

Volunteering in Dorset's Greenspaces – more than a link to the Countryside

Whatever the reason, exercise, socialising, hiking, admiring the plants and wildlife, enjoying a view or climbing a tree, evidence suggests, we can all benefit from being outdoors in the fresh air, and connected to nature.

There are almost 3,000 miles of public rights of way in Dorset: 4,700 footpaths, 1,700 bridleways and 37 byways. This network of paths serves as many things for many people, from providing a link to the countryside, a safer short cut to the local school, a long distance walking route, a safe place to commute by bike or simply an accessible route to a greenspace. A well maintained link to a greenspace or the wider countryside can improve the quality of life for many, not least those that are less mobile.

There are 4 categories of Public Rights of Way:

1. **Footpath** – a path for walkers, and if conditions permit, a pram, pushchair, wheelchair or electric mobility scooter may be used on a footpath.
2. **Bridleway** – This route may be used by horse-riders or walkers and if the existing surface is suitable, by cyclists.
3. **Byway open to all Traffic** – This route would mainly be used by people on foot or horseback, however, vehicles have a right to use the route; it may not be ploughed or gated.
4. **Restricted Byway** – this is for walkers, horse-riders, horse drawn carriages and cyclists, and other non-mechanically propelled vehicles.

The management of the rights of way network in Dorset comes under Dorset County Council, and the area is divided between the West and Coast, Central, North, Purbeck and East teams. Any issues can be reported to the relevant teams by using the link on Dorset County Councils website www.dorsetforyou.com.

The following guidance is also available on dorsetforyou.com, and gives an insight into the responsibility of the County Council with regards to maintaining the rights of way:

- **Signposting and waymarking:** Dorset County Council has a duty to signpost public rights of way where they leave a metalled road. Rights of way are also signposted or waymarked particularly where the route is not obvious.
- **Stiles and gates:** It is the landowner's responsibility to maintain stiles or gates on public rights of way on their land. Dorset County Council usually contributes a minimum of 25% of costs.
- **Obstruction:** It is an offence to intentionally obstruct a public right of way.
- **Ploughing and cropping:** Crossfield paths may be ploughed or cropped as long as the path is reinstated within 14 days. Headland paths should not be ploughed or cropped.
- **Overgrown vegetation:** Landowners are responsible for cutting back hedges, trees or shrubs overhanging a public right of way. Surface vegetation

or undergrowth on rights of way, such as nettles or brambles, are the responsibility of Dorset County Council.

- **Bulls:** A bull can only be kept in a field crossed by a right of way if it is under 10 months old OR it is accompanied by cows or heifers.
- **Bridges:** Dorset County Council is responsible for the maintenance and repair of foot and bridle bridges.
- **Surface:** Dorset County Council is responsible for the maintenance of the surface of rights of way according to the status of the path.

The East Dorset Green Spaces Team are looking for volunteers to become part of an expanding network of enthusiastic individuals, who help take responsibility for maintaining our rights of way and conservation sites.

Whether you are looking for a great day out in the countryside, a way to get active and take more exercise, or a first step into a career in the countryside or conservation sector - volunteering is a great way to meet like-minded people and learn more about your local countryside sites, and gain some new skills. This is a wonderful opportunity to enhance or discover more about conservation, rights of way maintenance, countryside furniture (gates and stiles) and more. We will provide the training, tools, gloves and refreshments!

For those who volunteer regularly there may be an opportunity for additional advanced training in the use of power tools, wildlife ID and first aid.

Helping your local team maintain the rights of way in your area could not only benefit your own enjoyment of the countryside, but enable and encourage others to enjoy and value these important links, getting people out into the wilder spaces and beyond!

For more information please contact East Dorset Green Spaces Team: 01425 483809 or email: k.martin@dorsetcc.gov.uk.