



Recreational Horse Trails Criteria for Ireland



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Disclaimer

The criteria set out in this document provide guidelines which outline good practice for the development of horse trails at the time of writing. The criteria do not purport to be exhaustive and may not cover every eventuality arising on a horse trail. Users should use their own judgement when implementing the guidelines. Although horse trails may be developed in accordance with these criteria, Sport Ireland does not accept responsibility for liability for any accident or injury arising from the use of such trails.

Written by Vyv Wood-Gee, Countryside Management Consultant

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Jim O'Sullivan: Pages 17, 18, 24 & 26

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1

Introduction

Sport Ireland is committed to supporting development of appropriate recreational trails as an essential part of its leading role in encouraging and supporting responsible and sustainable outdoor recreation and physical activity throughout the Republic of Ireland.

Demand for safe, off-road horse riding routes in Ireland continues to grow as the escalating volume and speed of traffic on roads presents ever greater safety risks for horse riders. Development of clearly signed horse trails will encourage and enable more people to be more active and to get out and enjoy Ireland's beautiful countryside on horseback, with associated physical and mental health benefits.

In conjunction with key stakeholders, Sport Ireland have produced the criteria set out in this document to provide a benchmark for all horse trail development in Ireland, with the emphasis on encouraging and maintaining sustainable trails of a consistently high quality, and addressing concerns about risk of environmental damage and the safety implications of shared use. This document brings together information relevant to horse trails from various publications, including Recreation in the Irish Countryside Property Rights Obligations and Responsibilities, A Guide to Planning and Developing Recreation Trails in Ireland and relevant aspects of the Visitor Safety Group's guiding principles. It supersedes Classification and Grading for Recreation Trails in relation to horse trails.

The information which follows summarises what you need to know about horse trails in Ireland, from the legal context, planning, safety and managing risk to effective trail management. The guidance is equally relevant whether you are already involved in trail management, reviewing the scope to open up an existing trail to horse riders or thinking of developing a new trail which might include equestrian use. As with walking trails, the criteria for horse trails focus on the physical trails rather than looking at how they are used or defining the requirements of supporting accommodation or services which may be necessary to support equestrian tourism development.

What is a horse trail?

Put simply, a horse trail is the equestrian equivalent of a walking or cycling trail, designed and managed for leisure and recreational use. Horse trails can be circular or linear, varying from short routes intended mainly for everyday use by local riders to long distance or more challenging trails which offer scope for potential economic development in attracting visiting riders.

Regardless of their length or location, all horse trails share the same basic characteristics, namely:

- A horse trail is a path, defined route or trail developed and managed to provide opportunities for off-road horse riding by individuals or small informal groups of riders.
- Horse trails may include, but are not limited to, surfaced and unsurfaced paths, farm and forest roads/tracks, boreens, sections of disused railway or canal towpath, hill paths, green lanes, bog roads or other tracks.
- Horse trails should be available free of charge to any member of the general public wishing to ride or lead a horse along the trail for leisure or recreation, provided they do so with respect for other trail users and the environment.
- Horse trails may or may not include or allow use by walkers and cyclists.
- Horse trails are primarily intended for self-guided use.
- Horse trails do not include any jumps or artificial obstacles.

Why have criteria for trails?

Nationally recognised, standardised criteria fulfil many functions, including

- outlining best practice for development and management of trails
- providing a benchmark for trail development
- promoting high quality infrastructure
- providing consistent information about different trails
- enabling accessible, safe and enjoyable access to Ireland's beautiful countryside while simultaneously protecting the environment
- determining suitability of trails for promotion to the public through the National Trails Register.

National Trails Register

Sport Ireland maintains a National Trails Register which lists trails which meet agreed criteria. For members of the public, inclusion on the National Trails Register provides assurance that trails meet agreed quality standards. For trail managers, the main benefits of trail registration are:

- inclusion and public promotion on the Sport Ireland trails website, which provides a valuable marketing opportunity
- allowing the trail to be shown on Ordnance Survey maps
- access to the national trails insurance policy
- strengthening applications for agri-environment or other funding schemes.

Trail managers interested in registering a trail can apply to Sport Ireland for an independent trail registration inspection which uses an approved, standardised methodology to assess different aspects of a trail against the criteria set out in this document. The assessment process includes identification of any further work required to bring the trail up to the required standard together with other recommendations for improvement. Trails which meet the required criteria will be added to the National Trails Register and included on the Sport Ireland website. Periodic reassessment against the criteria is required to stay on the register, using the same process.

Essential components of a successful trail

Recognising and responding to the needs, wants and concerns of land owners and managers, as well as trail users, is fundamental to the development and management of any successful recreational trail, whether for walking, cycling or horse riding. Other essential considerations are summarised in the diagram below.



- **Trail planning and design:** what are the aims of the trail and are these reflected in design? Who will be allowed to use the trail, or wish to do so? What are their needs and expectations and how have these been taken into account in designing the trail? How has environmental impact been taken into account in designing the trail?
- **Landowner agreement:** has access been agreed with all owners of land over which the trail passes for informal recreational use of the trail by individual or small groups of horse riders, and any other relevant types of user such as walkers and cyclists
- **Trail Infrastructure:** has best practice been followed? Has the least restrictive option been used for all infrastructure and is the trail readily passable with a horse along its entire length?
- **Signage and waymarking:** has best practice been followed? Can first-time users of the trail navigate easily and safely?
- **Safety and risk management:** have potential safety risks been identified and assessed and has appropriate action been taken to reduce, monitor and manage risks?
- **Management of Environment:** have potential safety risks been identified and assessed and has appropriate action been taken to reduce, monitor and manage risks?

In order to be included in the National Trails Register for Ireland, a horse trail must:

- » follow a defined, waymarked route
- » be readily passable along its entire length by a reasonably competent unaccompanied adult rider riding or leading their horse
- » be available free of charge to any member of the general public wishing to ride or lead a horse along the trail
- » be largely off public roads (minimum 70%)
- » be designed, constructed and managed to facilitate sustainable use by self-guided horse riders, either individually or in small informal groups
- » maintain local character and distinctiveness by using local materials and construction techniques
- » have been negotiated with relevant land owners and managers and their permission to develop and promote the route confirmed in writing
- » comply with Irish and European law
- » be able to demonstrate consultation with and where necessary approval from the appropriate authority for any section of trail which passes through a site officially recognised as being of environmental, archaeological or architectural interest
- » have an effective management plan and organisational structure in place for future trail monitoring, maintenance and management
- » have set up the necessary processes and funding for inspection and risk assessment of the entire route and all associated infrastructure at least annually
- » keep records of condition of all infrastructure, issues identified during inspection, required action to address safety issues and when this was implemented
- » be well drained throughout with no boggy unsurfaced sections and a firm base maximum 150 mm below the surface (regardless of the weather) for the majority of the trail. Occasional short sections (maximum 20 m) with a maximum 300 mm depth to firm base are allowable where there is no viable alternative
- » ensure that all infrastructure, including gates, bridges and other access facilities, follows best practice and is designed, constructed and installed to allow safe passage by horses with all gates minimum 1.5 m passable width and 3 m level, firm turning space clear of any obstructions or protrusions. Gates must be hung on sound posts, swing freely on their hinges and fasten with a catch negotiable without dismounting
- » have no barbed wire or live electric wire within 2 m of any gate or associated structure on the trail, or within 1 m of the side of the trail (allowing for minimum 3 m clear passable width)
- » be clearly signed and waymarked at the start/finish and all road and path junctions with a horse/horseshoe symbol so everyone knows the trail is accessible to horse-riders
- » identify and clearly sign any necessary temporary diversions
- » be graded to enable trail users to decide for themselves which trails are best suited to the skills, experience and level of fitness of themselves and their horse
- » provide the necessary information to enable potential route users to take their own decisions on suitability of a route for their skills, experience and intended use
- » promote the Leave No Trace principles through the trail website, on-site information boards and any promotional material.

Further details of each of these criteria, together with more specific requirements relating to information, signage, waymarking, surfacing and infrastructure, are set out in the following sections. Mandatory criteria which trails must meet to be included on the National Trails register are highlighted in green boxes.

2



Landowner Agreement

Consultation and negotiation with farmers and landowners to confirm their agreement to proposals is essential to any sustainable recreational trail and should start as soon as possible in planning and designing a trail

As with walking and cycling trails, to be included on the National Trails Register all horse trails must have been negotiated with relevant land owners/managers and their permission for development, promotion and recreational use of the route confirmed in writing. Use of the trail for competitive events and/or by commercial establishments may have different liability and insurance implications and therefore needs to be negotiated separately with landowners.

2.1 Need for landowner permission

All land in Ireland is either publicly or privately owned, in some cases by individual private landowners or companies, in others by state agencies such as the National Parks and Wildlife Service or Waterways Ireland. In upland parts of the country, much of the land is commonage owned jointly by multiple landowners who have specific rights for grazing, peat cutting etc.

There are very few public rights of way in Ireland (other than those maintained as public roads), and no legal right of access to the wider countryside on foot, cycle or with a horse. Some organisations such as Coillte actively encourage recreational access in certain areas, but even in these areas, access is permissive rather than by legal right. The same applies to waymarked paths across private ground, or many routes which are promoted online or in printed publications. Development of any trail therefore depends on obtaining the necessary permission from relevant land owners and managers.

When developing or improving any trail, all relevant landowners, and where relevant tenant farmers, must be consulted at the earliest opportunity, and their agreement to unobstructed access along the trail confirmed in writing.

2.2 What do landowner agreements need to include

Agreement should be clear and unambiguous and include details of:

- the proposed alignment of the trail, including access linking the trail to/from parking or other services
- who will be allowed to use the trail
- duration of the agreement and any agreed review schedule
- confirmation of the legal status of the agreement. Most waymarked trails are developed as permissive routes in agreement with the landowner. This does not create a permanent legally recognised right of way
- details of capital work necessary to establish, improve or maintain the trail including drainage, gates, fencing, bridges, signage, installation of information panels etc.
- responsibility for funding and implementing this work
- access arrangements for undertaking the agreed capital work, who will manage any contractors to be involved and who will be responsible for liaising regarding dates for implementation.



3

Trail planning and design

The key to a successful, sustainable trail is to design and create the right trail in the right place. The fundamental principles in planning and developing any trail are that it should:

- meet the needs and expectations of those who will use it (i.e. be fit for purpose)
- be appropriate for the local land type
- support responsible outdoor recreation
- have a positive impact on the environment, heritage and local communities through or close to which the trail passes
- be sustainable

3.1 Who are horse trails for?

The main users of horse trails will be individual horse riders or small informal groups of riders looking for opportunities to ride off-road on clearly waymarked trails which they can be confident have been developed and are managed to an agreed standard to provide good access for horses.

Some carriage drivers are also interested in off-road trails but this would require different criteria, beyond the scope of this guidance or the definition of horse trails.

3.2 Horses for courses

Like walkers and cyclists, horses and their riders come in different shapes and sizes and vary considerably in their age, ability, experience, interests, needs and aspirations. Some horse riders are interested only in short, easy, local routes they can use on a daily basis and they are happy walking all the way. Others welcome the challenge of more demanding, longer distance routes which may offer potential for multi-day rides. As for walking and cycling trails, the ideal is to create and manage horse trails offering a variety of scenery and experience and scope for riders to enjoy the trail at different paces.

There is no requirement for horse trails to allow or provide for anything faster than a walk, although trails which include at least some sections suitable for faster going are more likely to attract visiting riders and support equestrian tourism development.

3.3 Environmental impact

- » All horse trails must be designed, constructed and managed to minimise their environmental impact and must comply with Irish and European law.
- » Potential impact on cultural, built and natural heritage as well as the landscape should all be taken into account when considering alignment options and developing longer term maintenance plans. Creation and management of the trail should not adversely affect adjacent habitat.
- » All horse trails which pass through or run adjacent to a designated site of environmental, archaeological or architectural interest must be able to demonstrate consultation with the appropriate authority, and where necessary documented authorisation for relevant trail development proposals must be obtained from the appropriate authority and retained as a permanent record.
- » On sites of recognised ecological importance, any physical work to be undertaken to establish or maintain the route should be timed to minimise disturbance to wildlife.
- » Local character and distinctiveness should be encouraged and maintained by using local materials and techniques wherever possible. Any surfacing should blend sympathetically in colour and texture with the surrounding landscape.

3.4 Start and finish point

All trails should have a clearly defined start and finish point with information panels at either end which include a map of the trail and other essential details such as types of eligible use.

3.5 Length of trail

In terms of criteria to satisfy National Trails Register standards, length of trail is immaterial. Horse trails designed mainly for local use which might be only a couple of kilometres long can attract and support high levels of daily use which make them just as valuable as longer distance trails which stretch for many hundreds of kilometres. Although some riders are reluctant to transport their horses for trails less than 10 km long, short trails can also be useful as pilot projects. Where the aim is to develop equestrian tourism, the 'average' rider is typically looking to cover 15-25 km per day, whereas fit, more experienced riders will happily ride 40km/day. Identifying and signing access points along the trail and breaking longer trails down into achievable sections can help attract greater use.

3.6 On or off-road?

As with walking trails, horse trails are intended to be primarily off public roads, but may include up to a maximum of 30% of the total length of the trail on sections of public road used by motorised traffic. Ideally this should be on quiet lanes, but where short sections on busier roads are unavoidable, particular care should be taken to minimise safety risk by alerting drivers to likelihood of meeting horses and designing and clearly signing safe road crossings. Signs may also be needed to alert horse riders using the trail of intersections with busy roads.



3.7 Accessibility

The most essential criteria for all horse trails is that they should be fully functional from an equestrian perspective throughout their length by a reasonably competent unaccompanied rider, either mounted or leading their horse. At no point along the trail should there be a man-made or natural obstruction which precludes access with a horse without providing a means of continuing along the trail.

To meet the criteria for inclusion in the national Trails Register horse trails must

- » provide gates or other appropriate facility minimum 1.5 m passable width to get through or past walls, fences and other boundaries with a horse, plus minimum 3 m level, firm turning space clear of any obstructions or protrusions
- » have no barbed wire or live electric wire within 2 m of the side of the trail, any gate or associated structure on the trail.



3.8 Single or shared use

Shared or multi-use, which means horse riders sharing use of paths and trails with walkers and cyclists, is the norm in most countries on greenways, forest and farm tracks, paths and other trails across farmland and open hill ground. Provided it is clear to all trail users which activities are permitted, and trail users are encouraged to respect each other, shared use usually works well for everyone. Shared use trails are feasible within Ireland, although not necessarily common practice at present. However, it is recognised that there may be situations where shared use is not considered practical. In recognition of this, horse trails may or may not allow simultaneous use by walkers and/or cyclists.

3.9 Width, turning space and height clearance

Acceptable width for horse trails depends on level and type of use, gradient, surface and ground conditions. The wider the path, the greater the visual intrusion but the flip side of this is that narrow paths concentrate wear and tear and restrict space for trail users to pass each other safely and comfortably. Narrow paths are a particular problem next to electric or barbed wire fencing, or where there is a steep drop or other hazard immediately alongside, for example trails running tight alongside a railway or waterway. Encroaching vegetation and poor drainage can effectively reduce the usable width of a path so narrow paths also usually need more maintenance to control encroaching vegetation.

- » Horse trails should be a minimum 3 m clear passable width between any fences, hedges, walls or other physical restriction. The actual path may, in places, be as narrow as 1 m, provided adequate passing spaces are provided at regular intervals, with clear sightlines on restricted sections.
- » Overhanging branches should be cleared to a minimum of at least 3 m height (ideally 3.7 m) from ground level to allow clear, safe passage by mounted horse riders.
- » Underpasses in the line of the trail designed to provide safe access under roads, rivers or canals should be designed to meet the above specifications i.e. minimum 3 m clear passable width and 3 m clear passable height from ground level. Any underpasses which do not meet these specifications but can be safely traversed by a rider leading a horse should be clearly identified on information boards and on the trail website, including details of height and width to enable riders to decide for themselves whether they can get through with their horse.

3.10 Gradient

Horses have evolved to cope with relatively steep gradients and (just like mountain bikers) many riders welcome the challenge of hilly trails, or sections, which are also good for getting horses fit. Gradients of 10-20% (i.e. 10-20 m rise over 100 m stretch) do not present a problem for most experienced horses or riders, providing the footing is sound, the path is wide enough and there is not a precipitous drop to the side. Less fit or able riders and very young or old horses may struggle more with their balance on steeper inclines, particularly where the surface is loose. Vegetation, surfacing, anticipated level of use and drainage are all important considerations.

Arguably of more concern than traction is the impact of gradient on other trail users and increasing risk of erosion on steeper gradients as water gains speed as it runs downhill. Profiling hill paths and tracks to create a cross-fall across the width to shed water off to the side helps prevent erosion but can present balance and tendon problems for horses if the cross-fall is too steep.

Horses generally find it easier to maintain their balance travelling uphill rather than downhill because their front legs support the bulk of their weight. Consider which direction most riders are likely to ride a trail, and identify any particularly steep sections in trail information.

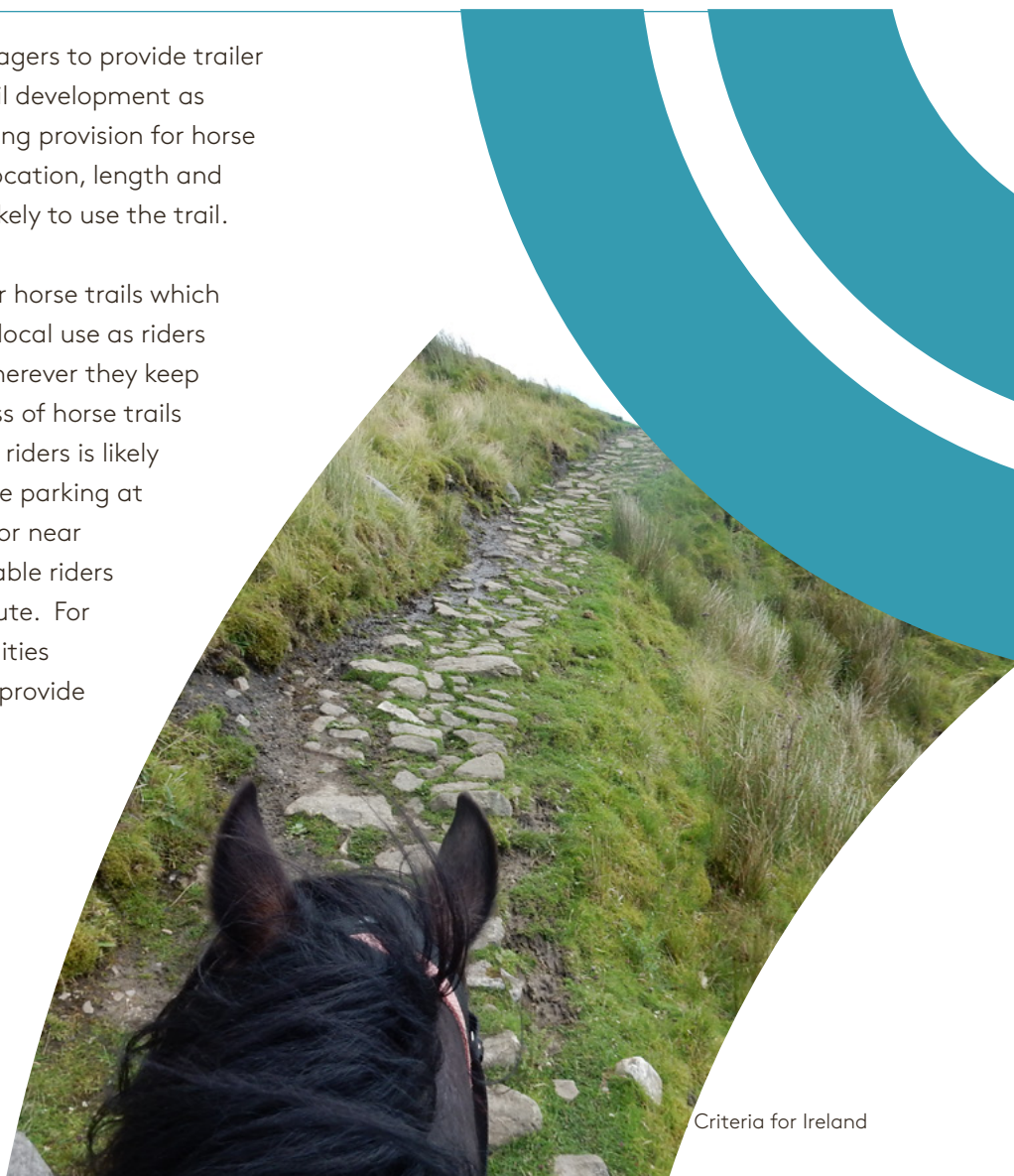
Gradient is an important consideration in defining trail grading.

- » Horse and shared use trails which are graded as easy and which it is anticipated may attract high levels of pedestrian, cycle (including road bikes) and equestrian use should be maximum 5% gradient for the majority of the length of the trail with steeper sections up to 10% gradient limited to short lengths of up to 100 m.
- » On trails graded as moderate primarily managed for use by horses, mountain bikers and walkers, maximum gradient over the majority of the trail should be 8%. Some steeper sections up to 15% are acceptable.
- » Maximum gradient for horse trails graded as challenging is 20%, although this should be for relatively short sections.
- » Switchbacks should be incorporated into trail design where possible on steeper sections of trail to reduce risk of erosion and improve accessibility.
- » Cross-fall of hill paths and tracks should be reflected in the trail grading with 5% maximum difference in level between the top and lower side of the trail on easy trails, 7.5% on moderate trails and 10% maximum cross-fall on any section of the most challenging routes.

3.11 Parking

There is no obligation on trail managers to provide trailer or horse box parking as part of trail development as requirement and demand for parking provision for horse trailers and boxes will depend on location, length and character of the trail, and who is likely to use the trail.

Parking is unlikely to be an issue for horse trails which attract or are intended mainly for local use as riders will usually ride to the trail from wherever they keep their horse. In contrast, the success of horse trails being developed to attract visiting riders is likely to depend on availability of suitable parking at the start/finish and potentially at or near access points along the way to enable riders to use individual sections of the route. For some trails there may be opportunities for local farmers or landowners to provide parking for a fee.



4



Horse Trail infrastructure

All infrastructure on horse trails must be fit for purpose, designed and managed in line with best practice to facilitate access with a horse, as well as any other type of use for which the trail is intended. The basic principle is to use the least restrictive option.

4.1 Surfacing

There is no single prescription for surfacing on horse trails. As with any well-designed and managed trail, the surface should be as natural as possible to fit in with the surrounding landscape. The most viable and sustainable option will depend on type and level of use, substrate, soil type, drainage and – equally importantly - what can be negotiated with landowners and fits in with land management. Bound surfaces are usually able to withstand use by horses without damage and are commonly used in many countries on shared use paths or trails with high levels of use, or in more urban areas, but tarmac and concrete can be slippery for horses, particularly on a gradient and are therefore not usually the preferred surfacing choice for horse trails.

Formal surfacing of horse trails is not necessarily desirable or essential. From a rider's perspective, short, firm, well-drained turf provides the ideal surface and presumption should be in favour of minimising hard surfacing unless the existing natural surface is unsuitable or unsustainable for the anticipated type(s) and level of use.

Where levels of use are high or drainage is poor, firm tracks and paths with a well compacted stone base are likely to be more sustainable. Newly constructed forest roads or tracks with uncompacted, sharp or angular hard stone surfaces can lame horses and are tiring to walk, cycle or ride on. Over time, accumulation of soil usually blinds the sharp stone which can then provide ideal trails for horses or shared use. Free-draining gravel paths or tracks and forest roads which have grassed over are perfect for horse riders, cyclists and walkers.

A grass strip down the middle of a stoned or hard surfaced vehicle track can also provide a less-jarring surface for horse riders without interfering with reinforced wheel tracks but may be less suitable for trails with high levels of use.



Where space is not an issue, well drained grass alongside a surfaced path works well on some shared use trails, such as disused railway tracks, and can also reduce problems with dog fouling on the surfaced path. However, horse riders are unlikely to use the grass strip if there are hidden hazards such as litter which might present risk of injury. Fencing of parallel strips to segregate horses from other users may increase rather than reduce risk and liability if horses shy into the fence for any reason.

To some extent surfacing will determine horse riders' pace as level of concussion to horses' hooves and legs increases with the hardness of the surface and the speed at which the horse is going. Some form of surfacing may be necessary on paths subject to heavy use to sustain year-round use, which will naturally limit pace of horse riders to walk. Firm grass tracks allow trotting or faster going. Softer ground risks sprains and tendon damage at speed so on sections suitable for cantering, surface needs to be either resilient or soft enough to allow hooves to sink to a maximum of 3 cm. Woodchip and sand are popular surfaces for riding arenas but are not suitable or sustainable for horse trails.

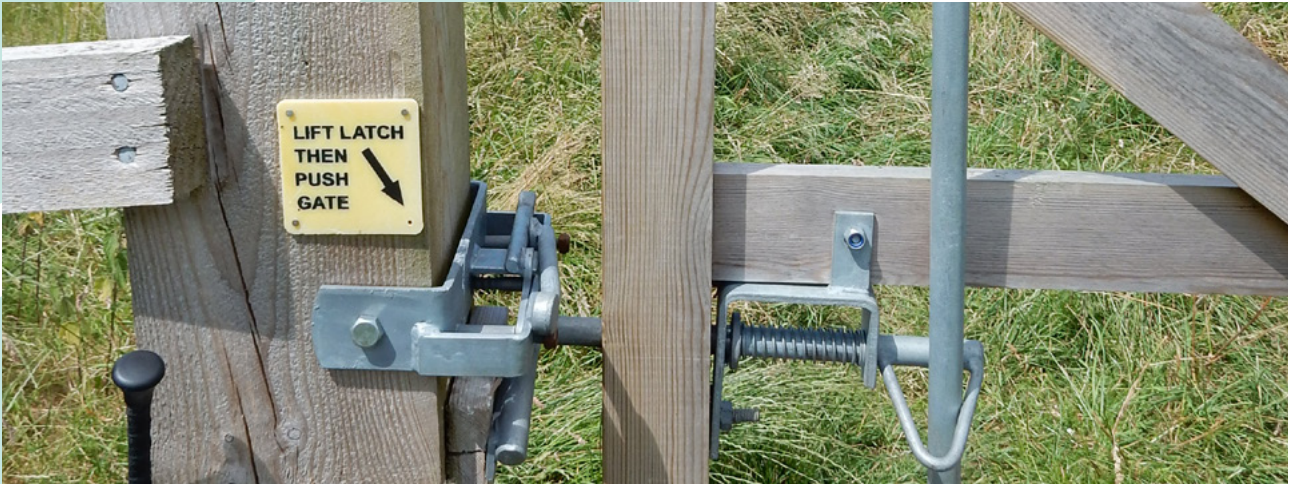
- » Any material used for path surfacing on horse or shared use trails should be non-slip, resilient to the level and type of use, require minimal maintenance and be appropriate to the local landscape.
- » Wherever possible surfaced riding routes should be finished with compacted crushed stone (40 mm to dust) blinded with fine whin dust to fill voids, bind and smooth the surface.
- » Geotextile or geogrid used to support path surfacing should be minimum 250 mm below the finished surface.
- » Stone pitching is commonly used on popular sections of the Pennine Bridleway and many other horse trails and can be the most sustainable option on sections of steep, upland path. Where stone pitching is used on horse trails, smaller random stones should be laid to create a slightly irregular surface which will allow horses to put their hooves flat to the ground and is less slippery for all trail users than dressed stone. Adjoining stones should be pitched to provide a minimum 300 mm width foothold with downhill gradient <5 degrees.
- » Stone flags were for centuries the traditional surface on packhorse routes across peat or boggy ground, and are still used on some sections of the Pennine Bridleway and Trans Pennine Trail without presenting a problem for horses. Where stone flags are used on horse trails, wider passing places or refuges should be provided at regular intervals. Riders should be able to see before setting off on the flags whether the next section of path is clear.

4.2 Fencing, gates and barriers

Provision of appropriate access facilities within fences, walls and other boundaries is essential on a trail. Fine details, such as the type and position of a catch, can make a significant difference to how easy it is for horse riders to open and close a gate, risk of getting reins caught and horse riders' enjoyment of the trail. Equally important, careful design, specification and maintenance of gates and catches is critical to ensuring that gates are always properly closed to prevent stock straying. 1.5 m wooden or metal bridle gates with a trombone handle are easy for horse riders, walkers and cyclists of all ages and abilities to operate, but it is up to trail managers to agree with farmers and landowners what is most suitable for the specific situation.

Positioning of gates is also important. To open a gate without dismounting, the rider will usually line their horse up parallel to the gate with its heels towards the hinges and its head towards the opening end. Sufficient space is required for the horse to extend its head beyond the shutting post for the rider to operate the catch. Gates sited in a corner are therefore difficult to open on a horse.





- » Gates should swing freely on hinges and be equally easy to open and close from both directions, without lifting, preferably without dismounting.
- » Gateways should be firm underfoot and well drained to facilitate access by all users.
- » Internal width between gateposts or other structures must be at least 1.5 m, with no nails or sharp protrusions on or within 1 m either side of the gate, and no bars hanging below the gates.
- » All gates should allow at least 3 m level turning space both sides to enable riders to open and close the gate (mounted or dismounted). The turning space must be clear of obstructions including overgrown hedges or other vegetation, remnant fence/gate posts, large stones, broken culverts or changes in level.
- » Gates should be positioned to allow adequate space beyond the shutting post to enable a horse to extend its head and neck over the gate while the rider is beside the latch.
- » Electric fencing must be sheathed at least 2 m either side of any gate.
- » There should be no barbed wire on or within 2 m either side of the gate and turning space.
- » Clasps and other fastenings should be attached towards the top of the gate to be within riders' reach without dismounting while still readily accessible by other potential trail users.
- » Ideally gates should be set back at least 2 m from any junction between the trail and public road to allow sufficient manoeuvring space to open and close the gate safely off the carriageway.
- » Where risk of livestock straying is a concern, self-closing gates should be fitted with stockproof latches or alternatively a fenced 'box' enclosure should be created with a gate either side. Any such enclosure should be minimum 4 m x 4 m to allow adequate turning space for riders to safely negotiate both gates.
- » Cattle grids are a potential liability because horses cannot safely cross them. Appropriate alternative access should therefore be provided alongside or within 10 m of any cattle grid. Ideally gates beside cattle grids should be hung with the opening end furthest away from the grid so the horse is not facing the grid when trying to open the gate. A fence minimum 1 m high should be erected alongside cattle grids to prevent risk of a startled horse accidentally stepping into the cattle grid.

The Outdoor Access Design Guide includes specifications and general guidance on all basic infrastructure <https://www.pathsforall.org.uk/mediaLibrary/other/english/outdoor-access-design-guide.pdf>

4.3 Horse stiles and motorcycle barriers

Single or parallel wooden beam horse stiles or motorcycle traps can help deter illegal motorcycle use and, provided they are correctly designed, horses soon learn to step safely over. Bespoke lockable vehicle barriers with a lowered central horse stile section provide an alternative.

- » Horse stiles should be 1.7 m minimum passable width clear of any nails or other protrusions.
- » Maximum height of horizontal ground rails 375 mm with small gap underneath to allow free drainage.
- » Ground between the two parallel beams/ground rails should be firm and level
- » Step-over section of lockable barriers must be clad in wood to avoid risk of horses clanging their hooves.
- » On shared use trails alternative access such as kissing or radar gates may be required alongside horse stiles to maintain easy access for walkers.

4.4 Drainage

Drainage is arguably the single most important aspect of any horse trail, affecting usability, sustainability, safety, maintenance requirement and liability. Deep peat and boggy ground are a rider's worst nightmare: getting stuck in boggy ground or straining a tendon is one of the greatest risks for horses, and in extreme circumstances can prove fatal. Although the consequences may be less serious, walkers and cyclists are equally unlikely to appreciate boggy sections of path. Horse trails should be aligned to avoid or circumnavigate boggy ground wherever possible, or designed to include robust, sustainable sections of path or track over the boggy sections. Floating paths across boggy ground supported on brash are not suitable for horse trails because of the risk of horses hooves breaking through the surface and injuring their legs in the branches below.

- » All horse trails should provide a firm base which for the majority of the trail should be maximum 150 mm below the surface. Where there is no viable alternative, occasional short sections (maximum 20 m length) up to 300 mm depth to firm base are allowable.
- » Paths with adjacent open drains or ditches should be wide enough to avoid risk of horses inadvertently stepping off into the ditch.
- » Drainage should be designed to cope with storm conditions and take water well away from the path, preferably connecting into a wider drainage network
- » All drainage pipes across the trail should be covered by compacted stone or dry earth (not peat) minimum depth 250 mm.
- » Open cross drains or grips on upland paths should be maximum 300 mm wide to minimise risk of horses trying to jump across them. There should be at least 500 mm flat, level surface uphill and downhill of the cross drain to provide firm footing for the horse to step across.
- » Lipped metal box drains across a track can potentially present a safety hazard. Box culverts should be either <100 mm or >300 mm wide to avoid risk of horses getting their hooves stuck.

4.5 Culverts

In practical terms, culverting ditches and small streams under a path or track is often a more effective, cheaper, sustainable and less risky option on horse trails than installing bridges or sustainably managing fords, particularly on trails which are likely to attract high levels of use.

- » Width of the trail over culvert pipes should be minimum 2 m.
- » Plastic culvert pipes should extend minimum 500 mm beyond the edge of the path or track.
- » Diameter of culvert pipes needs to be sufficient to accommodate maximum flow.
- » Culvert pipes should be covered by minimum 250 mm compacted stone.
- » Ends of all culvert pipes should be supported by appropriate head walls.



4.6 Fords

Fords are often a simpler, cheaper option on horse trails for crossing relatively shallow watercourses. On longer trails they also offer opportunity for horses to drink.



- » Maximum depth of watercourse where fords are included on a horse trail should be <math><0.5\text{ m}</math> in normal conditions. Water flow in normal conditions should allow a horse to walk easily through without being pushed off course.
- » The base of the ford should be firm and level with no large boulders or holes.
- » Entry or exit to the ford should be firm, well compacted and non-slip, shelving into the water with a maximum gradient of <math><1:10</math>.
- » Markers should be provided for entry/exit points where the ford is wider than 4 m.
- » Alternative routes/crossings should be identified and clearly signed for when the stream or river is in spate.
- » The environmental implications of horses using fords must be taken into account in route design.
- » Stone pitching or an Irish ford may be necessary to protect entry and exit from fluctuating water levels and potential damage from equestrian use.
- » Stepping stones or pedestrian footbridges should be on the upstream side of a ford.

4.7 Bridges

Where bridges are required on a horse trail to cross streams, rivers or roads, they must be designed to support the weight of horse and rider (average 600 kg) without sway and preferably without undue noise or echo.

- » All bridges must be designed and constructed in line with environmental protection legislation and necessary permission obtained.
- » Structures should be stable and capable of supporting a live load of 5kN/sq m and a point load of 8.12 kN.
- » Sleeper bridges are acceptable up to a maximum span of 3 m.
- » Regardless of design or construction, all bridges on horse trails should be minimum 1.5 m wide up to 3 m span, 2 m wide up to 8 m span and minimum 4 m wide for wider river/road crossings.
- » Decking boards should be laid at right angles to the sides of the bridge with 10 mm maximum gap between decking planks (or sleepers).
- » Surface or decking of wooden bridges (including sleepers) should be rendered non-slip by pre-formed grooves cut into the surface, by securely attaching grip strips or applying epoxy resin and bauxite grit rather than staples or wire netting.
- » Bridges with a drop below of >1 m should include parapets and secure side rails to 1.5 m high with kickboards to at least 25 cm height to prevent horses' hooves slipping between railing and decking. A gap of <50 mm should be left between the kickboard and decking to facilitate drainage and allow leaves or other debris to wash off.
- » Entry/exit onto/off the bridge should be level with the trail either end without a step.
- » Gates leading onto or off bridges should allow minimum 3 m turning space to allow riders to close the gate behind them.
- » Where necessary, fenced wings should be included at the end(s) of bridges to prevent risk of horses shying off abutments. Rails should finish at a vertical post cut flush with the top rail to avoid creating a hazard on which riders could catch stirrups or reins.





4.8 Steps

Steps should be used on horse trails only as a last resort where it is not possible to reduce the gradient by zig-zagging the path. When negotiating steep slopes, horses will often descend sideways or at a 45 degree angle, which can result in their back legs slipping, potentially causing erosion. Where necessary to reduce erosion, horses can manage steps provided the rise of each step is not too high and the tread (landing area) allows the horse to maintain its balance. Horse riders using more remote upland trails are typically more experienced and thus more likely to be able to cope with steps. Some welcome the added challenge.

- » Steps should be designed to fit in with the local landscape and minimise erosion, incorporating a variety of heights and lengths, but also taking account of the length of horses.
- » Maximum rise between steps should be 300 mm.
- » The tread on each step should be firm, well compacted stone or earth.
- » Minimum depth of tread (distance from front to back) should be 400 mm. At least every five steps the depth of tread should be at least 2 m to allow horses to regain their balance by placing all four hooves on the same step.
- » A shallow slope downwards towards the next riser is acceptable to make best use of limited space but drainage along the trail should be designed to avoid water running down the steps.
- » Longer treads (minimum 3 m) should be provided where steps change direction, e.g. around a steep corner.

4.9 Mounting blocks

Horse riders appreciate mounting blocks where parking is provided at the start of a trail or where riders may need to dismount to negotiate a bridge or gate which cannot be opened from horseback, but there is no compulsion to provide formal mounting blocks. Where formal mounting blocks are not provided, most riders will find a large stone, log or tree stump, or position their horse downhill of a bank to provide a height advantage which makes mounting easier.

- » Any structure provided on a horse trail to help riders mount their horse, whether a bespoke mounting block or a log, should be stable and rigid so that it does not move or tilt as the rider mounts their horse, and positioned so that a horse can stand parallel.

Recommended dimensions for mounting blocks, where provided, are minimum 450 mm wide by 650 mm high, with a step at 350 mm with a non-slip surface.

5



Trail signage and waymarking

Clear, consistent signage and waymarking is essential to enable trail users to follow the agreed route without referring to a map, app or guide book, and to alert trail users to specific risks. The assumption should be that signage and waymarking is the only means of navigation along the trail.

- » All horse trails should be clearly and consistently signed and waymarked at the start/finish and at all intersections with other paths or trails, including a horse or horse shoe symbol so everyone knows the trail is accessible to horse riders.
- » All signage and waymarking should follow best practice, adopt a consistent design for the trail, and be located so it is clearly visible to trail users approaching from either direction.
- » All signage and waymarking must be correctly aligned, secured in position, clearly legible by mounted riders and other trail users and not obscured by vegetation or anything else.

For guidance on good practice for all aspects of signage and waymarking see <https://www.pathsforall.org.uk/resource/signage-guidance-for-outdoor-access>.

Criteria relating to provision of essential information about the trail is summarised in section 6.6.

5.1 Signage at path and road junctions

- » The start and finish of the trail and each intersection with roads should be clearly signed with a fingerpost clearly indicating the name and distance to the end of the trail or next major settlement.
- » The blade on the finger or the post itself should include either the name of the trail or easily distinguishable logo.

5.2 Waymarking

All trails should be clearly and consistently waymarked where they intersect with other paths or trails, and where there may be any cause for doubt about the direction of the agreed trail. Coloured waymark disks bearing the name of the trail and an arrow which can be rotated as required are usually the simplest, cheapest means of waymarking. Typically these are attached to simple wooden posts but design and siting should take account of functionality, durability and risk of cattle rubbing on and dislodging the posts. Care is required to ensure that screws or nails used to affix waymarkers are not left protruding with consequent risk of injury or damage to horse, rider or tack, particularly where disks are attached to posts which the horse may brush against when negotiating a gate or narrow gap.

5.3 Temporary diversions

Temporary diversions from the agreed route are sometimes unavoidable, for example during major work to upgrade a section of trail which would potentially conflict with trail use, where the trail has become impassable due to landslip or fallen trees, or during timber harvesting.

- » Where it is necessary to temporarily close or re-route a section of the agreed trail, an acceptable alternative should be identified and clearly signed and waymarked.
- » Trail users should be alerted in advance to any temporary diversions on the trail through the trail website, by information boards at the start/finish of the trail, and at the start and finish of any diversion.
- » The dates during which the diversion will apply, the reason for the diversion and a map clearly showing the length and route of the diversion should be clearly identified.
- » Diversions should be clearly waymarked at least every 300 m and confirmed by appropriate signs at all path and road junctions.
- » All signage relating to temporary diversions should be taken down within a maximum of five days of reversion to the original route.



5.4 Safety/warning signage

Warning signs can help alert trail users to potential hazards but there is a risk of littering the countryside with too many signs, and of people switching off and ignoring signs where excessive signage is used. The need for warning signs will also depend on the location and nature of the hazard. Time-limited warning signs, signs specific to a location, which are self-explanatory and convincing are generally more effective than a sign which simply says “trail closed” without any explanation or alternative offered.

Warning signs should be erected on horse trails

- » to alert trail users where a trail joins or crosses a busy road (including any national or regional road). Signs should also be erected on the road to alert motorists that they may meet horses. Section 6.18.2 of the Traffic Signs Manual stipulates that sign W150 (pictured right) should only be used where traffic exceeds 300 vehicles/day and at least five accompanied horses or ponies a day regularly cross or use a stretch of road
- » where maintenance, improvement or other work is underway on the trail which is considered passable with care but might be considered a safety risk
- » at regular intervals on any electric fence alongside a trail.



In some cases it may be more effective to flag up risks on the trail website or information panels, for example reminding trail users to check tide times for sections along a beach, or to assess water levels before attempting to cross a ford on a horse when rivers are in spate.

5.5 Interpretive signs

On-site interpretation offering information about natural, built and cultural heritage along the trail is not an essential requirement for horse trails but can add to the experience for trail users.



6



Safety and risk management

The law regarding public liability in Ireland is clearly defined by the Occupiers Liability Act 1995 which places onus on trail users to be aware of the risks associated with recreational access, whether on foot, cycle or horseback, and to accept responsibility for their own actions. Under the Act, the duty of care owed by an occupier to a recreational user is minimal. The duty of care owed to visitors paying for entry to land (as opposed to reasonable charge for parking) is significantly greater.

6.1 Public liability

Countryside recreation in Ireland is based on the ethos of recreational users being aware of and accepting risks inherent in all recreational activities and taking responsibility for their own actions. As claims for negligence increase, land owners and trail managers are nevertheless understandably concerned about the risk of anyone suffering an accident or sustaining injury on their land and then pursuing a claim for damages. Case law confirms that liability towards recreational trail users is, in fact, significantly less than for visitors who a property owner has invited onto their land.

The Occupiers Liability Act 1995 was introduced to ensure that recreational use of land does not place an undue burden of responsibility on landowners. It defines the duty of the occupier as being

“not to intentionally injure recreational users, or damage the property of the person, nor act with reckless disregard for the person or the property of the person”

Reckless is defined as being

“beyond careless and almost intentional – characterised by wilful, being heedless of obvious and serious dangers”.

Provision of structures, such as gates or bridges, increases the duty of care so particular care is required to ensure all structures are fit for purpose, appropriately located, designed and installed, regularly inspected and maintained. Section 4.4 of the Occupiers Liability Act 1995 states

“where a structure is or has been provided primarily for use by recreational users, the occupier shall owe a duty towards such users in respect of such a structure to take reasonable care to maintain the structure in safe condition.”

For examples of case law relating to public liability see Appendix C. For further information on liability see Recreation in the Irish Countryside: property rights, obligations and responsibilities. Information for landowners and recreational users:

<https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/media/document/2020-04/accessliability.pdf>

For a legal interpretation of the Occupiers Liability Act and a more detailed consideration of the position regarding liability, consult a solicitor.

6.2 Insurance

Sport Ireland currently provide insurance to indemnify private landowners and trail management groups against claims for injury, accident or property damage related to privately owned sections of walking trails which meet the agreed criteria and are included on the National Trails Register. Sport Ireland are working towards providing a similar structure for private landowners and trail management groups in relation to horse trails.

All landowners are advised to have public liability insurance, regardless of recreational activity or a trail on their land. Horse riders are also advised to have their own public liability insurance to cover their liability for any injury or damage caused by their negligence - or by their horse. However, as with walking and cycling trails, and with horse trails all around the world, there is no legal requirement for horse riders or other trail users to have their own public liability or personal accident insurance in order to use horse trails, or to be required to provide proof of such insurance, although they may choose to do so for their own peace of mind.

6.3 Safety and risk management

All outdoor recreation involves safety risks, and horse riding is inherently a risky activity. It is impossible to design out or eliminate all risk from any trail and it is implicit that anyone using a horse trail chooses to accept some level of risk. Where unacceptable risks are identified, alternatives should be explored, such as realignment of a section of route, installing a large bore culvert instead of a bridge, or temporary diversion during timber felling.

The Visitor Safety Group's guidelines urge trail managers not to take away people's sense of freedom and adventure, including the appeal of wild and remote places, which horse riders are as keen to explore and enjoy as walkers and mountain bikers.

“People should be free to participate in high risk or adventurous activities as long as they are aware of the risks. Riders of mountain bikes should not be prevented from experiencing the exhilaration of steep descents and challenging drops, if that is their informed choice.”

Visitor Safety Group Guidelines

Exactly the same applies to horse riders: many have the skills and experience necessary to safely enjoy long distances, and welcome the challenge of sections of trail through wild country, varying surface and gradient, as well as the variety of scenery.

Whether a short, local, easy trail designed and managed to provide for horse riders of all ages and abilities, or a more challenging trail in a remote part of Ireland, the key to risk management is to ensure that trail users are aware of the nature and extent of hazards and risks they may encounter on the trail and the precautions that they personally should take to mitigate risk.

- ✔ It is reasonable to expect visitors to exercise responsibility for themselves.
- ✔ It is reasonable to expect visitors not to put others at risk. Horse riders should always slow down when approaching other path users, particularly young and old and those using mobility aids or buggies, and restrict their speed to walk until safely past others using the trail. It is also reasonable to restrict horse riders' pace to walk on busy sections of trail, particularly in or close to more urban areas.
- ✔ Assess risks and develop a consistent plan for dealing with them.
- ✔ Aim to strike a balance between visitor self-reliance and management intervention.

As location becomes more remote and terrain more rugged, it is reasonable to expect visitors to have greater knowledge and awareness of risks and take more personal responsibility for their own safety, the level of management intervention required decreases and fewer physical safety measures are required. It is reasonable to expect trail users in more remote or mountainous areas to be equipped with suitable clothing, to carry maps and a compass (and know how to use it!).

The basic principle for risk management is plan – do – check – act. For more about the guiding principles of safety and risk management see <https://www.visitorsafety.group/principles/guiding-principles/>

- » All horse trails should have a clearly defined safety and risk management programme with defined responsibilities for risk assessment of all infrastructure and other aspects of the trail.
- » Trail managers are required to keep a written record of all risk assessments and any resultant action, including:
 - date and details of inspections carried out, including safety risks or hazards identified during the inspection and assessment of the condition of all infrastructure
 - date and details of any issues reported by the public
 - action taken to address issues identified during inspection or reported, including date and details of repair or maintenance work undertaken
 - written note of where and why it was decided not to take any action to mitigate identified risks or safety hazards

6.4 Risk assessment and mitigation

Liability can be mitigated by identifying, assessing and recording risks associated with infrastructure and all other aspects of the trail then identifying and doing whatever reasonably possible to reduce the risk. Risk assessment involves a simple, methodical process.

6.4.1 Identifying risks

The starting point is to survey the trail carefully and identify hazards which trail users might encounter. Include natural hazards such as steep drops, boggy ground, low branches or rabbit holes, as well as man-made structures such as gates, bridges, fencing and signage. Check that all infrastructure is safe and properly maintained. Consider who might be harmed, and how. Ignore the trivial; concentrate instead on the main hazards which could have most serious impact or affect more people.

Make a note of any issues which might require further investigation such as bridges requiring structural engineering survey. Identify who is best qualified or experienced to carry out further assessment, fix a date and follow through accordingly.

6.4.2 Evaluate the likelihood and severity of the risk

Weigh up the likelihood that harm might be suffered or caused. How many people might be affected, and how severe is the injury or harm likely to be?

6.5.3 Decide what (if any) action is required to minimise the risk

There are many situations where risk can be accepted, such as where the hazard is obvious, the level of risk is low, physical precautions would have an adverse impact on trail user experience or be impractical. Deciding to do nothing is acceptable, but you must explain and record your reasoning as part of the risk assessment process.



A protruding sharp-ended metal bar such as this can easily injure a horse or catch on a saddle or rider's leg when trying to negotiate a gate. A rubber stop fitted across the end or triangular closed end bar reduces the risk.

If the level of risk is not acceptable, choose the most effective and practical action necessary to minimise the risk while allowing reasonable access and protecting the landscape and environment.

- Can you eliminate the hazard e.g. re-aligning the trail? Bear in mind that features such as dramatic cliffs and rugged terrain may be part of what attracts people to use the trail.
- How could you control or influence where people go e.g. effective signage or planting dense, prickly vegetation as a deterrent.
- Inform trail users about what to expect through trail grading and information provision on the internet, information panels, notices and leaflets. Take particular care to alert people to unusual or hidden risks such as adders or hidden rabbit holes.

6.5 Trail grading

A trail grading (difficulty rating) system for horse trails has been established to enable trail users to decide for themselves whether any particular trail is suitable for their skills, experience and ability (See Appendix A). In line with the grading system adopted for walking and cycling trails, horse trail grading is based on the accessibility, ease of navigation, surfacing, infrastructure and other physical characteristics and challenges trail users can expect to meet on the trail. Other factors such as remoteness and exposure may also be taken into account where appropriate. For long trails of variable character, different sections may be individually graded. Otherwise grading is based on the most difficult section of the trail.

As with walking and cycling trails, horse trail grading is about providing information to enable trail users to decide for themselves whether they have the necessary skills and experience to use a trail rather than dictating qualifications or levels of competence which trail users must demonstrate before being allowed to use a trail. All riders should be suitably equipped for the terrain and weather they may meet on the trail and should be capable of controlling their horse at any pace, including on open ground, and when encountering walkers, cyclists or other trail users. Trail managers should make this clear when promoting horse trails.

6.6 Information about the trail

The key to encouraging responsible use of trails is to avoid a long list of do's and don'ts and to focus instead on providing reliable information which enables potential trail users to decide for themselves in advance whether the trail in question is suitable for their own abilities, skills, experience and intended use. By the time horse riders reach the beginning of a trail they are probably committed to using it regardless.



To be included on the National Trails Register, horse trail managers must provide accurate, up to date information about the trail. This should include:

- » readily accessible information about the trail on the internet for potential trail users to look at before they leave home
- » on-site information panels at trail heads and on longer trails at key access points. On short trails <5 km long, relatively simple panels may suffice. On longer trails, larger information boards are required.

Web coverage of the trail might be through a bespoke website set up and managed by the trail management organisation, included on one of the partner organisation's websites, or on the Sport Ireland Outdoors website.

Regardless of the length of the trail, information provided on the trail website, information panels and in any trail guide or promotional material should include:

- » an easy to read, up to date map of the agreed route clearly identifying start and finish point length of the trail
- » summary brief description of the trail and the types of use for which it is intended i.e. equestrian and possibly also pedestrian and cycling
- » information on trail grading or difficulty grading (see Appendix A)
- » a brief description of what trail users can expect to find along the route, including any notable hazards and any bridges or underpasses which do not meet the minimum height and width specifications set out in section 3.9 but are still potentially passable with a horse
- » confirmation of the signage and waymarking system used on the trail
- » alternative option(s) where the route includes fords which may not be passable when the river is in spate
- » information on trail grading or difficulty grading (see Appendix A)
- » confirmation of waymarking which trail users should follow (particularly important where there are numerous different trails which may overlap)
- » details of any temporary diversions or seasonal restrictions on use during winter/wet weather to avoid unsustainable damage to unsurfaced paths
- » summary guidance on responsible use of the trail, including a simple succinct code of conduct which all trail users should follow (see Appendix B) highlighting that in choosing to use the trail, horse riders and other trail users accept responsibility for their own safety, actions and decisions (see Appendix C)
- » endorsement of the Leave No Trace principles to encourage trail users to minimise their environmental impact. For further information see www.leavenotraceireland.org.
- » contact details for the trail manager
- » website address for further information.

Information boards might also provide additional information about local attractions or services.

6.7 Access through livestock

Walkers, cyclists and horse riders all over the world use paths and tracks across ground where livestock are grazing, usually with very little problem, but some animals can be unpredictable or aggressive, particularly bulls, rams, stallions and cows protecting their calves. As so much of Ireland is farmed, inevitably some trails will pass through livestock. Interaction of horses with livestock is no more of a concern than for walkers or cyclists – arguably less so than for walkers accompanied by a dog.

Exactly the same principles apply to livestock as to any other risk associated with a trail, namely that the onus is on trail users to exercise caution, behave responsibly and decide for themselves whether they feel they (and their horse) have the necessary skills and experience to proceed along the trail. Some horse riders may feel perfectly confident riding through fields or across hill ground where sucklers are grazing with their calves, whereas others may choose not to, perhaps because they are worried how their horse may behave, or they personally are frightened of cows.

Trail managers should work with farmers and landowners to agree the best way of minimising safety risks associated with livestock to trail users. On busy trails, the simplest (but not necessarily cheapest) way of reducing risks associated with access through enclosed fields where livestock are grazing is to segregate the trail with a fence, but this is not always practical, nor feasible on open ground.

- » Information should be provided on the trail website and information panels at the start and finish of the route clearly identifying sections of the trail where trail users may meet livestock and summarising how trail users should conduct themselves when using any section(s) of the trail which passes through land where livestock are grazing. An example of suitable instructions is provided in Appendix D.
- » No section of the trail should go through a field in which a bull, stallion or other animal with a known history of dangerous or unpredictable behaviour is grazing or has access unless the animal(s) in question is segregated from trail users by secure fencing. Where this is not possible, the trail should be temporarily diverted, with clear signs where the diversion begins and ends warning trail users not to enter the field.



6.8 Biosecurity

There are very few serious diseases which pass from horses to people or livestock. Horses cannot communicate Johne's disease, BVD (Bovine Virus Diarrhoea), leptospirosis or IBR (Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis) to cattle or spread parasites or clostridial diseases to sheep. During acute disease outbreaks, such as Foot and Mouth, any public access is likely to be restricted within a defined circumference of infected farms. An outbreak of strangles on a farm directly along the trail could potentially justify restriction of equestrian use but as a general rule, biosecurity is not a valid reason for preventing or restricting equestrian or any other legitimate public access.

Quarantine restrictions or welfare code recommendations for new livestock brought onto a holding apply to other farm livestock, not to members of the public on horseback using an agreed horse trail. Quality assurance and accreditation schemes sometimes include stipulation about worming of farm dogs, but do not include any restriction on equestrian access.



7



Effective horse trail management

The success and sustainability of any trail depends on an effective organisational structure to co-ordinate and oversee trail development, monitoring and maintenance. A clear, concise management plan is essential, which should summarise the aims of trail development, management and maintenance, how these will be achieved and who will do what.

7.1 Trail management organisation

To be included on the National Trails Register, for each horse trail there must be a defined management structure in place with assigned responsibility for:

- » trail planning and development, from designing and establishing the trail to ongoing maintenance and improvements
- » liaising with farmers and landowners to identify opportunities, issues and concerns
- » negotiating and confirming in writing agreement of landowners and where relevant tenant farmers to the alignment, signage and promotion of the proposed route, including any drainage, surfacing, gates and other associated infrastructure
- » undertaking (or commissioning) a risk assessment to identify potential safety risks or hazards, identifying and implementing appropriate ways to mitigate risk
- » implementing agreed capital work to ensure the trail is accessible, safe, enjoyable, sustainable and clearly signed throughout
- » arranging for assessment of the trail to enable inclusion on the National Trails Register
- » encouraging responsible use of the trail
- » trail promotion through media coverage, signage and potentially a website
- » regular monitoring, inspection and maintenance of the trail and all associated infrastructure.

A single point of contact must be identified, but beyond this there is no fixed requirement for how trail management organisations are structured or function. The number of people or organisations involved, and the role each plays, will vary depending on the length of the trail, associated challenges and opportunities. Short, local horse trails can often be effectively managed by an existing organisation, potentially in collaboration with other relevant individuals and organisations. For more ambitious longer distance trails, it may be worthwhile – and sometimes necessary to secure funding – to set up a new, formally structured trail management group including representatives of relevant local and national organisations with assigned roles and responsibilities.

7.2 Trail management plan

All registered horse trails must have a trail management plan. This can be as simple or as detailed as required, depending on the trail and available resources, but at a minimum should include:

- » overall aims of trail development and management
- » confirmation of target audience and who will be able to use the trail
- » summary strategy of how the aims will be achieved
- » details of the trail management organisation i.e. who is responsible for what in terms of managing the trail, and relevant contact information
- » a map identifying the confirmed route agreed in writing with all relevant landowners
- » relationship of the trail to any designated sites, summary review of potential environmental impact and how any adverse impact will be minimised
- » summary of how responsible use of the trail will be promoted including the principles of “leave no trace”
- » an ongoing maintenance plan
- » how often the trail will be monitored/inspected, how this will be done and by whom, including a copy of the monitoring/recording sheet to be used
- » confirmation of funding for establishing and managing the trail.

7.3 Ongoing management, maintenance and monitoring

No matter how well planned, designed, aligned and constructed, regular ongoing management and maintenance is essential to ensure trails remain at the same high standard as when they were first developed. Regular condition monitoring of the trail and any associated infrastructure is essential to identify any issues which may have arisen, such as fallen trees across the trail, blocked drains, missing waymarks or broken decking on a bridge. Routine monitoring is important not only to maintain accessibility, but also as an important part of risk management.

Frequency of monitoring depends on level of trail usage and likelihood of weather or other factors affecting the condition of the trail or associated infrastructure. On most trails monitoring inspection at least twice a year is recommended, say in spring and autumn, before and after the main season, to identify any issues which may have arisen over winter, and again at the end of the season to allow time to address any problems.

- » To be eligible for inclusion on the National Trails Register and for cover under the national trails insurance scheme a trail must have in place a system for ongoing maintenance and monitoring of the trail managed locally by the trail management organisation.
- » Any safety issues found or reported must be prioritised and addressed accordingly.

Templates for trail inspection and maintenance plans and related record keeping can be downloaded from the Sport Ireland website <https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/media/document/2020-11/summary-of-trail-maintenance-and-monitoring-system-23-aug-2020.pdf>



7.4 Maintaining records

Recording details of risk assessments, inspections, maintenance and repair work undertaken, any issues reported by trail users or landowners and subsequent action taken is essential to defend any attempted liability claims and is therefore an essential requirement of all registered horse trails.

» Documented records of all monitoring and work carried out on the trail must be retained by the management organisation.

7.5 Vegetation control

On some trails, regular use may be sufficient to suppress growth of grass or other ground vegetation, but on most trails vegetation control will be necessary

- to ensure the trail is easily passable with a horse, and where appropriate on foot or cycle
- maintain the required passable width of the path
- to ensure all signage, waymarking and information panels remain easily visible
- to cut back overhanging branches to maintain sufficient height clearance for mounted riders.

It is up to individual trail management organisations to decide what vegetation needs controlling and how best to do this.

7.6 Trail creep

Poor drainage and deterioration of trail standard are the commonest causes of trail users straying off the original line of the path and causing braiding or trail creep.

» Monitoring of the trail by physical survey at least once a year should identify any sections of trail where braiding or creep is becoming an issue and appropriate action should be taken to remedy the problem.

7.7 Litter/waste

Litter left by trail users and rubbish dumped on a trail detract from trail users' enjoyment and can cause pollution and risk to wildlife.

» Trail monitoring should include identification of issues with litter and the trail maintenance plan should include appropriate action to regularly collect and responsibly dispose of any litter.

7.8 Horse dung

Horse dung is mainly digested grass which in most situations rots away quickly, which is why many rural horse trails report no problems arising from dung.

Unlike dog faeces, dung from a normal, healthy horse does not contain any risk to the health of humans or other animals. However, on shared use paths, particularly those which are well-used and have a bound surface, horse dung can be a nuisance for walkers and cyclists on sections of trail heavily used by horses. Horse trail managers should identify sections of shared use trail where horse dung might present an issue along which they might recommend riders move off the path when their horse is about to dung, or dismount and kick dung to the side.



Appendices



Appendix A: Grading structure for horse trails in Ireland

Trail characteristic	Easy	Moderate	Challenging
General description	Level or gently sloping paths and tracks with a good, firm surface throughout and all gates negotiable without dismounting	Less formal waymarked paths and tracks which include moderate slopes and variable surfacing. Likely to include a combination of forest tracks, fire roads, single track unsurfaced trails and paths. All gates, fords, bridges accessible with a horse but some may require dismounting	The most challenging level of horse trail following paths and tracks of variable width, surface and gradient, which may include challenges such as rock steps and river fords. Some sections may be through remote countryside
Who is this type of trail suitable for?	Horse riders with a basic level of skill and horse and rider fitness	Horses and riders with an intermediate level of skill, training, experience and fitness	Experienced horses and riders with a high level of skill, fitness and trail riding experience
Signage and waymarking	Clearly signed and waymarked throughout	Clearly signed and waymarked throughout	Clearly waymarked at all road and path junctions but some sections through more remote upland areas may not be waymarked throughout
Trail surface	Generally compacted, well-drained unbound natural surface or bound and hardened surfaces (e.g. asphalt) on higher intensity, shared use trails where horses are likely to be restricted to walk. May include dual surface with hard sealed surface for bikes, walkers, buggies and wheelchairs and parallel firm grass strip for horses and dog walkers	Generally well-drained unbound surface, including firm grass, stoned tracks etc. which may or may not include a central grass strip. May also include some sections of bound surface path	Variable including grass, beaten earth or unbound natural surface paths, sandy beach/loch shore, gravel paths or short sections of bedrock
Trail width	Minimum 2500mm Minimum corridor width 3000mm Minimum corridor height 3700mm	Minimum 1500mm Minimum corridor width 1500mm Minimum corridor height 3700mm	Minimum 1000mm Minimum corridor width 1500mm Minimum corridor height 2500mm
Trail gradient	Maximum 10% Maximum sustained pitch 5% Cross-fall maximum 4%	Majority 8%, maximum 15% Maximum sustained pitch 10% Cross-fall maximum 7.5%	Maximum 20% Maximum sustained pitch 10% Cross-fall maximum 10%
Infrastructure	All gates or barriers minimum 1500 mm wide and passable on a horse without dismounting. Bridges or culverts provided for any water crossing minimum 1500 mm wide	All gates or other access facilities minimum 1500 mm wide and easily negotiable with a horse, some may require dismounting. Bridges or shallow fords provided at all water crossings	All gates or access facilities minimum 1500 mm wide, some may require dismounting to negotiate. River crossings may include fords

Appendix B: Responsible horse trail riding in Ireland

Suggested points which trail managers may wish to include in a code of conduct.

All riders should be suitably equipped for the terrain and weather they may meet on the trail and should be capable of controlling their horse at any pace, including on open ground, and when encountering walkers, cyclists or other trail users.

- ✓ Make sure you and your horse are prepared and equipped to ride your chosen trail.
- ✓ Wear a suitable riding hat.
- ✓ Make sure you know in advance where you are going, have a map with you and know how to read it!
- ✓ Give way to walkers and other horse riders. Don't assume they can see or hear you.
- ✓ Warn people of your approach, and acknowledge everyone you meet with a friendly smile or hello.
- ✓ Take particular care at road junctions, when riding downhill, on loose or wet surfaces and on boggy ground.
- ✓ Dismount on steep sections to reduce erosion and risk.
- ✓ Let someone know where you are going and when you plan to get back.
- ✓ For more challenging routes, check the forecast before you set off and if necessary adjust your route or change your plans accordingly.
- ✓ Respect land management activities including forestry and farming.
- ✓ Take your litter home.
- ✓ Leave gates as you find them.
- ✓ Take care of the countryside.
- ✓ On longer trails, carry food, map, spare clothing and waterproofs.
- ✓ Do not let your horse loose to graze on a horse trail.

Appendix C: Occupiers legal liability

For many years, the Occupiers Liability Act 1995 went untested. In 2003 a high court judge set an unfortunate precedent in finding a landowner 75% responsible for injuries sustained when someone fell off a cliff while watching the sunset. In 2005 the original judgement in this case (Weir Rodgers v the S. E. Trust Ltd) was overturned in the supreme court. Written judgement strengthened the Occupiers Liability Act considerably in stating

“those on private land for recreational purposes understand the risk that is inherent in their activities, have regard to the nature of the terrain they are crossing and take measures to ensure their own safety.”

James Staines, an Irish Solicitor, further clarified the onus on recreational users in saying that they are legally obliged to

“have regard for the nature of the land over which they are crossing. If it is rough and wet, then that person is deemed to be aware of the type of risk inherent in that type of terrain.”

Liability relating to structures was put to the test when a hill walker pursued action in respect of injuries suffered in 2013 when her foot snagged in a hole in one of the old railway sleepers used to construct a boardwalk on the Wicklow Way. Judgement by a Dublin Circuit Court judge initially found the National Parks and Wildlife Service negligent and awarded the walker 40,000 Euros damages. On appeal, the High Court overturned the judgement, rejecting the walker’s argument that a trip hazard is the same no matter what the location and on the basis that the walker was participating in an activity known to have risks. When considering the ‘mechanism of the fall’ the judge found “a high degree of negligence” on the walker’s part due to not looking at the surface of the boardwalk when she fell.

Appendix D: Practical tips on riding through livestock

Cattle are notoriously inquisitive creatures. What may appear as aggression is commonly curiosity. Young and recently turned out cattle can also be very boisterous and get excited at horses passing across “their” ground. Suckler cows are typically very protective of their calves, and potentially the greatest risk. Always keep your distance, keep your eye on the mother, and never get between cow and calf.

Riding responsibly through livestock involves making sure that you are not going to cause the animals undue stress or concern and taking responsibility for yourself and your horse.

- Read any signs and pay attention to the advice given, evaluate alternative routes, and think carefully about the implications and risks before riding through livestock.
- Give all animals a wide berth, keep to a walk, keep your horse under control, and keep your wits about you. Make sure you are always aware of the nearest exit in case of emergency.
- Keep calm, purposeful and quietly but firmly assertive in your movements.
- If riding in a group, keep reasonably close together.
- If stock are following you closely, turn your horse to face them. If necessary, use a firm voice and gesture with your hand or whip to urge them away (taking care not to frighten your horse in the process!). Move towards the stock which will encourage them to retreat. You may need to do this repeatedly until the stock stop following, or you are out of the field.
- Where cattle are congregating around the gate you need to get through, walk calmly towards them, using a firm but calm voice, if necessary reinforced by a wave of your arm or stick.
- Always leave gates as you find them.
- Be prepared to wait patiently and quietly out of the way while livestock are being moved, or find an alternative route.



Appendix E: Useful references

Lowland path construction guide - planning, construction, maintenance and signage of lowland paths

<https://www.pathsforall.org.uk/resource/lowland-path-construction-guide>

Great outdoors guide for accessibility – guidance on making paths and trails accessible to people of all ages and abilities

<https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/2019-10/great-outdoors-a-guide-for-accessibility.pdf>

Principles and standards for trail development in Northern Ireland – available to purchase from

<http://www.outdoorrecreationni.com/>

Surfacing guide for path projects – guidance on choosing the most effective and sustainable surfacing

<https://www.pathsforall.org.uk/resources/resource/surfacing-guide-for-path-projects---updated>

Signage guidance for outdoor access: a guide to good practice

<https://www.pathsforall.org.uk/resource/signage-guidance-for-outdoor-access>

Trail maintenance and monitoring – a summary guide

<https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/media/document/2020-11/summary-of-trail-maintenance-and-monitoring-system-23-aug-2020.pdf>

Upland path construction – practical guidance on when and where to use different techniques to develop sustainable paths and minimise future maintenance requirements

<https://www.nature.scot/upland-pathwork-construction-standards-scotland>

Upland path management from project planning to implementation and contract management. Many of the principles are equally relevant to lowland paths

<https://www.nature.scot/upland-path-management-standards-delivering-path-projects-scotlands-mountains>



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Sport Ireland

The Courtyard, Sport Ireland Campus
Snugborough Road, Blanchardstown
D15 PN0N, Ireland
Phone: +353-1-860 8800

www.sportireland.ie