



Devon Countryside Access Forum
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Devon Countryside Access Forum

Physical Disability Access Position Statement

The Devon Countryside Access Forum recognises that everyone, whether residents or visitors, should be able to enjoy recreation in Devon's natural environment.

The issue

This Position Statement sets out recommendations for improving access to the countryside for people with limited mobility, including on Public Rights of Way and cycle/multi-use trails, and points readers to more detailed information.

Although this Statement focuses particularly on physical disabilities, it is worth noting that limited mobility affects a range of people, including parents with children in buggies; elderly or frail people, who might use an electric mobility scooter or wheelchair; and people with walking aids. Improving access for wheelchairs and large off-road electric mobility scooters can improve access for all.

Research shows that people with limited mobility are less likely to say they can access 'green spaces' and are less likely to visit the countryside. This is because they experience barriers that can be impossible to navigate. Barriers can include:

- stiles;
- steps;
- narrow gates, entrances, paths and exits;
- difficult or high handles and latches on gates;
- logs or earth mounds;
- steep gradients and cross-gradients; and
- overgrown vegetation.

The DCAF recognises that there are some routes that cannot be made accessible because of flights of steps or unavoidably narrow sections. However, many barriers can be removed at relatively low cost, opening up significant areas of countryside to more disabled people. The aim should be to achieve the least restrictive option.

Disabled people are now benefiting from ongoing technological improvements in mobility aids. Now, electric and all terrain scooters/buggies, such as the off-road Tramper, can

cope with more challenging gradients (25%) and cross gradients as well as having good ground clearance. All-terrain type scooters are quite capable of going across grass fields and open moorland. Such off-road scooters can even manage distances of 20 to 40 miles. A modest improvement to a gate may open up more extensive areas for access.

Access managers often under-estimate the capability of this new generation of off-road mobility scooters and may think access cannot be improved if routes are not suitable for wheelchairs, whereas it is highly likely that a Trampler off road scooter could cope adequately.

Making improvements

Major modifications to routes using very specific criteria are often inappropriate, especially in rural areas, or very expensive but relatively minor changes can often result in a much more accessible and enjoyable route, particularly for people with all-terrain scooters.

Improvements must be agreed with landowners and should consider how disabled people might be able to access the route while maintaining necessary measures to control farm animals and any vehicles. In some instances, changes will not be possible. Historic or locally important structures should be respected.

Some possible improvements include:

- Replacing stiles and kissing gates with 1.5 m wide gates with good latches and trombone handles. Where self-closing gates are required a two-way gate is preferable. Kissing gates that can be operated by radar keys may be an option in some locations. (e.g. National Trust Parke estate and Fremington Quay nature reserve). Latches are often over-looked but can ensure gates can be easily opened and closed. They should be positioned where they can be reached and in good condition. Long handles which can be reached at different heights are useful to open gates.
- Ensuring the path width and surface are suitable for wheelchairs, buggies and trampers helps many people. This does not mean that a route requires a road surface – minimising puddles, roots and ruts may be all that is needed. Many disabled people still want a countryside experience.
- Ramps rather than steps on approaches to bridges would greatly assist those with disabilities. Where steps are unavoidable, rest or landing areas should be included or there should be signposting to an alternative reasonable route.
- DCAF advises site managers to explore options for facilitating access for Trampler all terrain mobility scooters or making these available for hire, as has been successfully developed by Countryside Mobility South West.
- Routes for cyclists should take into account reclining bikes, trikes and modified bikes as well as Trampler type mobility scooters. These can be longer, lower or wider than a standard bike when navigating a gate or turning space.

Planning for better access

The Forum advises that improvements to Public Rights of Way should incorporate the highest possible access standards from the outset, and that managers should regularly

consider potential enhancements. For example, Parish Councils may be planning improvements to Public Rights of Way through Neighbourhood Plans and should consult disabled people on changes. This will ensure costly mistakes that inhibit access are avoided and that people are informed where it is not possible to make an adjustment and improvement. In planning or designing *new* routes the above recommendations should be considered from the beginning to achieve the highest standards possible. Several organisations have good practice guides to ensure disability access standards can be implemented.

It is also worth noting that improving access to the countryside isn't necessarily limited to improving paths and gateways. People with limited mobility may have other needs too. There are additional aspects to consider and these include:

- Connectivity (access to the site via accessible public transport, disabled parking bays or safe paths).
- Rest (stopping off points such as picnic tables, pubs, cafes and wheelchair (or mobility scooter) accessible toilets).
- Information (providing clear, easy to read information about the route or site so that people can plan their visit with confidence and consider making information usable by visually sighted and/or deaf persons)
- Sensory enhancements such as scented plants for visually impaired people. Also, suitable lighting and clear edges to paths in urban areas.

Legislation

Under the Equality Act 2010, Public Authorities (including County, District, Town and Parish Councils) have a pro-active legal duty to advance equality for disabled people. This includes meeting disabled people's needs. The Act also places a requirement on providers of services to the public to ensure people are not unlawfully discriminated against and that reasonable adjustments are anticipated and made for disabled people. Landowners who have public access or public rights of way across their land are not providers of public services, and therefore cannot be obliged under the Act to make reasonable adjustments, for example by changing a stile to a gate. Landowners who provide permissive access must comply with the Equality Act by considering what reasonable adjustments can be made for disabled people. However, this does not oblige them to put in place anything that would be an unreasonable cost, ineffective or impractical. More information:

<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en>

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>

<https://new.devon.gov.uk/equality/policy-and-legislation/equality-legislation>

The Department of Transport legislation states that Class 3 mobility scooters must have a maximum speed of 4 mph on pavements and 8 mph on roads, a width of 85 cm and an unladen weight of 150 kg. This class includes Tramper mobility scooters and the TGA 3 wheel Supersport.

<https://www.gov.uk/mobility-scooters-and-powered-wheelchairs-rules/rules-for-class-3-invalid-carriages>

Best Practice

For photos showing good practice and details of wheelchair and mobility scooter specifications see the DCAF website www.devon.gov.uk/dcaf

For more comprehensive information on standards, particularly when establishing a new route, see:

- Disabled Ramblers UK
<http://disabledramblers.co.uk/>
The Disabled Ramblers helps mobility-challenged people get back out into the countryside. Disabled ramblers have several categories of footpath from level 1 for manual wheelchairs to level 3 for off road scooters. Full details are on the website. One useful guide is their publication on Man-made Barriers and Least Restrictive Access
<http://disabledramblers.co.uk/access-issues/>
- Natural England's Trial of self-closing bridlegates
<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/4580441024102400>
The summary and conclusions make recommendations for disability access following a trial involving walkers, horse-riders, cyclists, disabled users and landowners.
- Sensory Trust information fact sheets
<https://www.sensorytrust.org.uk/information/index.html>
These include advice on access design, accessible green space, access to the countryside, seating and shelter and access to historic landscapes.

For more general information on current initiatives in Devon which benefit disability access see:

- Countryside Mobility SW (tramper buggy hire project)
<http://www.countrysidemobility.org/>
- Living Options Devon Heritage Ability project
www.heritageability.org

The Devon Countryside Access Forum is a statutory local access forum set up under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. Its members are volunteers, appointed by Devon County Council, to provide independent advice on "the improvement of public access to land for the purposes of open-air recreation and enjoyment". The members represent the interests of landowners/land managers, access users and other interests such as tourism and conservation.