

Natural England Standard

Access: why we do what we do



1:0 An introduction

Strategic standards for 'why we do what we do'

We have a set of standards for 'why we do what we do' for each of the main areas of our work where we help deliver environmental outcomes. These are: Access, Biodiversity, Climate Change, Ecosystem Approach, Engagement, Landscape, Land Management, Land use and Marine. They describe the relevant legislation and Government policy, our role, and the principles that we apply to our work.

The standards are for all our staff and will provide:

- a common framework to help us work more consistently
- a coherent picture of our role, Government policy and how we deliver for the natural environment, people and places
- a clearer and shared understanding of our role as a science-led, impartial delivery body
- our customers with a better understanding of what we do and why.

A number of common themes are listed below which run through the principles in the standards. As such they illustrate key attributes that will be evident across our work and our contribution to national and local priorities.

1. Gathering, interpreting and providing evidence and information that those making decisions and choices need.
2. Practical advice that helps secure a high quality and diverse natural environment, which provides services of benefit to people and the economy and is resilient to climate change.
3. Enabling and supporting people to act for and engage with the natural environment.
4. Ensuring that the natural environment contributes to green growth and quality of life.
5. Working with and through others.
6. Responsive to local circumstances and customer needs.

2:0 Access strategic standard - definition and scope

The term *access* encompasses open-air recreation, including walking, cycling, horse riding and canoeing. It covers facilities such as footpaths and other public rights of way; open access land; designated and managed sites such as National Nature Reserves (NNRs), Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) and Country Parks; informal open spaces and other local greenspace; rivers, lakes, canals, coastal and marine waters. The term *access* also

includes information about, and promotion of, open-air recreational opportunities that people can enjoy.

Open-air recreation is a significant feature of life in England. In 2011/12 2.73 billion adults visited the natural environment, with 42% of the population visiting at least once a week. Of these visits 53% were in the countryside; 37% in urban greenspace and 11% at the coast. Two thirds of visits were within two miles of home, highlighting the importance of local access facilities. An estimated £20 billion was spent in 2011/12 in visits to the natural environment.

To support this activity there are a range of formal and informal facilities. This includes approximately 190,000 km (118,000 miles) of recorded footpaths and other public rights of way; thirteen National Trails, such as the Pennine Way, offering c.4,000 km (2,500 miles) of well managed routes through our finest countryside; approximately 865,000 hectares of Open Access Land, over 400 Country Parks and many hundreds of accessible LNRs, woodland sites and country estates.

3:0 Government policy and statutory context

The principle that people should have access to the natural environment, including to our highest quality landscapes is supported by a sizeable legacy of legislation going back over half a century, often seeking to give legal effect to long-standing freedoms of access along particular routes or over particular types of land. The key statutory provisions include:

- **The National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, 1949.** Established the mechanisms for National Parks (including a recreation remit), National Trails, and the recording of the historical rights of way network.
- **Countryside Act 1968.** Established the basis for designation of Country Parks.
- **Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.** Established the principles and mechanisms for recording and managing rights of access to open country and registered common land, including arrangements for dedicating additional land.
- **Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006.** Extended the purposes of National (and other) Nature Reserves to include a recreational purpose where this does not conflict with the core conservation purpose. The Act specifically mentions promoting and encouraging access.
- **Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009.** Required Natural England and the Secretary of State to create a walking route around the whole open coast of England together with an associated margin of accessible land.

The importance of access to the natural environment is reiterated in the [Natural Environment White Paper \(2011\)](#) placing emphasis on the importance of accessible local greenspace including a proposed new Green Areas designation. Likewise [Biodiversity 2020: A strategy](#)

[for England's wildlife and ecosystem services](#) recognises the significance of physical access to nature as part of the aspiration to 'reconnect people with nature'.

4:0 Natural England's role

Our approach to access is fundamental to the achievement of Natural England's overarching general purpose, as it ensures that through open-air recreation people directly experience and enjoy some of the benefits of the natural environment.

Our role requires us to maintain the unique knowledge and expertise required to work with and through others to:

- secure and improve the rights of way network (an important means by which people can gain safe, off-road access to the natural environment)
- make National Trails sustainable, high-quality routes through our finest landscapes
- implement and manage the access rights to open country and registered common land
- make NNRs more accessible and attractive to visitors
- support the creation and development of accessible local greenspace (e.g. Millennium Greens, Country Parks)
- provide access as part of delivering on wider natural environment objectives, for example through agri-environment agreements, and the development of the ecosystems approach
- deliver the England Coast Path; and
- advise Government, Defra and other government departments on matters relating to informal recreation in and enjoyment of the outdoors. And set standards and offer relevant advice to others with an interest in access.

Natural England's Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment ([MENE](#)) is a set of national statistics providing trend data on access to the natural environment, as well as data on the reasons for people accessing it.

5:0 The principles we apply to our work

AA1: Delivering our statutory responsibilities for access in an effective and collaborative way

We will deliver our statutory responsibilities, by working as effectively and collaboratively as possible, for example working with communities to find an effective way of improving off-road access opportunities for horse riders and cyclists. Our general powers and duties have implications for access, for example our advice to local authorities on planning matters, but some are more specific. The most important of these specific access responsibilities are i) powers to propose National Trails, and our partnership working with the authorities that manage them ii) a duty to prepare, issue and periodically review maps of open access land, and iii) a duty to propose a National Trail around the coast.

AA2: Providing information, advice and evidence about access

We will make available the best environmental, social and economic evidence on the benefits of access to the natural environment. We will provide advice about creating and managing accessible places and the provision of information to the public. We shall base our advice on the best available evidence and in ways that enable people to make informed choices and take positive action where they wish. We will provide evidence about the state and trends of access to the natural environment; for example the Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment ([MENE](#)) survey. Based on the best available evidence and our experience and knowledge of delivery, we provide advice to Government for developing more detailed policy about access.

AA3: Integrating Access provision across our work areas

We will improve access provision by integrating access outcomes into our wider work; for example, ensuring access benefits are secured through the ecosystems approach, our management of the NNR estate, and our advice on proposals affecting Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs).

AA4: Supporting others to improve access provision

We will work to establish and maintain effective support for communities including Local Access Forums, to enable them to identify and meet their own priorities for safeguarding, improving, and promoting the access opportunities that matter to them. We will work with stakeholders to agree ways of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of access provision and management, including for England's National Trails.

AA5: Contributing to the evidence about access provision and its value

Working with partners and communities we will build evidence about good practice, particularly the effective integration of access with nature conservation and the environmental, social, and economic impacts of access. We also gather new evidence about access trends to the natural environment.

Quick reference

Type of standard	Strategic standard
Purpose:	Sets out the principles that all staff are expected to apply to their work
Owner(s):	Access & Engagement Function
Sign-off:	Liz Newton, Director Access & Engagement Rob Aubrook, Director Standards
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