



Living & Working
Access and Recreation

5. Policy Framework - Access and Recreation

5.9 Access and Recreation

Background

5.9.1 The countryside has increasingly become a popular destination for visitors and an important resource for informal recreation. The spectacular coast and countryside of the Dorset AONB attracts huge visitor numbers each year, for a range of activities. The AONB offers a variety of visitor sites, from country parks to historic buildings, but nationally it is estimated that three times as many trips are made to the wider countryside than to these 'managed sites'.



A walker enjoys the dramatic scenery of Eggardon Hill.

5.9.2 As a designated AONB, the primary task must be to conserve and enhance the countryside. National policy on the AONB designation states that recreation is "not an objective of designation but the demand for recreation should be met so far as it is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty".

5.9.3 The AONB provides a focus for recreation for Dorset residents, tourists and day visitors from Poole, Bournemouth and the surrounding region. Dorset has an extensive Rights of Way network, with 2,838 miles of footpaths, bridleways and byways. The AONB includes 71 miles of the South West Coast Path National Trail and a number of other long distance routes. Private landowners and estates, for example The National Trust, R.S.P.B., Weld Estate and the Ministry of Defence also provide land or routes with public access. Numerous areas of coast and countryside are favoured for walking or just relaxing and enjoying the views, including 'honey-pot' sites such as



Access should be suitable for all abilities wherever possible.

Studland and Lulworth Cove, with Golden Cap and Chesil Beach providing very different scenery in the west of the AONB. Popular activities include walking, cycling, riding, country sports, hang gliding, climbing, sailing, fossil hunting and bird watching.

5.9.4 Although visitor pressure on the countryside can have negative impacts on wildlife, heritage features, landscape and tranquillity, visitors can also generate income for the rural economy, help support village services and may bring opportunities for new ventures. Recent research (carried out by SW Tourism and Exeter University) indicates that the South West Coast Path generates around £300m a year for the region's economy.

5.9.5 New areas of open access land will be created under the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000. This will give people a right to walk over areas of registered common land and open country (mountain, moor, heath or downland). For Dorset, the Act may open up some additional areas of heathland in Purbeck and chalk downland, and there will also be isolated new "pockets" of land which, unless links can be made to existing (or new) Rights of Way, will remain inaccessible to public access. Much desirable walking country is already open to the public through private landowners such as RSPB, National Trust and private estates.

5.9.6 Recreation has been identified as a recognised component of health and well-being, and the number of people using the AONB for leisure activities is increasing. In some fragile areas of the AONB like sections of the South West Coast Path, this presents challenges, with the sheer number of visitors damaging the environment and tranquillity that many come to enjoy.

5.9.7 In addition to the wider countryside, there is a need for a variety of provision for community use in recreational terms – community woodland, country parks, village greens, open space provision and green links close to communities. As well as providing space for informal recreation "on the doorstep" they may well offer an introduction to the enjoyment of the wider countryside.

5.9.8 Integrating access and recreation within wider policy is the key to ensuring the protection of the AONB. For example, there are often poor links between public transport and recreation sites, meaning that much recreation is only available to those travelling by car. This has major environmental implications for the AONB and

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contributes to the congestion often experienced during the summer months.

5.9.9 Practical integration of the Rights of Way network can also cause problems for users. Sometimes paths and bridleways necessitate busy road crossings or stretches of road need to be used to link routes, putting the user at risk from traffic and discouraging use on safety grounds.

5.9.10 In addition, access is not purely about recreational use. There is a need to develop more utility routes – routes appropriate to people’s everyday needs – for use such as safe walking routes for schools and links between settlements and town and country. These could help assimilate walking and cycling more fully within an integrated transport system.



Recreation is a recognised component of well-being.

5.9.11 A major issue that has been consistently raised through consultation is the danger of turning Dorset’s countryside into a ‘theme park’. Inappropriate structures or development, loss of local identity and projection of a “rural idyll” rather than a living, working environment could easily convey this artificial image, which leads to unrealistic expectations of the countryside from many visitors. Education about the duties and responsibilities of those who use the countryside and those who manage it, play a key part in ensuring that the realities of the countryside are understood. This will also help to re-connect people with their landscape heritage and engender respect and pride in the natural beauty of the Dorset AONB. However over-interpretation, profuse and obtrusive signage can lead to the loss of excitement and adventure in the open countryside, whereas too little signage makes the countryside an unwelcoming place for non-traditional users. Whilst it is essential to raise understanding of rural issues and to make the countryside accessible to all, this must be achieved in a sensitive and balanced way.

Current Trends

5.9.12 There is considerable emphasis on increasing and improving access opportunities through the CROW Act, agri-environment schemes and other initiatives.

5.9.13 The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 means that greater efforts need to be made to increase access for all abilities.

5.9.14 Demand for recreation opportunities is increasing as the need to escape the stresses of modern urban life rises and the health benefits of exercise are recognised. Household expenditure on recreation has increased substantially over the past thirty years.



Farrier shoeing horse.

5.9.15 Lack of access to recreational opportunities is widely recognised as one of the contributory factors leading to social exclusion.

5.9.16 Current government thinking links recreation in the countryside with wider social, tourism and rural regeneration policies. For example the Environment Agency advocates greater use of rivers and reservoirs for water-based activities. The Forestry Commission supports and encourages a diverse range of activities within its forests ranging from mountain biking trails to art, music and theatre.

Key Issues

5.9.17 The key issues for access and recreation in the AONB include:

- Lack of integration of countryside access and recreation provision.
- Space for informal recreational provision within communities is often overlooked.
- Impacts of high visitor pressure on wildlife, heritage, landscape and tranquillity.
- Conflicts of interest between users of the countryside and those who manage it – need for education about rights and responsibilities of both.

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Canoeing in Poole Harbour.

- Agreement and harmony with the landscape for co-ordination in signage and interpretation between different information providers e.g. World Heritage Site, Tourism, Countryside Service, private, advertising.
- Limited resources for maintenance of Rights of Way network and sites - income from tourism could directly support the countryside which people come to enjoy.
- Sustainable management of the South West Coast Path on a very vulnerable section of coast.
- Poor integration between access / recreation and the transport network.
- Recreation is not sufficiently addressed in the wider strategic context.
- Lack of countryside / gateway sites particularly in the north and west of the county.
- Limited recognition and understanding of the special qualities of the AONB and the importance of the countryside as a working environment.

Key Opportunities

5.9.18 The key opportunities for access and recreation include:

- Development of Rights of Way Improvement Plans (CROW Act 2000) presents a major opportunity to incorporate any new open access provision where appropriate and improve current Rights of Way network, providing it is adequately resourced.
- Achievement of sustainable rural tourism in the AONB is dependent upon substantial investment in facilities for informal recreation

in a viable and usable Rights of Way and Quiet Lanes network.

- Significant network of Permissive Paths funded under DEFRA agri-environment schemes.
- Children's Fund and Countryside Agency funding has created a new post (Community Play and Recreation Facilitator) with Dorset Community Action to work with communities across Dorset to increase and improve their outdoor play provision. Living Spaces Programme provides funding support to community groups wanting to create or improve play and open space areas.
- Forests and woodlands can provide a unique sense of remoteness, accommodate recreational pursuits, link areas of open access and hide infrastructure.
- Proposed development of a North Dorset Countryside Centre in Sturminster Newton would provide a northern gateway to the AONB.
- Traditional country sports command a strong following in rural areas and provide considerable benefit to rural businesses and management of woodland and field margins.



Climbing at Dancing Ledge in Purbeck.

Current Activity

5.9.19 Current initiatives include:

- **Open Access Land Mapping Process** (under CROW Act 2000), has been through its provisional phase. When agreed, the conclusive map will show the new access areas which are for walking, sightseeing, birdwatching, picnicking, running and climbing only. Government time scale assumes

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completion of process in 2004.

- **Dorset Local Access Forum.** This is a joint forum, statutorily required under the CROW Act 2000 to offer independent advice to the Highway Authorities in Dorset on public access to land and open-air recreation and enjoyment throughout the County. The Forum have produced a consultation document 'A Future for Countryside Access in Dorset' which will feed into the statutory Rights of Way Improvement Plan for Dorset.
- **Rights of Way Improvement Plans.** Highway Authorities are statutorily required to provide information highlighting their performance regarding Public Rights of Way responsibilities as well as identifying improvements to the network, (CROW Act 2000) Dorset's will be produced by 2007. Currently Dorset Countryside is carrying out a project (with the Countryside Agency) in the Blackmore Vale to pilot future implementation of the Rights of Way Improvement Plans.
- **South West Coast Path.** The strategy ('More than just a Path') outlines new Path Management systems to increase quality of path in accordance with National Trail standards, priority re-alignments and manage associated landscape corridor to maximise economic potential for local communities.
- **Dorset Countryside Rangers and other organisations.** The Rangers, along with RSPB, National Trust etc organise guided walks and events at locations throughout the County.
- **Other access projects and initiatives.** These include the Wessex Ridgeway Project, the Purbeck Leisure Bus, North Dorset Trailway Project, Studland Transport Project, Purbeck Cycleways Project and the National Sailing Academy.

Related Policies and Strategies

5.9.20 Policies, strategies and documents relating to access and recreation in the AONB include:

- *Countryside & Rights of Way (CROW) Act 2000*
- *Disability Discrimination Act 1995*
- *'Saving Lives, Our Healthier Nation'* (July 1999) - Government action plan to tackle health
- *'NHS National Service Framework (1998-2003)'* - Healthy Exercise Prescription programmes



Horse riding is a popular activity in the AONB.

- *'More than just a path'* (South West Coast Path Team, 1997)
- *'Milestone Statement'* (Dorset County Council, 1999)
- *'Dorset Local Transport Plan (2001-2006)'* - includes cycling and walking as integral elements
- *'A Future for Countryside Access in Dorset'* - (Local Access Forum, 2003) Consultation document
- *'Dorset Local Agenda 21 Strategy'* (2001) and *'Dorset in the 21st Century: An Agenda for Action'* (Dorset Local Agenda 21 Group, 1999)
- *'Dorset Coast Strategy'* (Dorset Coast Forum 1999)
- *'Dorset Action for Rural Transport (DART) Action Plan'* (DART Partnership, 1999)
- *'Making it Happen (2002-2007)'* Environment Agency and *'England Forestry - A new Focus for England's Woodlands'* (1999) Forestry Commission - examples where access and recreation have been built into wider strategies.
- *'Purbeck Countryside Recreation Strategy'* (Purbeck District Council, 2000)
- *'Preventing Social Exclusion'* (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001)
- *'Countryside & Interpretation Strategy for the Wessex region (1997 - 2001)'* (National Trust, 1997)



Fishing in Poole Harbour.

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5.9.21 Dorset AONB Policy Framework - Access and Recreation

Policy Aims

- Facilitate enjoyment of the special qualities of the AONB.
- Ensure a strategic understanding and integration of access and recreation provision in social, cultural and economic policy frameworks.
- Promote better understanding of rural issues and countryside management requirements.
- Encourage sustainable access and recreation including integration with sustainable transport provision.

Policy Objectives

- AR1. Development of a Rights of Way Improvement and Access development plan to guide sustainable access provision.
- AR2. Identify opportunities for improving the provision and quality of access links to the open countryside.
- AR3. Seek to “join up” access and recreation provision where possible to increase options for user.
- AR4. Promote the provision and benefits of access and recreation.
- AR5. Develop and promote a network of rural roads, quiet lanes and greenways to enhance recreation in the AONB.
- AR6. Develop initiatives which incorporate and demonstrate sustainable access and recreation provision.
- AR7. Ensure adequate, sensitive provision of high quality information and interpretation.
- AR8. Provide for the continued good management of access and recreation provision.
- AR9. Ensure that Community, Parish and Village plans inform access and recreation provision.