

**Document on disabled people and access to the countryside.
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People are individuals, coming in all sorts of different shapes and sizes, colour and abilities, but all deserving respect. Although we all have prejudices of some sort or another, what we must guard against is letting these become discrimination. Like others, disabled people expect to be able to conduct our lives as fully as possible, and that means being enabled to live fully within our means despite impairment we may have which influence our mobility, hearing, mental capacity or sight. Although there are over 9 million disabled people in the UK, plus others temporarily disabled, we should not be considered abnormal, deserving pity, cotton wooling or separating into ghettos. The offer of a helping hand is always welcome, provided you accept a 'No thanks', if that is the reply.

In Somerset people, whether disabled or not, want to visit the countryside for all sorts of reasons; leisure or recreation, excitement or quiet, scenery and the wildlife, horse-riding, cycling, walking or trail riding, 4x4 off-roading and other pursuits. Wheelchairs and class three electric buggies all form part of the legitimate 'mobility vehicles' allowed on rights of way, and have been for over 100 years. Then they were called invalid carriages and allowed onto rights of way, being classified as aids to disabled pedestrians.

Arising from the SW LAFs meeting in June 2004 I thought it might be helpful to set out some relevant information and recommendations from the perspective of a disabled person.

- It is estimated that only about 10% of paths are fully accessible to people with mobility impairments. But those with sight, hearing or learning impairments also need consideration.
- Legislation in the CRoW Act and Disability Discrimination Act encourages ways and means of opening more of the countryside to disabled people.
- BS5709:2001, "Gaps, gates and stiles-specifications" recommends the use of the principal of '**least restrictive structures**', to ease use of the path, while fulfilling the requirements of livestock control and preventing access by those not entitled to use the path. Along with this British Standard are many specifically designed gates, all fully accessible to disabled people, yet capable of retaining livestock effectively. (Centrewire catalogue. SSDF's "The Friendly Access Guide" 2003)
- Electric buggies designed and built specifically for out-door use in rough country, e.g. the 'Tramper', are now available and conform to class three specifications.
- The combination of legislation, available fully accessible gates and mobility vehicles should enable disabled people to aspire to joining their families and friends on country walks, provided the routes are not barred by man-made barriers.
- The opening of paths to disabled people also provides access to many more people who would not consider themselves disabled; those with stiff joints, some of the elderly, family groups with children's push-chairs or buggies, those with old dogs unable to jump fences or climb stiles, those with sight impairments and many others.
- Because we all have different perceptions of our abilities, of the nature of the countryside and use different mobility vehicles, we should aim to provide basic information about 'Accessible' routes and let the disabled person and their friends make up their own minds as to where they go. A rambler or climber would not wear his or her boots in the lounge. For people with mobility impairments their means of transport, wheelchairs and buggies, are their 'boots'; different ones for different occasions.

- On some routes a mixture of users may cause problems. Bridleways tend to provide good barrier-free routes, but soft ground or steep turf surfaces can become very difficult to cross in a wheelchair after use by horse riders. Can there be user education to try and separate users over vulnerable ground? Respect for other legitimate uses must be the aim.
- We need to consider two basic concepts for access to the countryside. (1) the '**All Ability Route**', one that can be used by virtually anybody, with a firm surface, only slight gradients, no difficulties, but costly to make and maintain and somewhat intrusive in the open country. These paths may be justified at sites of high visitor density where paths are a few 100m in length leading to specific sites, viewpoints, information sites or special features. (2) The '**Accessible Route**' is one lacking man-made inaccessible barriers, no stiles, steps, smaller kissing gates, narrow bridges or unopenable gates, where the path remains essentially natural, but subject to regular maintenance to a minimum of 1.0m wide, it extends for many kms and preferably forms a circular route with several access points.
- We need to consider the gradual opening of paths over time to disabled people by the removal or replacement of barriers by fully accessible gates. A partially accessible path is better than a non-accessible path.
- So in considering Countryside Rights of Way Improvement Plans we need (1) to know the condition of our path stock, (2) their potential as 'All Ability' or 'Accessible' paths, (3) with the above in mind, and the CRoWIP requirements of serving the community today and tomorrow, we need to list paths in priority order for attention.
- Be careful in notices and descriptions to use language that does not appear to exclude all motorised vehicles, including electrically propelled wheelchairs. Some land owners and users are unfamiliar with the legitimate use of mobility vehicles on rights of way, so the inclusion of manual and electrically powered class 1 to 3 vehicles should be emphasised in all literature and notices.
- Be aware that it is seldom possible for a non-disabled person to have the experience and view of 'walking' in the countryside as has a disabled person. Thus, whenever possible do try to discuss the needs of access by disabled people with informed local disabled people from your area, or from further away. The Disabled Ramblers have considerable experience of organising 'rambles' in the open countryside for a wide variety of people with mobility impairments, and of campaigning for improved access (Chairman, Dr Mike Bruton MBE).

BS 5709:2001. "Gaps, Gates and stiles – specifications", BSI, 389 Chiswick High Road, London W4 4AL.

Centrewire. "Designs for easy access to rights of way". Centrewire Ltd., Tom Bindoff, PO Box 11, Wymondham, Norfolk NR18 0XD.

"The Friendly Access Guide", South Somerset Disability Forum, December 2003. 20 South Street, Yeovil BA20 1QE. Tel. 01935 706766.

"Waymark", Autumn 2004, focuses on accessibility matters in relation to the Disability Discrimination Act and public rights of way. Some useful articles. Journal of the Institute of Public Rights of Way Officers.

'Tramper' buggy. Beamer Ltd., Southampton Road, Salisbury SA5 2QW. Tel. 01794 885814

Disabled Ramblers. Secretary, Mrs Rosie Norris, Tel. 01372 272536.