

Grants and incentives for managing and improving countryside access in England and Wales

There are significant gaps in the support currently available to facilitate the new right of access under the present framework of grant aid and incentives.

Summary

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 Part I grants a statutory right to walk on land designated as open country and registered common land ('access land'). This will eventually open up some 1.1 million hectares of countryside for people's enjoyment in England and Wales.

In addition, wider objectives for access, beyond the Act's basic statutory requirements, could be achieved by:

- meeting the needs of a broader range of visitors such as disabled people, cyclists and horse-riders, and
- improving access opportunities in the wider countryside, for example through voluntary dedication by landowners.

Targeted support will be necessary, both to facilitate the new statutory right of access and to achieve wider voluntary improvements to countryside access. Support for open access is a pressing priority, in view of UK Government and Welsh Assembly commitments to introduce the new right on open country and registered commons by 2005.



This research considers what infrastructure and management tools would be necessary to facilitate the new statutory right of access on foot and to encourage wider voluntary improvements. It then examines the way national grant schemes and other incentives currently operate in England and Wales, and whether or not they could help to meet these requirements.

In their present form, grants and incentives are generally inadequate to facilitate the introduction of statutory open access or to support wider voluntary improvements. Constraints such as eligibility rules and broader policy objectives mean that gaps exist between what is required and what might be funded under the present schemes.

Consideration needs to be given either to adapting one or more existing schemes or to developing a completely new scheme, in order to support a full range of access infrastructure and management tools. Local support, delivered by local highway authorities and National Park authorities, should have an important role to play, but this is not covered by the research.

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Background

This research was commissioned jointly by the Countryside Agency, Countryside Council for Wales, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, English Nature and the Forestry Commission.

In particular, the research set out to:

- define the recreational infrastructure and management tools necessary to facilitate the new statutory right of access on foot;
- identify further measures that could be used to improve access beyond the basic statutory requirements of the Act by:
 - extending access in the wider countryside;
 - improving opportunities for a wider range of users;
- determine the extent to which existing grants and incentives could be used to implement these measures, and where any gaps might lie.

The research drew on the experiences of National Parks, local authorities, and others in managing public access in four case studies in England and Wales.

The primary focus of the research was to consider how grant aid schemes and other initiatives could help to implement the new open access provisions.

The Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 Part 1

- Part I grants a statutory right of public access on foot to open country (mountain, moor, heath and down) and registered common land in England and Wales.
- Section 16 provides a new power for landowners to dedicate their land permanently for access. Dedication will make it possible to extend the new statutory right of access to woodlands, inland watersides and other areas of attractive countryside.
- The Act allows for access by cyclists, horse riders, canoeists or others with the permission of landowners.
- The Act appoints local highway authorities and National Park Authorities as access authorities, with powers to negotiate means of access for the public, appoint wardens, make byelaws and erect notices on access land.
- Access can be restricted locally, where necessary for the purposes of land management, public safety, nature or heritage conservation.

Main findings

How to facilitate the new right of access on foot

The Government is committed to introducing the new statutory right on open country and common land by 2005. This will work best if facilitated by planned and targeted visitor management. The overriding priority, therefore, is to ensure that the right infrastructure and management tools are in place for this to happen. These include:

- measures that make land more easily accessible to the public on foot; and
- informal techniques which influence the way visitors use the land and keep formal restrictions or closures to a minimum – for example providing attractive paths that steer people away from sensitive areas.

The amount of support actually necessary will vary according to the level of visitor use, the presence of wildlife or heritage interests, and land management activities taking place on the land. In areas where active management is justified, support will be essential to facilitate introduction of the new right.

Good visitor management enables people to enjoy the countryside in a way that respects important nature conservation, heritage and land management interests.

Appropriate support measures include:

- advice on how to prepare and plan for visitors on access land;
- providing and maintaining paths, gates and signs which help walkers use the land;
- creating routes to link ‘islands’ of access land to the local path network;
- positive visitor management through, for example, information, interpretation or a warden service.

The Act grants a range of statutory powers to National Park authorities and local highway authorities (“access authorities”). The new powers should enable them to deliver these measures, if they are adequately resourced.

How to improve access beyond the new statutory requirements

Other improvements that go beyond the basic requirements of the Act may be desirable in cases of clear public benefit. As these are not requirements of the Act, they would rely on the voluntary cooperation of land managers.

Public benefit from access land could be maximised by:

- providing opportunities for those not benefiting directly from the new right of access on foot, such as cyclists, horse-riders and disabled people;
- encouraging more people to appreciate open access through interpretation.

Public access in the wider countryside could be improved for all users (including walkers) on land not included under the basic statutory provisions. The following types of support measures would help improve access beyond the basic statutory requirements:

- **New routes and links** that improve the network for a wide range of users – for example, creating circular routes with new cycleways or bridleways, or upgrading existing routes so they are suitable for disabled people.
- **Encouraging landowners to dedicate their land permanently for access through grant aid and other incentives**, targeted to provide access where there is proven demand.
- **Services that encourage people to enjoy public access**, such as information, interpretation and support for educational visits.
- **Special projects** that significantly enhance local access opportunities – for example, improving access to water with a canoe launching facility for a local canoeing club.
- **Improving rural public transport**, so that the countryside becomes more accessible for everyone, including families and disabled people.
- **Planning and monitoring the effects of visitor use**, to inform strategic access planning and ensure an integrated approach to visitor management.
- **Encouraging voluntary access agreements** under the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, through management agreements (which aim to preserve the character of access land) under the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act, and through other permissive agreements.

Current grants and incentives

Existing schemes that contribute to countryside access include the following:

- agri-environment schemes including the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA) Scheme in England, and Tir Gofal in Wales;
- the Woodland Grant Scheme;
- nature conservation grants and management agreements;
- Lottery funds;
- the Rural Transport Partnership;
- local grant schemes, such as those delivered by local highway authorities and National Park authorities (local schemes were not covered by the research).

Existing grants and incentives provide some support for public access, but are constrained to varying extents by scheme rules and objectives.

The scope for existing schemes to support statutory and voluntary access objectives

The new statutory right of access on foot

Under the present framework of incentive schemes there would be significant gaps in the support required to facilitate the new right of access on foot.

- No significant support is likely to be available to provide advice on visitor management on open country and commons.

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- There would be insufficient support for access infrastructure and positive visitor management on access land.
- Some schemes could support new links to access land from the local path network, or be adapted to incorporate this objective on review.
- Open country and registered common land is excluded from any new access payments under agri-environment schemes.
- The Woodland Grant Scheme could support a range of access facilities and management tools on some wooded commons and dedicated woodlands.
- Limited support may be available to manage access on sensitive wildlife sites through schemes administered by English Nature and the Countryside Council for Wales.

Voluntary improvements to maximise the benefits from access land

Support available through schemes in their present forms is likely to be limited by eligibility criteria and other constraints, and significant gaps remain.

- Under current rules, Countryside Stewardship and the ESA scheme cannot support access on access land for disabled people, horse riders and cyclists, but this may change on review.
- In Wales, Tir Gofal will continue to support improvements not required under the Act, such as access for horse riders and cyclists.
- Lottery funding could create opportunities on access land for disabled people, horse riders, cyclists and other higher rights.
- Lottery funding may also be available for projects which encourage wider appreciation and understanding of open access.

At present, there is no significant financial encouragement to dedicate land permanently for public access under section 16.

Voluntary improvements to access in the wider countryside

Access in the wider countryside is supported by a broader framework of grants and incentives, but there are significant gaps too.

- Various schemes help improve access in the wider countryside by supporting new routes and links in the path network, special projects to meet local access needs, and information and interpretation for visitors.
- Countryside Stewardship, Tir Gofal and the Woodland Grant Scheme all support new facilities for horse-riders, cyclists and disabled people.
- The targeting of agri-environment schemes for public access is constrained by the need to deliver other scheme objectives relating to biodiversity, landscape and archaeology.
- The Rural Transport Fund helps make the countryside more accessible, by funding improvements to transport to and from the countryside.
- No incentives are currently available to encourage the permanent dedication of land for public access under section 16 of the Act. Lottery funding may be flexible enough to support dedication, but none of the major distributors are currently developing grant schemes for landowners who might be willing to do so, if the right incentives were available.
- There is little support for the planning or monitoring of public access.
- There are no financial incentives to encourage voluntary agreements for access under the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act or the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act.

Further Reading

Copies of the full report can be obtained by emailing access@countryside.gov.uk

Countryside Agency Research Notes can also be viewed on our website: www.countryside.gov.uk