

Mr Philip Hackett
(by email)

County Hall
Topsham Road
Exeter
Devon
EX2 4QD

10th May 2023

Dear Philip,

RE: Multiuser trails

Please accept my apologies for the delay in responding to the questions you raised with Councillor Hart about the County Council's position on horse riding in relation to the multi-use trail network. You have raised several points questioning officers' expertise and believe that the authority takes an anti-horse stance. I have provided a response below to explain how we consider horse riders in the planning and delivery of new infrastructure and also what future opportunities there may be to make further improvements.

Devon County Council's starting point for all new multi-use / rural trails is to include equestrians, unless there are good reasons not to. This start point is informed by guidance from the Devon Countryside Access Forum and also the Rights of Way Improvement Plan.

Examples of when we cannot include equestrians on multi-use trails include:

- No safe equestrian access onto the proposed trail
- Where the trail requires use of infrastructure e.g., bridges and other structures that are not appropriate for safe equestrian use
- Landowners may be opposed and cannot be persuaded otherwise

Many of the constraints are to do with legal restrictions in some leases and licences, and Health & Safety considerations and our design teams need to consider a range of criteria including specifications on path surface, parapet height (to be minimum 1.8m) and overhanging vegetation.

For new routes impacting on highway schemes impacting on motorways and all-purpose trunk roads (i.e. responsibility of National Highways), we carry out a walking, cycling and horse-riding assessment (WCHAR – see [GG 142 - Walking, cycling and horse-riding assessment and review \(standardsforhighways.co.uk\)](https://standardsforhighways.co.uk)).

I therefore do not believe that we exclude horse riders in the planning or design of new infrastructure. Whilst I appreciate that there are pre-existing restrictions on a number of routes, there are several recreational trails across the County, providing access to horse riders, and over 1,300 km of bridleways and byways forming part of the public rights of way network, plus approx. 600 km of unsurfaced, unclassified County roads not generally used by vehicular traffic other than occasional agricultural vehicles for access. There is also permissive land (e.g. National Trust, Clinton Devon

Estates etc), Forestry Commission trails and Common land on Dartmoor. I have attached separately a summary of opportunities that exist in Devon for horse riders.

Regarding future opportunities to improve upon the network, the only current funding route for investment in our multi-use trail network is via our limited Local Transport Plan capital programme or Active Travel England¹ grant funding; however to date, the criteria for active travel funding has been focused on commuter cycling with funding primarily offered for more urban cycle routes.

I am aware that one of my colleagues [REDACTED] spoke at length with you at the Barnstaple, Bideford and Northam Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan consultation and in response to the points you raised, he followed up with officials at DfT / Active Travel England to seek their formal position regarding horse riding. They replied sharing a letter, which was sent to the British Horse Society in March this year, which included the following excerpts:

“Horse riders do not come under the strict definition of active travel used by the Department for Transport, and therefore active travel funding cannot be used directly to improve the safety of horse riders”

“Active Travel England (ATE) does encourage local authorities and funding partners like Sustrans to consider safety improvements for horse riders during the design and implementation of new or upgraded active travel projects. LTN 1/20 also recommends that equestrian groups should be considered in the design stage of certain active travel projects, such as mixed off-road routes. We will work with local authorities during the design stage of active travel projects to ensure that the needs of different road users, including horse riders, are considered throughout the process”

The approach described above is consistent with Devon County Council’s approach which considers the needs of equestrian groups at the design stage of new multi-use trail trails. Separately, in an email [REDACTED] on 24th March 2023, ATE also clarified:

“ATE focuses on functional journeys, particularly short vehicle journeys that can be converted to walking, wheeling and cycling. We don’t support schemes that are purely leisure orientated, but we do support those that have dual use, e.g. NCN routes that link housing to various trip attractors and are also used for leisure purposes”

Our opportunities to finance improvements to our multi-use trail network using active travel grant funding are therefore likely to be limited to what can be achieved through funding linked to delivery of objectives within the Rights of Way Improvement Plan. Requests for a wholesale opening up of the network has previously been resisted due to restrictions in Deed packets and agreements with landowners which were not fully known or on digital record. While we do not have the resource to carry out a comprehensive review of our entire existing trails, we are willing to consider ‘quick wins’ if these can be identified by users. This is a similar approach to the work we have been doing to remove physical barriers on some of our trails to improve access for people with disabilities.

¹ Active Travel England is the government’s executive agency responsible for making walking, wheeling and cycling

Our Public Rights of Way & Country Parks Manager, Richard Walton, previously involved in many of the Cornish schemes you described, has also offered to review and audit trails to identify and quantify the constraints. He will use this information to prioritise sections that can potentially be made available for horse riders (subject to considering wider issues described above). At the current time Richard's team's capacity to move this forward is very limited; but he is happy to factor this into the review of the Rights of Way Improvement Plan, which is underway at present.

I hope this helps clarify our position regarding horse riders and our multi-use trail network.

Yours sincerely.



Deputy Director – Planning
Climate Change, Environment & Transport Directorate

cc: Councillor John Hart

Horse-riding access statistics in Devon – April 2021

These linear routes and land offer opportunities for horse-riders to enjoy riding off-road in the County. Connections between the different types of access provide longer or circular routes.

Recreational trails

Horse riders have access to parts of the recreational trail network in Devon. Information provided in order of length.

- Pegasus Way - 15 miles
- Tarka Trail - Meeth to Servis Farm, Great Torrington - 9 miles (via Little Torrington Bridleway 1 or Frithelstock Bridleway 2 - 11 miles)
- Wray Valley Trail - 7 miles and Stover Trails - 3.5 miles
- Granite Way - Granite Way - 2 sections Prewley to Lake and Southerly Down Sourton Bridleway 12 to Lydford - 4 miles
- Holsworthy (Windmill Road to Hollacombe) - 3.5 miles
- Exe Estuary Trail (Starcross) - 1.5 miles
- Okehampton (Fatherford) Granite & Gears project - 1 mile
- Drakes Trail (connection to Mary Tavy) - 0.62 miles
- Knowle link (Castle Lane) - 0.3 miles
- Bratton Fleming (NCN3) at Ditch End Cross - 0.14 miles

Total length of recreational trail accessible to horses – 47 miles approximately

Public rights of way

- Bridleways – 256.11 miles
- Restricted byways – 20.31 miles
- BOATs (byways open to all traffic) – 49.81 miles

Total public rights of way accessible to horses – 362.23 miles

Unsurfaced, unclassified County roads

These roads are not used by normal vehicular traffic but might be used by off-riders or farm vehicles.

Total length of uUCRs accessible to horses – 365 miles

Note that all public carriageways are also available except those with legal restrictions e.g. motorways.

Other access – not quantifiable

- Permissive access routes by permission of the landowner e.g. Clinton Devon Estates on the Pebblebed Heaths and the National Trust at several locations including Killerton.
- Forestry Commission woods and forests, some with waymarked horse trails and designated de-boxing car parks.
- Common Land on Dartmoor. The right to ride on the commons was established under the Dartmoor Commons Act 1985.