

CHAPTER 13. ACCESS

Vision for access

A network of Public Rights of way and permitted paths maintained and improved in a way that satisfies walkers, riders, cyclists, farmers, landowners and local people alike, providing links across the farmed landscapes to the wilder landscapes beyond.

Objectives and Indicators

Objectives relate to the Exmoor National Park Management Plan

Indicators may be shared with those from other plans or organisations

LP - Exmoor National Park Local Plan

BVPP – Exmoor National Park Best Value Performance Plan

AC – Audit Commission

CA – Countryside Agency indicators used in their ‘*State of the Countryside Reports*’

RWP – The Government’s Rural White Paper ‘*Our Countryside*’

NPA – ‘Headline’ indicators developed by the National Park Authorities’ Data Working Group

RO – Indicators developed for the South West’s Regional Observatory

Objective 13/1

To seek and promote opportunities for access for the enjoyment of Exmoor's special qualities by the public in a sustainable manner.

Indicators:

Length of Public Rights of Way and permissive paths; area of open access land

Objective 13/2

To maintain a Public Rights of Way network that is open, sustainable and convenient for people to use and enjoy and which, where possible, provides opportunities of access for people of all abilities.

Indicators:

Percentage of Rights of Way open and in a condition suitable for their intended use; percentage of Rights of Way signposted where they leave the road

Objective 13/3

To encourage and enable the public to enjoy access to open country for quiet enjoyment (and where possible to extend such opportunities), while having due regard to the interests of nature conservation and farming.

Indicators:

Area of land with open access; area of land defined as open country

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Objective 13/4

To improve opportunities for access on Exmoor for all people, irrespective of their mobility or other physical abilities.

Indicators:

Length of track promoted as suitable for wheelchair users; length of Rights of Way without stiles

IS EXMOOR WELL SERVED BY RIGHTS OF WAY?

Current situation:

Exmoor has a fairly high density of Rights of Way compared with other National Parks

Exmoor has a higher density of bridleways than any other National Park

A high proportion of off road sections of Rights of Way is in good condition

A high proportion of Rights of Way is open and useable

Trends:



The length of the Rights of Way network is slightly increasing

Exmoor has a good network of Rights of Way with a high proportion of bridleways:

Exmoor is well supplied with Rights of Way, with a density of 1.39km/ sq km. This is above average for National Parks and compares with the extremes of the Peak District at 1.86km/ sq km and Brecon Beacons at 0.86km/ sq km. 48% of its Rights of Way are bridleways and, for its size, Exmoor must have one of the best networks of bridleways in the country. There is a strong local tradition of Rights of Way over moorland being bridleways. However, there is still room for improvement to make circular routes and divert riders from busy roads.

Public footpaths	437km	(272 miles)
Public bridleways	464km	(288 miles)
Roads Used as Public Paths	64km	(40 miles)
Permitted paths negotiated by ENPA	40km	(25 miles)
TOTAL	1005km	(625 miles)

The Rights of Way network is continually being modified and improved for both walkers and residents. They are sometimes extinguished to suit land management or to avoid farmyards but at the same time are usually replaced by an improved route. Some new routes have been dedicated for recreation purposes. In addition, many kilometres of permitted routes have been added to the network. Although those negotiated by Exmoor National Park Authority are generally recorded, there are many others, particularly on National Trust properties, which are not measured. Many agreements are long standing and may have lapsed with change of landowner.

- *Since 1974 about 16.2km of Rights of Way within the National Park have been extinguished and 20.0km have been added through dedication, diversion or modification orders. 1.6km of footpath has been upgraded to bridleway. Source: Definitive Map*

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Exmoor's Rights of Way network is generally in good condition:

Exmoor generally does not suffer the erosion of footpaths experienced by more visited National Parks. What erosion there is can often be attributed to causes other than walkers: rainfall and run-off, vehicles, livestock and horse riders. It would be very difficult to assess the particular impact of visitors on the Rights of Way system but the condition survey of the South West Coast Path undertaken in 1999/2000 utilised new technology which, combined with the National Park Authority's Countryside Access Management System, should allow for monitoring of at least part of the network.

- *In 1999, of the 26.5km of off road sections of the South West Coast Path in the National Park, 96.5% was in good condition, on 2.1% there were seasonal problems and on 1.4% there were year round problems. Source: South West Coast Path Management Survey*
- *In 1999, of the 956 metres of Coast Path identified as unsatisfactory, the majority of problems were due to natural causes or livestock. However, 108 metres were eroded by vehicles and 136 metres by heavy usage from walkers. Thus 0.5 % of off road sections of this relatively popular path was eroded by walkers. Source: South West Coast Path Management Survey*
- *In 1995 a visitor survey was undertaken of the Coast Path. Estimates of annual numbers walking the path varied from 16,399 just outside of Combe Martin to 11,487 just outside of Minehead and 5,373 on Countisbury Common. In each case numbers were low compared with the average for sites of similar remoteness on the path elsewhere in the West Country. Source: South West Coast Path Initiative*

As part of the Exmoor Paths Partnership project footpath users were surveyed on heavily used sections of path to assess what they thought of the condition of the path. Responses were polarised between good and poor, reflecting the fact that many people did not recognise the signs of erosion. There was also a difference between perceived and actual damage and many walkers would tolerate a high level of erosion. In general few people recognised erosion unless they had previous experience of the path before it was eroded. This was borne out by later surveys of paths used mostly by local people.

- *In 1997/8 walkers on eroded sections of footpath were questioned as to what condition they felt the path to be in. From a range between 'excellent' and 'very poor', 42.8% replied 'poor', 10.4% 'average' and 46.8% 'good'. Source: Exmoor Paths Partnership 4th Progress Report*
- *In 1999 a survey of users of Milham Lane in Dulverton showed 100% of users thinking the path to be in poor or very poor condition before remedial work and 100% thinking it to be in better condition after the work. Source: Exmoor Paths Partnership 6th Progress Report*

Exmoor's Rights of Way are generally easy to use by the public. In the year 2000/1 82% was considered easy to use, an improvement of 4% in two years. At the same time 99% were signposted where they leave a highway. Those which are not are generally not signed by request of the relevant parish council.

HOW MUCH OF EXMOOR'S OPEN COUNTRY HAS OPEN ACCESS?

Current situation:

A moderate proportion of Exmoor's open country has open access

Trends:



Open access has steadily improved as more land has come into public ownership and has doubled with the implementation of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act.

Exmoor has much open access but visitors are unsure where it is:

Generally, most of Exmoor's open country is available for access to walkers. However, there are few areas where this is a legal right of access, even on publicly owned land. Most landowners are happy to allow access over open country

Working to ensure that Exmoor remains beautiful for all to enjoy, in harmony with a thriving community

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but, naturally, are keen to preserve their right to prevent access where this causes problems. The result is that few areas are clearly designated for public access and visitors are unsure where they can roam. It is even less clear where people can ride, cycle or walk their dogs. This situation should be clarified over the next few years by designation of open access areas under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act.

Open Access Areas

	Ha	%
Total area of 'open country' (27% of NP)	19,000	
Existing right of access and public land	8,000	42%
Access secured by formal agreement	1,000	5%
Area of open country with no public access	10,000	53%

HOW ACCESSIBLE IS EXMOOR TO PEOPLE WITH MOBILITY PROBLEMS?

Current situation:

Only a very small proportion of Exmoor's Rights of Way are suitable for persons with mobility problems

There is a relatively small proportion of stiles compared with gates on Exmoor's Rights of Way

Trends:



In recent years there has been a slight improvement in the length of tracks accessible to wheelchair users

The potential of access to Exmoor's Rights of Way network for people with mobility problems is limited:

The steep and relatively wild terrain of Exmoor means that access on foot or wheelchair is difficult for those with mobility problems. However, Exmoor is supplied with a relatively dense network of roads and many cross open moorland so that it is possible to experience Exmoor's special qualities without wandering far from highways. It is not known what length of Rights of Way could be suitably improved for wheelchair use without detriment to the landscape. There is some potential for stiles to be replaced by gates and for fording points to be bridged but some improvements may be to the detriment of the quality of wildness in parts of the National Park.

- *In 1999, of the 27.5kms of off road sections of the South West Coast Path in the National Park, 1.2km or 4.5% was identified as being accessible for wheelchairs or with potential access for wheelchairs. Source: South West Coast Path Management Survey*
- *In 1999 the Moor Access Group identified approximately 14kms of Rights of Way on Exmoor suitable for persons with mobility problems. Since then approximately 3kms of permissive paths have been designated for wheelchair use. Source: Accessible Exmoor*
- *In 2002 there were 400 stiles, 1 ladder stile and 14 kissing gates on Exmoor Rights of Way compared with 1940 field and hunting gates. Source: Exmoor National Park Authority Rights of Way Survey*
- *In 1999 only one location was noted on the 53km of South West Coast Path in the National Park where a stile could potentially be replaced by a gate. Source: South West Coast Path Management Survey*

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Actions

Some of these actions are from the Exmoor National Park Management Plan

Action 13/1

Monitor the condition of paths and path furniture and assess the potential for improvement for people with mobility problems

Action 13/2

Identify and map permitted and agreement paths and make the information available to the public

Action 13/3

Conduct path erosion surveys

Action 13/4

Monitor the effects of open access and the condition of sensitive areas before and after open access

NB The information contained in this report is based upon the best information available at the time. Although every effort has been made to confirm its accuracy and ensure that it has been used in the proper context, Exmoor National Park Authority cannot guarantee the accuracy of the information.