

Path Problems

We are grateful to Mags Hobby (Essex area Footpath Secretary) who prepared this note and allowed us to reproduce it.

Aim: to provide information which encourages all walkers to report any unacceptable conditions which they find on a Public Right of Way

Identifying the Problem

Public Rights of Way (PRoW)

Are highways and should be as easy to use as any public road; free to use, unobstructed and signposted where necessary. If they are not, you have a problem which will generally fall into one of these categories:

A Fingerpost

Is mandatory (legally required) where a path leaves the metalled road. It is a post with a finger pointing the line of the start of the route. A wholly metalled PRoW within the urban area is the only exception to this.

Waymarking

Is not mandatory but helpful and should be available to guide anyone following a map but unfamiliar with the route. A plastic disc with a yellow arrow denotes footpath, blue – bridleway and red – byway. White arrows are used for permissive paths which do not concern us for reporting purposes.

Bridges

Should enable you to cross (usually a stream, river or ditch) safely. Report if it is missing, rotten, exceptionally and unpredictably slippery, needs a handrail (if it is high or particularly long) or blocked by growth.

Furniture

Includes steps (with or without a handrail), board walks, gates & stiles. They should be safe & usable. The buzzword is “least restrictive option” – gap, simple gate, kissing gate or stile? Consider whether livestock must be kept in or wildlife kept out.

Sometimes highway authority barriers might be used to prevent people rushing out into traffic without thinking first.

There should be no barbed wire or electric fence on a stile or within a metre or so of it – you are entitled to fall off without sustaining secondary injuries.

Ploughing & cropping.

A field edge path should never be disturbed. It should be a minimum of 1.5 metres wide for a footpath, 3m for a bridleway or 5m for a byway.

Note whether the problem is from ploughing, up-growth from the surface of the path (Highways responsibility) or overgrowth from adjacent hedges or land (Landowners responsibility).

A crossfield path should be a minimum of one metre wide for a footpath, 2m for a bridleway or 3m for a byway. It should be obvious in direction (by clear waymarking - for instance white stakes along the route, rolled or unseeded or cut or sprayed out through the crop) and unobstructed by any crop more than a few inches high. Within 14 days of first disturbance of the path in any cropping cycle, it should be reinstated to at least the minimum width and give a firm even surface that is easy to use. Thereafter, any disturbance should be reinstated within 24 hours. A path across a meadow of grass or lucerne is exempt.

Surface condition

Concerns any drainage problems, potholes, animal holes and so on. Does the route of the path divert from the definitive (mapped) line? Is this a temporary or seasonal matter? There should be no obstructions on the path: buildings, reservoirs, piles of rubbish, threatening notices, electric fences etc.. If you feel threatened by animals on the route, do not attempt to pass.

Next Steps

Get to know your 1:25000 OS Explorer map. Can you identify which parish the problem was in? (If it is in a London borough you do not need to know.) Parish names are marked in grey capitals about 3mm high with CP after them. Parish boundaries are small black dots. County and Unitary Authority boundaries are – well, it is time to look at the map legend. You'll find it easiest to report where you were if you can read off a grid reference – get a fellow walker to show you and remember to go “along the corridor and up the stairs”. A six figure grid reference refers to the whole 100m square to the north and east so don't fall into the trap of thinking the nearest number is the one to quote. It is best, though not essential, if you can give grid references for the beginning and end of the section of path you were on as well as the actual problem site.

Reporting

Let your footpath secretary know of the problem. See contact details on the website, or speak to a committee member, even if you intend to contact the authorities yourself. If you are outside Essex Area, do still consider making reports. Many council websites now contain details and contacts for PRoW. Some counties put a generic phone number on the furniture they have erected or you might be using a route guide which gives details. Finally do not forget to thank anyone who helps to clear up a problem.