

Enhanced access and engagement

Through the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS), we intend to support farmers to become world leaders in sustainable food production leading to profitable farm businesses generating employment, protecting the environment and connecting people with the land. The scheme will help farmers to thrive by producing sustainable food in a way that delivers several Sustainable Land Management (SLM) outcomes, each with economic, environmental and social benefits. Enhanced access and engagement is an important outcome of the scheme that must be delivered alongside the scheme's other outcomes.

Our countryside and coastlines are places of natural beauty. Landscapes are a precious part of our heritage with people's health and wellbeing improved by spending time in the natural environment. The aim of this outcome is to support farmers in the important role they play in improving access and interacting with rural culture, landscapes and heritage. Actions to enhance access and engagement could involve some spatial targeting, for example enabling the Right of Way (RoW) network to better connect areas without good access to green space. As well as including a set of farm-level actions, the scheme's structure will support farmers to work together to contribute to larger, local and landscape-scale goals.

RoW include footpaths, byways and bridleways. Many are very old, with some dating back hundreds of years. These days they are used largely for recreation, particularly walking, cycling and horse riding, although they are also public highways in their own right and are playing an increasingly important role in active travel. They also play an important role in the tourism and recreation industry. Allowing people to access the countryside for exercise and activities increases their physical and mental health.

There are laws covering public rights of way. These laws exist to protect:

- paths from being lost or damaged
- the rights of the public to use paths without difficulty or danger.

It is also important anyone who uses a RoW follows the [countryside code](#) when doing so. It is a criminal offence to block or obstruct a RoW and the Highways Act 1980 places a duty on the landowner to make sure any stile or gate is in good repair and in a safe condition. Under the Act, landowners are responsible for maintaining gates, stiles and similar structures across RoW. Local Authorities must contribute no less than a quarter of the expenses reasonably incurred where landowners carry out works to these structures.

Farmers will need to meet all their [legal obligations](#) for maintaining and clearing RoW to claim the sustainable farming payment. Ensuring compliance with this obligation could include using established local authority schemes that enable recreational users to report issues.

Over two thirds of RoW are on farmland. Enhancing existing RoW, beyond the legal requirements, is a way for farmers to contribute further to Wales' health and prosperity, while also providing greater access to the culture and heritage of rural areas. The scheme will support farmers to:

- upgrade footpaths to multi-use paths (only 21% of RoW is accessible to cyclists and horse riders)
- enhance existing paths through surface and furniture improvements, drainage, footbridges, signs etc. to make them more accessible
- establish joined-up and new access routes and trails
- establish new access, based on priorities set out in the local Rights of Way Improvement Plans.

The aim of the scheme will be to increase the proportion of RoW that are open, easy to use and well signed. Payment could include reimbursement for any cost of upgrades, for example converting from stiles to gates, labour for installing them or the use of contractors.

The scheme could play an important role in our ambitions for wider access to the countryside, including:

- Access to inland waters for the purposes of recreation. For example, it could fund a limited amount of egress points to inland waters (rivers and lakes) to improve outdoor recreation opportunities.
- Enabling people access the leisure and nature spaces created through the new National Forest.
- Improving access to historic buildings and rural landscapes, the enhancement of which will also be supported through the scheme.
- Active travel, supporting the Wales Transport Strategy's aim to achieve a shift away from private car use to more sustainable transport modes for the majority of journeys.

As well as these national priorities the scheme will support local priorities and compliment the improvements made by the local authority to the public rights of way network in their area.

The wider Welsh Government is considering a number of proposals for increasing access to the RoW network and Open Access land, as well as for simplifying the associated administration. No changes are expected in 2021 but the scheme could play an important role in delivering this by incentivising landowners to upgrade appropriate paths. To get the most benefit, these should be those which support the priorities of local communities.

Summary and next steps

- Enhanced access and engagement is an important outcome of the scheme that must be delivered alongside the scheme's other outcomes.
- Farmers will need to meet all their legal obligations for maintaining and clearing RoW to claim the sustainable farming payment. Ensuring compliance with this obligation could include using established local authority schemes that enable recreational users to report issues.
- The scheme will support farmers to increase the proportion of RoW that are well signed and accessible, and improve the overall quality of the experience

for users. We will explore what the specific support will look like and any minimum scheme requirements.

- The scheme will play an important role in supporting our national access including to inland waters for the purposes of recreation, to the new National Forest and for active travel.
- To get the most benefit, the scheme needs to support the priorities of local communities and compliment the improvements made by the local authority to the public rights of way network in their area.