

Press release: Opening access to the countryside

The country's first ever specialist centre to open up access to the countryside for wheelchair users and those with mobility needs as well as disabled and able-bodied horse riders, cyclists and walkers was launched today at Oxfordshire's Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve.

The new National Land Access Centre, located in the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, has been designed to demonstrate the use, maintenance and installation of gaps, gates and stiles meeting the new British Standard for improved countryside access.

The centre has been developed by Natural England, in partnership with The British Horse Society, Centrewire and the Pittecroft Trust, to ensure those who usually struggle with access to the countryside can access the natural environment and enjoy England's beautiful countryside.

Natural England research shows there are around 519 million visits to paths, cycleways and bridleways in England each year.

However, mobility issues can be a major barrier to people heading to the countryside. Over 20% of England's population cannot use public rights of way, either because they cannot use stiles or kissing gates themselves, or they are accompanying someone who can't.

Deputy Chair of Natural England Lord Blencathra said:

This project is the culmination of many years of partnership working and determination to ensure that our countryside can rightfully be enjoyed by everyone.

Improved access will help to connect more people with their natural environment, giving them a chance to enjoy our countryside, its open space and fascinating wildlife— all key aspects of the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan.

I am delighted that Natural England has played a key role in the partnership responsible for developing the National Land Access Centre, which has the potential to make such a difference to people's lives.

Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work Sarah Newton said:

Getting out into the countryside is an experience that many of us take for granted, but for disabled people it can often be much more difficult to access nature. The National Land Access Centre will

play an important role in ensuring everyone can enjoy the outstanding natural beauty our country has to offer.

John Cuthbertson, Chairman for the Disabled Ramblers, said:

I'm over the moon at the spirit of co-ordination and co-operation which has led to the development of the new National Land Access Centre.

Open access has got the ability to transform lives. We look forward to using the centre to test the new structures, helping to shape the future of access to the countryside.

Mark Weston, Director of Access for The British Horse Society, said:

We're very pleased to see the launch of the new National Land Access Centre, which builds on recommendations of the Bridlegate Trial started in partnership with Natural England in 2015.

The Centre will help to ensure the new British Standard becomes a reality, securing safe open access to the countryside not only for horse riders but for all users of the outdoors.

Today's launch of the National Land Access Centre also marks the 60th anniversary of Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve, one of the first National Nature Reserves in the country to offer wider public access.

Since 1994, members of the public have actively been encouraged to explore the reserve through the removal of unnecessary stiles, gates and fences and the installation of easy-access gates. This is key to the National Nature Reserve Strategy, itself a year old in September, which seeks to see England's nature restored, enriched and reconnected to people.

Landowners, land managers, rights of way officers and other users will be able to book onto training courses at the National Land Access Centre to aid understanding of the new standard and its application. This will involve testing new equipment with a view to installing it across the nation.

The British Standard 5709:2018 for Gaps, Gates and Stiles requires 'the least restrictive option' to be made available to users. Its implementation will help ensure that everyone can access and enjoy the countryside.

Visitors to the centre will be able to access specialist equipment, try out new designs and touch and test real examples in situ to fully understand this new equipment in operation. They can learn about its installation and maintenance, and see what compliance with the British Standard looks like in practice.

More information is available about Aston Rowant National Nature Reserve,

Oxfordshire's National Nature Reserves and the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.