

Advice on Width, area and height in England and Wales

The law and management of public access rights vary 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 access volunteers or staff at head office 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 ways used by equestrians.

Width for new routes

The intention of the widths recommended here is to provide a *useable* width of minimum 3 metres at all seasons, irrespective of whether a way is bounded by a hedge or fences, or may be fenced in future. A useable width is likely to require at least an additional half a metre to each side giving an overall width of 4 metres to avoid such as overgrowth reducing the useable width between cuts, or a rider catching a foot in a fence, or being snagged by barbed wire, or a horse-drawn vehicle having to avoid ruts. More than half a metre may be required where hedge growth must be accommodated for fast-growing hedge species or where the hedge is not cut each year.

A common difficult situation is where an unenclosed bridleway or byway with a recorded width of 2 metres becomes fenced as a 2 metre wide corridor, resulting in a useable width of only 1 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.

Observing users pass one another on an unenclosed bridleway or byway makes it clear that 2 metres is rarely the actual used width, most people will choose to give one another more space. Two pedestrians may pass each other within a 2 metre width, but two riders, or any combination of riders,

cyclists, carriage-drivers 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, may need more than 3 metres in which to turn easily. A horse-drawn vehicle with fixed shafts may need 4 metres or more. A corridor that is less than 4 metres wide makes turning potentially hazardous so any new route or reduction in width should ideally be 5 metres (especially when including horse-drawn vehicles) or provide turning/passing places.

The Society recognises that the circumstances for all new bridleways and byways (including 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 Diversion Orders

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

The Society will usually object to bridleway diversion proposals where the width of the replacement bridleway is less than 4 metres unless exceptional circumstances apply.

In Creation Agreements and Orders

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

For greenways and those considered to be of strategic importance, more than 5 metres allows comfortable space for different types of user, particularly if used by cyclists at speed. If segregation is thought necessary in a particular circumstance then the greater width makes this possible. Where available, a width greater than 5 metres also allows for the provision of trees and hedges and benches for resting to increase the attraction and health benefits of the route for all users.

For general maintenance or enforcement purposes

Where there is no substantive evidence of a right of way's width, the Society will request that a width of no less than 3 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 3 metres if bounded on one or both sides, 2 metres if open, based on the provisions of the Rights of Way Act 1990 for arable field paths).

The 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 and byways.

The width between gateposts (Highways Act 1980 Section 145) should be 1.5 metres on a bridleway, 3 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, 1.8 metres on a byway (see BHS Advice on Vehicle Barriers)..

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 right of way 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 provided that the remaining width is of a surface and nature which is resilient to use.

Area

Where it is necessary to turn a ridden horse (in order to close a gate, for example), the area of manoeuvring space should ideally be no less than 4 metres by 4 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.

Horse-drawn vehicles are likely to need to turn only if there is an obstruction which prevents them continuing, which could present a problem if an area less than 5 metres (depending on size of turnout) is available although, if absolutely necessary, a horse can be unhitched and the vehicle turned separately, but this is not a task to be considered normal or 'convenient' for a highway user.

Space and Safety at Gates for Ridden Horses

See BHS Advice on Gates. The recommended area for manoeuvring a ridden horse at a gate 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.

Drivers of horse-drawn vehicles are likely to be accompanied by another person who will open and close a gate. Additional space is not required but a gate at roadside which is not set back by at least 5 metres may put the horse and vehicle at risk from road traffic while waiting for the groom to close the gate and remount the vehicle.

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 should never be installed on the end of the bridge which is less than 3 metres wide. For any enclosed area it is recommended that:

- Clear manoeuvring space of at least 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).

If an area is likely to need to accommodate more than one ridden horse, such as a waiting area to cross a road, then more than 4 metres length or width will be required. For driven horses, a minimum of 6 metres length 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)
4. Vertical close board fencing has been used at roadside locations in waiting pens for light controlled crossings but while it may help horses feel safer while waiting, it will limit sightlines for equestrians

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 (Section 164 Highways Act 1980).

Metal palisade security fencing with spikes on top, commonly seen by railways, should be avoided alongside bridleways and byways as the injuries that could 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 or byways except where proper provision has been made at gates and the way is wide enough between the fencing (see BHS Advice on Electric Fencing).

Height

Overgrowth

The average height of a mounted rider is 2.5 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.

Horse-drawn vehicles vary in height but clearance to accommodate riders will also give clearance for drivers as those vehicles higher than a rider are very unlikely to be used as exercise vehicles.

Underpasses

Where underpasses are constructed to enable equestrians 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, equestrians would be expected to dismount although those with smaller horses and low vehicles may choose not to do if they are comfortable with the clearance. When a lower height has to be provided, a mounting block

should be provided at either end (see BHS Advice on Mounting Blocks) for those who are forced to dismount.

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. However, where a low or narrow underpass is the best available, equestrians must not be prevented from using it as many will be capable of doing so once the horse has accepted the new environment.

Please see www.bhs.org.uk/accessadvice for all BHS Advice referred to above.