

Environmental Land Management

Testing and Trials

A Green Infrastructure Trial

Creating people and wildlife connections.

Proposal: An investigation to test the willingness of landowners to dedicate pre-existing tracks and new paths to create green corridors (infrastructure) for people and wildlife.

Aim: Providing for sustainable human access, habitat and wildlife by restoring and caring for our heritage of paths, tracks and land corridors, by creating new links and enabling more people (families, people with mental health conditions, people with physical disabilities, over 55s and women) to use the network and reconnect with the landscape.



The Trails Trust in partnership with the Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Unit.



Registered Charity No. 1094139

Specialising in the creation of safe and sustainable access to the countryside for all
- on foot, bicycle or by horse

1. Please describe your proposal/idea(s) and its key objective(s)

1. Trial Proposal

This project would trial and test an approach that would enable the future Environmental Scheme to create a green infrastructure network to and around the Mendip Hills AONB. It would provide a model that could be adopted within other National Parks, AONBs and counties. The network (if created) will encourage people of all ages and abilities to participate in outdoor recreation and travel actively and sustainably on foot, by horse and by bicycle within the landscape, decreasing reliance on motor vehicles. Land corridors used for green travel are also valuable in protecting heritage and habitats and improving species connectivity, leading to more resilient wildlife populations in line with the Government's Natural Environment White Paper and the Lawton Review 2010.

There are 3 elements to this proposal.

- a) A test of how local community representatives could use data and local knowledge to identify and map pre-existing tracks and paths, cross-referenced with priority habitat and species data and connectivity mapping. Followed by demand and gap analysis to identify any additional routes needed for sustainable off-road access to meet modern needs for everyone (by foot, by horse, by bike).
- b) Preparation and testing of information required to work with landowners to stimulate a positive response to the identification of a need for a route across their land by the local community.
- c) Trialling a system of bids from land managers who could create or upgrade green routes to ascertain local market value of access and linear habitat improvement. This local valuation could be compared with ORVaL tool valuations and other relevant Natural Capital tools

The key objective of this project is to assess whether a community approach to rewarding landowners and land managers can produce a cohesive permanent network by creating new routes, extending existing routes, dedicating higher rights, enhancing existing routes and maintaining the network, thereby creating dual purpose corridors providing access for all and habitat connection.

If created, the route network would connect local communities with landscape and open space and protect green lanes as landscape features and habitats. These are aims within the 25 Year Environment Plan which has an ambition to "connect people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing", and an aim "to improve existing green infrastructure". (Note Green Infrastructure" includes green routes such as public rights of way).



Picture: shared access routes enables older citizens to live active lives.

This project would deliver the commitment to “help people improve their health and wellbeing by using greenspaces” and “Our aim is for more people, from all backgrounds, to engage with and spend time in green and blue spaces in their everyday lives. The Industrial Strategy Grand Challenge for an Ageing Society sets out our aim to help older citizens lead independent fulfilled lives, continuing to contribute to society.”

The 25 YEP states “we are fortunate to have accessible natural spaces in every county, mostly free to enter, and a network of public rights of way” but it is our experience that the network of paths and spaces is fragmented, not accessible for families with children on foot, bike or horse, nor is it accessible for elderly people who cannot climb stiles, or many disabled people. This project would trial an approach to make the network accessible to everyone.

This approach has not been trialled through previous environmental land management schemes.

2. Please describe what innovation your proposal/idea(s) bring(s) to the new Environmental Land Management system?



Picture: disused railway connecting two communities dedicated as a bridleway provides a permanent access and habitat corridor.

The Trails Trust has extensive experience in delivering permanent access by working with landowners and partners to secure permanent routes through express dedication / creation. The concept of rewarding landowners is a proven method of route creation, but it has not previously been used in an Environmental Land Management scheme. Express dedication was used in the Government’s Paths for Communities Scheme (P4C 2012 – 2014). The evaluation report is available [here](#)

Previous environmental stewardship schemes created permissive rights that only lasted for the duration of the payments, many of these have now been closed to the public and the value lost. Previous stewardship schemes did not involve

communities in helping to target access improvements where local communities want them

or where they would support the visitor economy, nor were the possibilities of protecting, enhancing and creating green corridor routes part of schemes.

This proposal is suitable for test and trial as it will pilot an approach to improving the network of access and wildlife corridors that would protect them in perpetuity, reconnecting people and wildlife and land managers with local communities in a way that has not been tried before. The Mendip Hills AONB green infrastructure trial is suitable in particular because The Trails Trust has demonstrated that it can work with local landowners to dedicate new rights of access. There is also a clear need for a better off road network in some parts of the AONB as some communities are very poorly served currently. The AONB Unit staff have indicated that they are willing to support the project.

It is difficult to quantify the benefits from this trial without knowing how a future environmental scheme will work, however the benefits of providing new paths can be estimated by ORVaL. CBA of new paths can be in the order of 1:4.

Without conducting this proposal it is unlikely that the future scheme delivery will be informed by local community or visitor needs. This proposal will also test how to communicate with land managers to elicit a favourable response to a request for improved or new access. We know that land managers often indicate that they do not welcome existing public access and are antagonistic towards access improvements, but our experience indicates that framed as a request from the local community that improves safety and health, landowners are much more amenable to improving access.

Without this proposal new access delivered by a new scheme is likely to result in:-

- Those currently excluded from the public rights of way network continuing to be excluded. This includes disabled people, parents with push chairs, women, the elderly and children.
- Green corridors destroyed and an increase in habitat fragmentation.
- Failure to enable green travel resulting in increasing levels of motorised traffic
- No improvement in the levels of physical activity or connection to nature



Pictures above show left- a former green corridor where parallel hedges have been removed and replaced by electric fencing and right – a green lane corridor (byway) giving permanent safe access to all and protection to habitat.

3. How does your proposal/idea(s) link in with the 25 year environment plan objectives?

As outlined in our answer to question 1 above, this proposal contributes to several aspects of the 25 Year Environment Plan (green infrastructure, connecting people, improving wildlife corridors, protecting environmental heritage, improving health and wellbeing), it will deliver environmental, social and public benefits.

The proposal's outcomes include an assessment of the possible changes in land management practices within the target area that could be delivered and an assessment of a method whereby land managers can be encouraged and incentivised to provide better access and habitat corridors where they are wanted by the local community. Outputs will include:

- 1) A plan showing existing infrastructure to be used in the network – specifically lengths of green corridor routes, existing community links and links to open space.
- 2) Assessment of current legal status and habitat value of existing routes
- 3) Assessment of lengths of route needed to be upgraded (e.g. footpath to bridleway or restricted byway) / cost
- 4) Assessment of lengths of route needed to be created / cost
- 5) Assessment of enhancements needed to enable multi use green travel (for example replacing stiles with gates, improving parallel hedgerows) / cost
- 6) Assessment of future maintenance / land management practices that can be routinely undertaken by landowners and managers
- 7) Assessment of open space for use in addition to access on foot (horse / bicycle)



This proposal is about how the new scheme could deliver improved green infrastructure to meet the needs of local people, particularly people that have perceived or physical barriers to accessing the countryside, including families with children, people with mental health conditions and people with physical disabilities - on foot, by bike, by horse - in a way that meets those needs. We therefore expect that it will deliver significant social and public

benefits. Natural England estimates that about 20% of the population cannot use the existing rights of way network. This proposal would identify how the new environmental scheme could meet the needs of the 20%.

This proposal helps to achieve the following environmental goals as set out in the 25 YEP:

- Clean Air (less reliance on motorised vehicles).
- Thriving Plants and Wildlife (creation and protection of habitat).
- Enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment (conserving and enhancing the landscape and connecting people with it).
- Mitigating and adapting to climate change (a landscape that is better connected for wildlife and people – facilitating species movement and less reliance on fossil fuels).

4. What are the specific risks with the proposal/idea(s) and what are your plans to control or mitigate against these?

In the first phase of testing how local community representatives could map existing routes and identify needs, there is a risk that the demand and gap analysis could generate a large number of new routes making it difficult to progress any single alternative. It is therefore proposed that new route proposals are limited in number. In addition there is the risk that the local highway authority records on the list of streets maintainable at public expense is not sufficiently comprehensive to identify pre-existing rights on some routes or the accurate location of these. This risk is expected to be small but may be problematic in some instances. The project will note where problems with the LoS arise and the scale of the issue to inform future plans.

In the second phase of testing information with landowners it may be difficult to find an adequate sample of landowners who are prepared to give feedback on information that is a test rather than for real. To reduce this risk we will work with the AONB Partnership and with all our existing contacts to reach out to a wider network of land managers. A further action to contact all farmers in existing stewardship schemes through Defra would reduce this risk further.

In the third phase of bidding we will need to have identified individual land owners who own land along a possible route, so that we can invite them to bid. Depending on resources

available for this trial we may be able to access this information through the Land Registry, but in addition we will utilise our networks to locate the identity of landowners. Quantifying this risk will be part of the findings from this trial as it is a barrier to all projects that need to involve multiple landowners. Some landowners may refuse to participate in this stage: wherever possible we will assess why this might be the case and the characteristics of these landowners.

As the third phase is effectively an auction there is the risk that landowners will overbid in an attempt to inflate future payment schemes. We do not know how to mitigate this risk and would welcome advice.

Securing support from all three Local Authorities in the AONB is a risk – this could be minimised by proving a clear benefit v's the cost of the implementation and future maintenance for RoW teams, and securing future maintenance agreements with landowners to reduce future increased liabilities / costs on Local Authorities?



Picture: Even surfaced rural lanes such as this provide for green travel / safe community links and wildlife habitat. Management of trees, shrubs and verges (with the highways authority's agreement) could be included in the green infrastructure trial.