



The countryside charity
Gloucestershire

Change is inevitable: it should be for the better

**POSITION STATEMENT 15
ACCESS TO THE COUNTRYSIDE**

Introduction

This Position Statement has been prompted by the suggestion made in an article “Why we need the right to roam further” (Countryside Voices, CPRE, Spring 2021) that the right to roam, introduced by the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 and covering access land, be extended to other areas including the Green Belt. Access land comprises open country (areas of mountain, moor, heath and down), registered common land and land dedicated for the purpose by its owner.

CPRE is grateful for the contributions of representatives of the National Farmers Union, the Ramblers and the Woodland Trust to discussions on this matter.

Background

The issue of access to the countryside was brought into sharper focus by the coronavirus pandemic. This led to a greater number of visitors to the countryside, in many cases people whose holiday plans or other leisure pursuits had been restricted.

It is now widely recognised that access to open spaces and contact with nature brings considerable benefits in terms of physical health and mental wellbeing, and generally is to be welcomed. However, much of the countryside is productive farmland with access mainly through the network of public rights of way.

The greater number of countryside visitors has led to more instances of damage to crops, disturbance to livestock, litter, trespass, fire risk and inconsiderate parking, and at worst to criminal activity. At the same time, it is recognised that some farmers and landowners continue to plough, plant or otherwise obstruct public rights of way. There has also been a small but increasing number of reports of walkers being injured – and in one or two cases killed – by livestock on rights of way.

Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) is the statutory authority responsible for the maintenance and improvement of public rights of way. Among other things, it holds and maintains the definitive map and has published a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP) covering the period 2011 to 2026. The Gloucestershire Local Access Forum (GLAF) is a statutory advisory body to the County Council and others. In the RoWIP, GCC acknowledges the increasing difficulty it has in maintaining the network as resources to do so are reduced.

The significant work by farmers and landowners in maintaining the rights of way network and access more generally needs to be more widely recognized, together with the invaluable work done by volunteers such as from the Ramblers and the Cotswold Voluntary Wardens.

The Rights of Way Network

Gloucestershire has a total area of about 2,650 square kilometres and contains 5,775 kilometres of public rights of way, of which 81% are footpaths, 15% bridleways, and 4% restricted byways.

The network is denser in some areas than others, and is used more extensively in some areas than others. It is maintained to varying standards. It includes parts of the Cotswold Way, Offa's Dyke Path and Thames Path, which are designated as National Trails (and for which appropriate resources are available), and other named routes such as the Gloucestershire Way and Wysis Way.

There are also a number of permissive paths. As their name implies, they are not rights of way but are routes permitted by the landowner. Where shown on Ordnance Survey maps in the Outdoor Leisure and Explorer series at 1:25,000 scale, they are depicted in brown (rather than green) and their status is included in signposting.

Categories of Land

For these purposes, the rural parts of Gloucestershire can conveniently be divided into four categories:

1 Access Land

Access land is depicted on all Ordnance Survey maps at 1:25,000 scale revised since 2000. Such land in Gloucestershire extends to about 4,000 hectares. The largest tracts consist of the most elevated parts of Cleeve Common, and Minchinhampton and Rodborough Commons. Smaller areas such as Charlton Kings Common and Ravensgate Hill occupy parts of the steep Cotswold scarp. In nearly all cases these areas are crossed by or connected to existing public rights of way.

2 Forest of Dean

The statutory forest covers about one sixth of the area of Forest of Dean District. There is an extensive network of tracks in it, not all of them defined as rights of way but where access is not only permitted but encouraged, except when forestry operations are taking place.

3 Green Belt

Despite the removal of much land from the Green Belt and its allocation for development in the Joint Core Strategy, the Green Belt continues to serve the purpose of separating Gloucester and Cheltenham, and has an area of about 6,000 hectares. In context, the Gloucester/Cheltenham Green Belt is the second smallest in England and represents just 2.4% of the County's area. What is important here is not what the designation means for planning and development, but its location and nature. Some of it can be described as urban fringe,

characterised by fragmented land ownership, general untidiness and multiple uses including equestrian.

4 All Other Land

This consists of most of the land across the County, even in Forest of Dean District. It is covered by public rights of way of all types (footpaths, bridleways and byways).

CPRE Gloucestershire's Position

CPRE Gloucestershire does not support the extension of the right to roam to areas other than access land. Apart from woodland, land in the fourth category above is nearly all used for growing crops or grazing animals. Damage and disturbance should be avoided wherever possible. CPRE considers the right to roam especially inappropriate in the Green Belt, for reasons relating to the characteristics of the Green Belt set out above.

CPRE does support the following:

- The maintenance and improvement to an appropriate standard of the existing public rights of way network
- Correct use of the network according to the status of the right of way
- Responsible behaviour in accordance with the Countryside Code by all countryside users
- In particular, the improvement of the existing public rights of way network in the Green Belt, consistent with paragraph 145 of the NPPF, and on the edges of other towns so that access to the countryside can be gained without the use of the private car
- Adjustments to the network where a case can be made, to the benefit of farmers, landowners and countryside users alike
- Suitable measures to protect walkers from livestock where rights of way cross paddocks or pasture
- The creation of more permissive paths where appropriate, particularly where this would effectively complement existing rights of way, and the inclusion of existing permissive paths on the definitive map where possible
- Making the network more accessible, for example the replacement where appropriate of stiles with kissing gates, but with the proviso that historic stone stiles should always be retained
- The provision of better information for visitors including more effective promotion of the Countryside Code.

Local Green Spaces

CPRE also supports the protection of existing local green spaces and the generous provision of green space in new development. These are seen as complementary to access to the countryside on public rights of way, in that such spaces will normally be located within easy reach of residential areas.

CPRE has welcomed the intention that public support for farming under the Local Nature Recovery element of the Environmental Land Management scheme (ELMs) will include delivery for “heritage and access”, although the details are not yet clear.

CPRE will work with Gloucestershire County Council as public rights of way authority, GLAF, parish councils, representative organisations of farmers, landowners and countryside users and others to these ends.