

# Countryside access



## OUR ASK

**Responsible management of public access to the countryside so it can be enjoyed by everyone, while recognising that much of it is an active working environment.**

## Why it's needed

There are more than 140,000 miles of public rights of way in England and Wales, including tens of thousands of miles of footpaths and bridleways, the vast majority of which run through farmland. Farmland is the destination of 48% of visits to the natural environment in England – with around 4.1 billion visits every year, boosting rural and local economies.

The next government must put an end to the ability to apply for historic rights of way to be added to the 'Definitive Map' as it creates a build-up of applications, leaving landowners suffering from blight, local authorities unable to deal with the backlog, and legitimate claims lost in the system.

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 gives a public right of access on foot to land mapped as 'open country' (mountain, moor, heath and down) or registered

common land. The new King Charles III England Coastal Path provides open access to more of the coastal margin.

Any proposal to open further areas of land for access, or to adopt access legislation in England and Wales similar to that in Scotland, needs very careful consideration and liaison with landowners and land managers.

A blanket increase in open access presents significant environmental, economic and safety risks. People walking over areas included in government environmental schemes could cause breaches of the scheme requirements, leading to farmers incurring penalties. It could also have negative impacts on wildlife, like ground nesting birds. Currently, the owner or occupier of the land is responsible for ensuring any route is visible and not obstructed. This means public

access is likely to require new or upgraded access infrastructure and these costs usually fall on the farmer. In some cases, arable farmers must adapt their cropping to accommodate public rights of way.

Any rights of way legislation should also allow flexibility for farmers to divert rights of way for safety or security reasons, especially where a right of way crosses a busy farmyard or a field containing cattle with calves.



For the livestock sector, livestock worrying involving dogs attacking or chasing animals is a recurring issue. In its Rural Crime Report 2023, NFU Mutual estimates UK farm animals worth £1.8 million were killed or injured by dogs in 2022.

Rather than blanket open-access designations, the next government

should develop a modern and adaptable public access network that meets the needs of both the public and food-producing business and builds on the hundreds of thousands of miles of access already available.

It should also focus on encouraging the use of existing

footpaths and raising public awareness of the access rights that already exist. A well-funded public messaging campaign to allow the public to visit the countryside safely, and in harmony with the farmed environment, would also be extremely welcome.

## What it would deliver

British farmers recognise, and continue to actively promote, the enormous benefits to people's wellbeing of getting out and enjoying the farmed countryside.

Connecting people with rural areas can have a long-term legacy of greater appreciation, valuing

and understanding of the countryside and where people's food comes from. But public access to the countryside must always be responsible, managed and safe, so livestock and the environment are protected.

A thorough, updated and widely promoted code of behaviour is vital to allow the public to

enjoy the countryside safely and responsibly. The term 'right to roam' does not conjure the required respect for farmland nor an understanding of the Countryside Code that the public should already have.

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