the equestrian public rights of way network and other areas with equestrian access without the necessity of utilising heavily trafficked road networks.

Richard Benyon MP, Minister for Natural Environment and Fisheries, recently wrote to Anne Main MP concerning Alban Way, questioning why horse riders are not permitted to use it.

He urges all local authorities to allow horse riders to use cycle trails, routes and any other ways where it is in their power to do so, and to encourage that permission or dedication to happen where it is not in their power. In the Government's view:

**"Unless there are good and specific reasons not to expressly allow horse riders to use such routes, local authorities should take steps to accommodate them. Local authorities should be making the most of their off-road networks through integration of use. Multi-user routes have been shown to be readily adopted and well appreciated by local people. Where they are done well they bolster community cohesion and create a better understanding between users."**

The BHS has been campaigning for this for years and the Minister's request that all local authorities allow horse riders to use these routes is most welcome.

Mr Benyon states further:

**"Horseriders are particularly vulnerable road users, and cycle routes can provide appropriate and important opportunities to avoid busy roads. There is potential for conflict in any situation"**

where people share a public space, but the possibility of conflict is not reason enough to disregard ridden access; actual conflict could be resolved and any misplaced concerns reduced over time.”

The BHS concurs with this point of view. Multi-user paths represent best value for everyone – users and taxpayers. Research demonstrates that multi-user paths present no unacceptable risk to users. Bridleways of all widths, gradients, sightlines and surfaces have been shared by walkers, horseriders and cyclists since 1968.

Sustrans states that:

“Horses automatically have access to all of the Network which is on the public highway, generally quiet roads, restricted byways and bridleways. Of the 965 kilometres of the NCN Sustrans actually owns, there is fewer than 80 kilometres which horses aren’t able to use, and that’s mostly because the strip of land in our ownership is either too narrow, or because we haven’t developed a route on that land yet. Where the NCN runs over land that is not in Sustrans ownership then the landowner determines whether horses can use the path. Where a route follows the course of a bridleway or restricted byway there is a statutory obligation to provide a route that is available for walkers, horses and cyclists to use and in developing the NCN we take this into account.”

The BHS will work with Sustrans to see if it can have the opportunity to negotiate with landowners who deny access to equestrians, as it is believed that in many instances any concerns that exist can be resolved and that access for equestrians could be provided in future schemes.

Sustrans information sheet FF27 states that 3m minimum width should be provided on a shared cycle track/footpath and bridle path, with a preferred clearance of 1m on either side of the path. The BHS maintains that horseriders, walkers and cyclists can comfortably pass on a route that has a width of 3m and all can happily coexist on narrower routes with one party giving way to the other as appropriate. Many public bridleways and permissive routes are significantly narrower than 3m, yet reports of it being a problem are very rare; rather it can create a greater feeling of co-operation and tolerance between users.

The BHS believes that Sustrans’ insistence that they prefer to provide access for equestrians where a 5m width can be provided is unreasonable, as this can militate against provision being made for equestrians, and provides an easy excuse not to provide access for equestrians when it could easily be provided.

In Scotland, the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 gives everyone statutory access rights to most land and inland water. This means that horses are allowed on all paths, irrespective of width or surface. This is the approach that the BHS believes Sustrans should follow when providing the NCN in England and Wales.

BHS submissions to support the argument for the inclusion of equestrians on cycle routes:

- Equestrians are vulnerable road users and every available opportunity should be taken to provide safer off-road access for them just as it is for walkers and cyclists
- Providing routes that cater for all non-motorised vulnerable road users represents best value
- Equestrians, walkers and cyclists coexist very well on bridleways, restricted byways and byways in England and Wales, and on routes in Scotland. There is therefore no cogent reason why this should not happen on cycle tracks
- The lack of a 3m width should not automatically mean that equestrians should not be provided for on a cycle route. There are many bridleways that are less than 3m and they are shared by riders, cyclists and walkers without problems
- Surfacing should not normally be a reason for not providing for use by all non-motorised users
- All local authorities should implement a general presumption to permit equestrians to use cycle routes along with walkers and cyclists
- Equestrians tend to avoid times when a cycle route is busy
- In Scotland the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 gives everyone statutory access rights to most land and such an approach should be followed in respect of cycle routes in England and Wales