



Devon Countryside Access Forum

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ENGLAND COAST PATH – ACCOMMODATING DISABILITY USERS

Response from the Devon Countryside Access Forum

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The Devon Countryside Access Forum (DCAF) is a statutory local access forum established under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW Act 2000). Its specific remit is to provide independent advice on the “improvement of public access to land in the area for the purposes of open-air recreation and the enjoyment of the area.”

The Forum currently has sixteen voluntary members, appointed by Devon County Council, who represent the interests of land owners/managers, access users and other relevant concerns such as health and tourism.

The England Coast Path roll-out in Devon presents the opportunity to consider whether improvements can be made to make better provision for disability users.

This response was agreed by DCAF members and was formally ratified at its meeting in October 2016. The comments are still current. A few site-specific references have been changed.

Detailed advice on disability access was provided by Gordon Guest, DCAF member, who uses both a wheelchair and mobility scooter to access the countryside. The Forum advises that these matters should be included in Natural England’s discussions with landowners.

Introduction

Increasing numbers of people use wheelchairs and motorised mobility vehicles. These are now able to tackle more difficult terrain and gradients. The Department of Transport has rules for wheelchairs and mobility scooters www.gov.uk/mobility-scooters-and-powered-wheelchairs-rules/overview governing weight, width and speed for the three classes of vehicles. A Trampler buggy, as used by Countryside Mobility, has a length of 151.7cm (60 inches), width of 71cm (29”), a ground

The Devon Countryside Access Forum is a local access forum. It is required, in accordance with Sections 94 and 95 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000, to provide advice as to the improvement of public access to land for the purposes of open-air recreation and enjoyment.

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clearance of 16.5 cm (6.5 ") and a range of 30 miles. The maximum width for a Class 3 vehicle is 85 cm. Other mobility vehicles within that class have differing dimensions.

Much of the existing South West Coast Path is not that accessible to wheelchairs and mobility scooters. There will be some places where the coast path drops steeply from cliffs to a valley and the path may be too steep for scooters to use safely. However, there will be many stretches that are reasonably undulating and quite safe for scooters to use.

Improved access to and from car parks for mobility scooters onto the coast would help also.

Landowner/land manager considerations

In its consideration of the England Coast Path and improvements to the existing South West Coast Path as part of this scheme, Natural England is required not just to discuss proposals with landowners and land managers but to take account of their views.

The Devon Countryside Access Forum advises that discussions should take place with landowners about path furniture. Stiles and gates may often be specified by the landowner because of an agricultural need, usually stock control. If a new path has to be created or an existing path widened to accommodate access or access points, such as easy access gates, then it may have an impact on that landowner or result in loss of land. Landowners may well be willing to accommodate these extra requirements if they are made aware that such path furniture could meet the needs of disabled users.

In discussion with landowners, Natural England is advised to consider whether the following improvements could be achieved to improve access to the England Coast Path.

Key footpath and gate issues

Type of furniture

- 1) Avoid using kissing gates and stiles wherever possible. Kissing gates can be adapted for scooters but need to have 2 m clear behind the scooter to open and close the gate and a minimum width of 1.2m.
- 2) Make the gate as wide as possible and consider scooter width and length. 1.5 m gates are good. Gates of 1m are too narrow. The Royal National Institute for the Blind recommends a blind person with a guide dog needs 1.2 m wide walking space on footpaths and through gates.
- 3) Fit the best possible handle for the location, considering whether stock control is needed and whether use includes horses or is just for walkers and scooters. Trombone type handles are good; possibly double ones at the end and middle for horse use. There can be a tension between the needs of multiple users. Some disabled users have very weak arms, so strong spring loaded gate levers, even with trombone type handles, are too difficult to open.

However, for stock control gates with strong latches are essential. It is possible to combine different options depending on the site.

- 4) Consider easy latch systems as part of the handle, unless stock control makes that an issue.
- 5) Consider which are the best type of hinges; 2 way, 1 way, self-closing etc. It should be possible with a 1.5 m wide gate, and the correct hinges, to get the gate to fully open with plenty of room for a scooter, and/or horse, and/or person with a dog or guide dog.
- 6) Consider barge boards on the bottom of gates so scooters can drive into the gate and push it open by pushing the barge board with the front of the scooter.
- 7) Consider adding simple rope handles so scooters can pull the rope and have space to reverse away from the gate whilst opening it. (This would be extra to latches). Often a gate has to be pulled back toward you to open. This means the mobility scooter has to approach the gate, grab the handle, hold the gate with one hand and reverse until the gate is open, then manoeuvre past the gate and go through. They then have to go through the gate, turn around, approach the gate and pull it closed. All of this is difficult.
- 8) Where there are small footbridges make sure there is either an earth ramp or wooden ramp for the scooter to get up onto the bridge. Make sure footbridges are wide enough for scooters to use.

Positioning of path furniture

- a) Improve alignment on both sides of the gate. Try and make this straight on for 2 m either side of the gate. Try and remove roots, boulders, and ruts caused by erosion. If the gate alignment is off centre then the scooter cannot get through, even if the gate is wide enough. So if the scooter has to approach the gate at a 45 degree angle this will prevent access. Similarly if the footpath curves away quickly then the scooter does not have enough space to turn.
- b) Try and have gates on a flat piece of land, not down a bank or on the edge of a ditch, where possible.
- c) Consider actual clearance space within the gate between fence posts, gate latch and when the gate is swung back open. A 1m wide gate that does not fully open may only have an 80cm clearance which might not be enough for a scooter.

Other obstacles and considerations

1. Consider beach access for scooters. There may be obstacles such as kissing gates, earth banks in car parks, barge boards to control beach sand flow etc. Many beaches have nearby car parks and link to the SW coast path. Often access is very difficult or impossible for wheelchairs. In the Thurlestone and Hope Cove area in the South Hams there are often earth banks at car parks or near gates which prevent access. There are kissing gates which completely stop mobility scooters and wheelchairs from accessing a beach, and make life more difficult for parents with pushchairs. Often there are also barge boards to control sand movement, but at the same time there are wooden board walks through sand dunes down to the beach. If a scooter /wheelchair could get

past the barge board / kissing gate / stile they could get onto the board walk and access the beach.

Quite often in these coast path / beach car parks there are designated blue badge disabled car parking spaces. But once parked the access onto the footpaths or beach paths is restricted by obstacles.

Most normal scooter / wheelchair tyres will not work on soft sand. But to be able to get to the edge of the beach in a wheelchair or scooter would often be more than enough for the person and family.

2. Many modern mobility scooters can drive over rough grassland quite easily and that often can be a better route than a narrow rutted footpath.

When implementing the England Coast Path please consider gates, footbridges, car parking, path and gate alignments, width of footpaths and flat grass areas beside footpaths. Many small changes can significantly improve access.

Suitable gates

Centrewire produce a range of gates www.centrewire.com/product-category/pedestrian-and-mobility-access-gates/ used widely by Public Rights of Way wardens.

At the moment the best Centrewire gate for mobility scooters is the Milton Keynes 2 way with an opening of 1.5 metres. The second best gate is the Centrewire Aston 2 way at 1.2 m metres wide with trombone type handles. The gates need to open at least 90 degrees, but 180 degrees is better to allow a wheelchair scooter through. Gates opening with a Radar Key is an option but this means buying two gates. The Centrewire York 2 in 1 has a farm tractor gate and a pedestrian gate beside it which has no step and is a better type of gate to install where needed for vehicle and pedestrian access. There are also wooden versions of these 2 in 1 farm gates.

Path signing.

There is no reason why simple extra signposts or little noticeboards for disabled users cannot be installed e.g. this section of the coast path has a number of kissing gates and is not suitable for wheelchairs. For example, the Victorian Carriageway at Heddon Valley, North Devon, runs parallel to the SW Coast path. It is fully accessible to Trampers, even though it climbs steeply and runs high up along the cliffs, but it is a there and back route and this is made clear at the start of the walk. In the Tamar Valley there are some footpaths that are very steep, Trampers are advised to use an alternative route, which is possible.

So consider some kind of signposting code for wheelchairs scooters that could go onto existing posts or way marks giving information where needed. Alternatively routes could be signed to indicate where they are suitable for disabled users. For example, the easy use path at Selworthy Beacon on Exmoor. (See photos below).

