

How to report problems on Public Rights of Way

This article is based on a note by Mags Hobby (Essex Area Footpath Secretary) amended, with her kind permission, to cover the situation in the Hertfordshire and North Middlesex Area. The article was first published in Stile, the Area journal, Autumn 2010 issue.

The majority of our rights of way are in good condition, but problems do arise. The Council's officers cannot be everywhere and they rely on the public to report problems. In our Area the Ramblers has a Footpath Secretary for virtually every parish and borough, but they will probably walk the paths in their territories only once or twice a year and may not be aware of every problem.

The sooner problems are reported the sooner they can be resolved, so this article explains how any walker can identify a problem and report it to the appropriate authority for action.

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 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 a means of indicating the line or direction of a path where the route may be difficult to follow. Highway authorities have a duty to put up waymarks along the route so far as they consider them required to help path users unfamiliar with the locality follow the route. It is normally done with arrow markings on gates, stiles and posts. These are often on plastic discs with the arrows yellow for footpaths, blue for bridleways, purple for restricted byways, and red for byways open to all traffic.

A *bridge* should enable you to cross (usually a stream or river) 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 can include steps (with or without a handrail), board walks, gates and stiles. They should be safe and 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 and 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 given 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. If you are outside our 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.

Identifying whom to report to

Within Hertfordshire the Rights of Way Unit in the County Council is responsible for most aspects of PRow. The exceptions are Dacorum and Broxbourne District Councils which undertake maintenance within their own areas. Each London Borough Council is responsible for the PRow within its own area.

You can report the problems by phone, letter or email to the addresses on page 30. If you have more information—for instance photos, sketch maps etc.—it can be very helpful if they are included. If the path concerned is in the parish where you live, you might also consider approaching your Parish Council.

Make a note of whom you spoke to or who replied to you and chase them if you hear nothing more and there have been no changes on the ground.

Send some notes about your report to the Ramblers' Deputy Area Footpath Secretary for the relevant District. Their contact details are also on page 30. They will ensure that it is forwarded to the appropriate parish Footpath Secretary so that they can take any necessary follow up action.

In summary

Remember that we are the walkers who are out on the paths and cover more miles of path than any employed Officer can manage to survey. Our reports are welcomed because they help to make the paths better for everyone. Improvements over the years are enormous, thanks chiefly to the interested Ramblers who walked before us. Please take the trouble to report what you find and help us to pass on a network in even better condition.