



Out and about

We are fortunate to have a vast network of Public Rights of Way in Dorset, these take us to many beautiful and wonderful places. Paths are part of our rich cultural heritage. Many are very old, others have emerged following legislative changes. To keep these arteries of the countryside open and useable for everyone's enjoyment, we must maintain and manage them – but most importantly, enjoy them.

A few facts

Knowing the network

Dorset has 2882 miles of Public Rights of Way – a network of footpaths, bridleways and byways.

Some of these Public Rights of Way are nationally designated long distance routes such as the South West Coast Path National Trail. Other long distance paths such as the Wessex Ridgeway are also gaining recognition as special efforts are being made to develop their character and accessibility.

Exporing the landscape

Many paths are very old and provide an interesting insight into people's lives in the past. They can connect us with our past and, if cherished and celebrated, connect us to the future too. They are a great way of experiencing the fantastic landscape in Dorset – often a chance to see nooks and crannies of the county you would miss in the car!

Bringing benefits

Walking and riding have significant health benefits – the value of regular exercise and time to unwind. However, the benefits of rights of way go far beyond health – a well managed and promoted network can bring new income to landowners and local business.

Improving access

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 Part III has been the catalyst for improving accessibility of Public Rights of Way where practical. Developing easy access paths for disabled people can benefit everyone.

Maintenance

In Dorset maintenance of Public Rights of Way is shared between the Dorset Countryside Service and landowners. The Dorset Countryside Service consists of Access Officers and Countryside Rangers who are responsible for signposting and way-marking, surfacing, bridges, promoted trails, circular routes, countryside sites, information and interpretation.

Improvement

The future of Public Rights of Way depends on them being used and useful to our way of life. In achieving this, the Dorset Countryside Service is preparing a Rights of Way Improvement Plan to guide its work and develop a network of improved countryside access across Dorset. This is an ongoing process and you can use the ideas in this toolkit to establish how the paths in your area could be improved and get the necessary actions into the Dorset Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP).

What you can do

• See what you've got

Do a survey to record the condition and character of your local paths. Look at everything critically – signposts, waymarks, stiles, gates, path surfaces and think about what works well and things that could be improved. You may also like to record things you see along the way – interesting wildlife, plants, viewpoints ... even the good cafes or pubs you come across! Make a note of bus stops / train stations and whether these connect to your path network well. Look at where they cross roads and think about whether these crossings are safe and/or where a new path could mean that you don't have to walk/ride along a dangerous stretch of road. Feed your findings into ROWIP process (see front page).



Advice: Countryside Access Development Officer, Dorset Countryside Service

Things to be aware of: You must always get permission from the landowner before you start.

• Making the most

If a new development is planned for your area, look at the planning application as it relates to Public Rights of Way. See if the new development will have an impact on existing paths and consider how new paths could be incorporated into the plans to benefit the whole community.

• Get a ROWLO for

Having a Rights of Way Liaison Officer for your local area is a good way of keeping up to date with all things to do with Rights of Way and new initiatives from the Dorset Countryside Service. Training and regular area meetings are organised.
Advice: Countryside Access Development Officer, Dorset Countryside

• Joining the dots

For footpaths & bridleways to be useful for 'getting about', they need to get people to the local shop / pub / school / playing field in a safe and easy manner. Take a step back and look at where people are trying to get to regularly in your area and think about how new paths may help them get there easier and without using their car. Feed your findings into the

ROWIP process (see above)
Advice: Countryside Access Development Officer, Dorset Countryside Service; School Travel Adviser, Dorset County Council.



• Access for all?

There may be demand for improving the accessibility of some paths in your area so that people of all abilities including those using wheelchairs, pushchairs and electric buggies can use them. Sometimes very simple changes such as swapping stiles for gates, or installing benches for people to rest, may be all that is needed.

Advice: Countryside Access Development Officer, Dorset Countryside Service
Further information: Fieldfare Trust publications
Things to be aware of: Always talk to the landowner right at the beginning of any project like this.

• Get your hands d

There are simple things you can do locally to keep paths open and accessible all year round. It could be as simple as clipping back bramble when you are out and about during the summer. However, groups often get together to improve waymarking, clearing more substantial vegetation, improving drainage or resurfacing.
Advice: Countryside Access Development Officer, Dorset Countryside, BTCV (British Trust for Conservation Volunteers)

• Paths to the past

With the help of old maps, documents and memories, you can find out where you oldest paths went to and what they were used for. A great insight into how people lived their lives. Make the most of what you find out – how about resurrecting old track names with new signs, or work with local school children to make pictures, maps and stories with what you have found out? Would an historic trail be of interest locally?

of new developments

Advice: Countryside Access Development Officer, Dorset Countryside Service

Things to be aware of: Notice of planning applications are posted on site, in local news papers and Parish Councils are also notified.

your area

Things to be aware of: ROWLO's are appointed by the Parish Council – check if a ROWLO already exists for the Parish and if so work with them.



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Funding: BTCV for setting up a group / tools

Things to be aware of: Before commencing ANY practical work you MUST contact Dorset County Council. You will also need advice on health & safety issues relating to the public and volunteers and personal accident & public liability insurance. Try not to disturb wildlife – some species are protected by law. Tool hire from Dorset Countryside.



Advice: Countryside Access Development Officer, Dorset Countryside Service; Common Ground website

Funding: Heritage Lottery Fund, Awards for all

Things to be aware of: Always talk to the landowner right at the beginning of any project like this – they may be a wealth of information and their permission is vital.

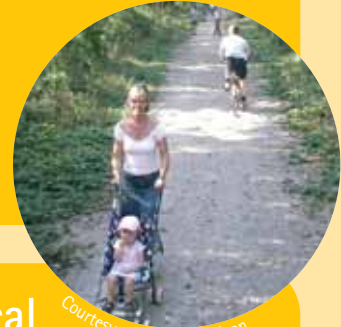
• Promoting your best paths

Promoting selected paths in your area with a leaflet or on a parish website can benefit the local economy and be a way of celebrating or developing understanding of an area. If you have a pub, café or shop, work with them to promote walks which bring thirsty & hungry walkers & riders past their door ... it all helps to keep local services viable. If possible, link these routes to public transport services to avoid an increase in traffic.

Advice: Countryside Access Development Officer, Dorset Countryside Service

Funding: AONB Sustainable Development Funds

Things to be aware of: Always talk to the landowner right at the beginning of any project like this.



• Explore and enjoy your local public rights of way together

Get a group together to explore your local paths by foot, bike or horse. Leave the car at home and see how far you can get. Enjoy the opportunity to get fit, de-stress and discover bits of your locality you never knew existed. Doing it in a group may help you do this regularly and go further than you would on your own.

Advice: Countryside Access Development Officer, Dorset Countryside Service

Information: Walking the Way to Health website

Things to be aware of: Countryside Code

• Linking to long distance routes

Long distance routes such as the South West Coast Path, the Wessex Ridgeway, North Dorset Trailway and the Frome Valley Trailway have a higher standard of maintenance than local paths and there may also be projects to increase their economic benefit or promote their heritage

underway. If you are close to any of these routes, it is worth contacting Dorset Countryside Service to see if local links could be made.

Advice: Dorset Countryside Service, Countryside Access Development Officer

• Access land

New opportunities for outdoor recreation in your countryside now exist as Access Land. Areas of accessible downland, heathland, moorland and registered common land in Dorset are detailed on Ordnance Survey Explorer maps and Countryside Agency website. Have a look at the maps for your area to see if there is any Access Land in your Parish. Some access land is difficult to get to, could you work with

landowners to determine permissive routes to access this land?

Advice: Dorset Countryside Access Development Officer & Countryside Open Access Development Officer





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Ideas for Action

Taking stock

A survey to record the condition and character of your local paths is a good starting point to improving your rights of way network for the future. For Public Rights of Way to be used and enjoyed today and in the future, they must meet our modern needs. By taking a step back and looking at your Public Rights of Way as a whole, you will begin to get a picture of what works and what could be improved for the future. And in doing so you may discover bits of your local area you never knew existed!

Easy access

Not everyone finds it easy to leap over stiles and trudge through muddy tracks and so are often unable to enjoy the countryside on their doorstep. Improving the quality of some of your local paths will improve access for all. It needn't mean an ugly tarmac transformation either – sometimes a well positioned seat, handrail or gate replacing a stile can open up a whole new world to people.

Planning new paths

If a new development is planned for your area, look at how new paths could be incorporated into the plans to benefit the whole community.

Getting your hands dirty

Help keep paths open and accessible all year round – simple tasks like co-ordinated clipping of bramble will help. However, community groups often take on bigger projects such as way marking, clearing more substantial vegetation, improving drainage or resurfacing.

Walking back in time

Old paths can be a great insight into how people lived their lives in the past. Using old maps, documents and memories, piece together a picture of the past based on your oldest paths. Record and celebrate the stories they tell.

Making the most of your paths

If you have a good path network, make it work for you. Encourage people to use them by promoting your paths, their history and wildlife. Emphasise links to local shops, pubs and public transport and help keep these services viable for your local community.

If you want to take up any of these ideas, there's a lot of help available. See over for how to get started.

Case study

Wessex Ridgeway Farm Walks

Eight landowners near Alton Pancras got together to develop a series of farm trails in the vicinity of the Wessex Ridgeway. Together with Dorset Countryside Service, the Parish Council and local walkers, they looked at the existing paths and drew up a list of improvements to make the paths more enjoyable and accessible to use.

The landowners worked together on a series of farm trails and information boards which interpret the farms, agricultural good practice & food production, as well as their wildlife, geology and archaeology.

A grant was awarded for locally made traditional Dorset gates, new signs and information panels which all helped bring the paths up to a high standard.

The project has improved the area for recreation and made it more accessible for a wider range of people. It has also helped improve the public's perceptions of farmers and farming practices.



Courtesy of Dorset Countryside Service



Courtesy of Dorset Countryside Service

If you are interested in taking up any of these ideas in your local area, we have more detailed information to help you.

For each topic in this pack, you can request our additional sheets which include more actions, a guide to who can help with advice and support, sources of funding available and things to be aware of before you start. These are all free and updated regularly.

For your free copy, contact the Dorset AONB Office:

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