



Canal &
River Trust

Towpaths for Everyone

Our policy for designing and managing towpaths as shared spaces for everyone to enjoy

January 2024





Towpaths for Everyone:

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Date of issue: January 2024

This policy will be regularly reviewed in response to any change in circumstances.



Foreword

Canal & River Trust towpaths are for everyone to share and enjoy. With over 2,000 miles of waterways in England and Wales, it's the largest multi-purpose wellbeing-focused network of its kind.

Originally designed for horse-drawn cargo boats, most towpaths became derelict before being reinvented as they are today – amazing, unique waterside spaces offering a space for walking, running, cycling, angling and places to meet and relax, alongside boating and a whole host of other on-water activities.

Our towpaths have characters of their own. Some are vibrant centre points of city life whilst others offer a much-needed respite from hectic lives. All are distinctive, special places that are much loved by those who use them and are making huge contributions to the nation's wellbeing.

In 2014, after one of our largest consultations and working with 16 national partners, we created the Better Towpaths for Everyone policy. This enshrined the use of towpaths as Shared Spaces with a pedestrian priority and established the Towpath Code. This policy also made three key commitments - delivering better infrastructure, signage, and behaviour. In the intervening years we made good on those commitments, upgrading 25% of our towpaths, refreshing 85% of our signage and running two successful high-profile behaviour change campaigns – Share the Space, Drop your Pace and Stay Kind, Slow Down.

The Trust is firmly committed to our towpaths being pedestrian priority shared spaces, and now more popular than ever, our towpaths aren't a standalone network. They play a key part in public life and also as part of wider active travel networks. Our new policy reflects this, working with partners and setting out how everyone can play their part in ensuring towpaths remain the nation's greatest linear parks.

Above all else our updated policy provides a simple and common-sense guide to how we manage our 2,000 miles of towpaths for the benefit of all visitors. It also includes our Towpath Code, and our Towpath Design Principles, which protect their unique character and ensure that everyone successfully 'shares the space'. This policy will be supported by further in-house technical documents to guide appropriate towpath design and implementation, subject to local need and context.

January 2024



Julie Sharman
Chief Operating Officer



Heather Clarke
Strategy & Impact
Director

Sharing towpaths

It is the Trust's role to care for, maintain and manage towpaths, ensuring they're safe, freely available and everyone feels welcome.

Given the impact different users can have on each other and towpaths' increasing popularity, the Trust can't do that alone. Everyone has a role to play. The Trust asks everyone to follow the Towpath Code and respect other users.

Please note the Towpath Code refers to the use of towpaths and land around canals and rivers, for guidance on use of the

waterspace please refer to our [Waterway Code for Anglers & Boaters](#).

The code itself is voluntary and offers guidance on how everyone can make towpaths pleasant places to be, recognising that part of their unique character is the open, free and accessible experience they offer.

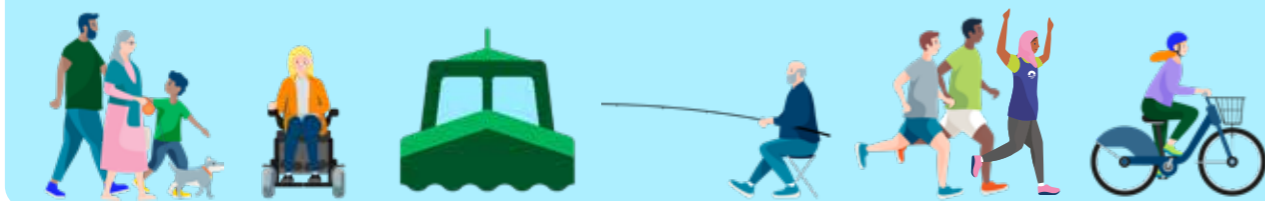
The majority of visitors use common sense and are considerate of each other. The Towpath Code reinforces this approach by setting out good practices for everyone to adopt.

The Towpath Code

Remember: Share the Space, Drop your Pace, It's a Special Place

Please be thoughtful and considerate when using towpaths. The following applies:

- Pedestrians have priority
- Cyclists must slow down for others
- Take extra care when passing people, pets and wildlife
- Respect people using the waterway for activities like angling, boating or paddle sports
- Wheelchairs, mobility aids, cycles and legal e-bikes are allowed
- E-scooters, motorbikes, modified e-bikes and other unauthorised vehicles are not allowed
- Keep dogs under close control and clean up after them
- Take litter home



Our shared space management principles

These ten principles underpin the Trust's approach to managing towpaths and sets out what is expected from those using them.

1. Towpaths are free for everyone to enjoy. The Trust works to ensure everyone feels welcome and safe. If required, we will temporarily close towpaths whilst we make them safe, for maintenance works or for special one-off events. Towpaths mostly have 'permissive rights' within the Trust's land ownership, although a small number form part of a formal 'public right of way' and the Trust will respect this designation where it applies.
2. Towpaths are shared spaces, with pedestrian priority. The Trust manages towpaths as shared spaces to accommodate a wide range of user activities. By giving pedestrians priority, it means that people who are more vulnerable, eg. on foot, handling or getting on or off boats or angling, are given extra consideration by those travelling more quickly, on bicycles for example.
3. Towpaths form part of the wider 'active travel' network. They offer routes for those wanting to connect with nature, often at a gentler, more relaxed pace. In places where use is high, the Trust aims to work with neighbouring landowners and local authorities to look at solutions for alternative provision so that towpath capacity is not overstretched.
4. Towpaths are unique. They form an integral part of a historic inland waterway network, dating back 250 years. The Trust's Towpath Design Principles set out how we design, improve and maintain towpaths, protecting their character and heritage, whilst also ensuring they are fit for purpose, safe and welcoming.
5. Towpaths should be accessible. Their historic origin means that towpaths weren't designed to modern-day standards and public access was not a consideration. However, the Trust will work within existing heritage and environmental constraints to make towpaths accessible to as many people as possible, carrying out regular assessments and working with partners to fund access and improvements. The Trust aims to make information about towpaths freely available so people can plan their visits.



6. Everyone is welcome, no-one should feel excluded or unsafe. To support this and deal with any anti-social activity, the Trust promotes the Towpath Code and works with the police and other authorities to take enforcement action where necessary.
7. Motorised vehicles are excluded*, except mobility aids, operational vehicles (that have been risk-assessed) and where towpaths form part of a legitimate vehicle access route. For clarity: unmodified 'electrically assisted pedal cycles' have the same legal definition as bicycles and are primarily human-powered (with some assistance) so are therefore allowed to be used on towpaths.
8. Cyclists and runners must watch out for and slow down around others. Pedestrians have priority and those travelling faster must control and moderate their speed when approaching other users or narrow sections where sight lines are poor. Keeping all users safe is of paramount importance. Those in a hurry, or who want to travel at a faster pace, should take a different route.
9. Towpaths are great places for walking dogs. Owners do need to be considerate of other users and it is always the owner's responsibility to keep their dogs under close control, on a lead in busy sections, following local by-laws and clearing up after their dogs.
10. Our towpaths are special, cherished places. Leaving litter endangers wildlife, the environment and spoils the experience for everyone, so visitors must take their litter away with them when they leave.



Towpath design principles

Our priorities

Towpath design and the law

The Canal & River Trust is the charity who looks after and cares for 2,000 miles of historic waterways across England and Wales. In addition, we also maintain the nation's third largest collection of listed heritage structures, as well as museums, historic waterway archives and hundreds of important wildlife sites. The Trust's objectives, as set out in our Articles of Association, are:

- 2.1 to preserve, protect, operate and manage Inland Waterways for public benefit
- 2.1.1 for navigation
- 2.1.2 for walking on towpaths
- 2.1.3 for recreation or other leisure-time pursuits of the public in the interest of their health and social welfare
- 2.3 to further, for public benefit, the conservation, protection and improvement of the natural environment and landscape of Inland Waterways

All construction in England & Wales is subject to legal and statutory obligations, and first and foremost we are subject to these laws and regulations. These include: Planning Law, advertising consent, Construction Design and Management Regulations 2015 (CDM), the Equality Act and the Health & Safety Act 1974.

Safety is our top priority

It is of the utmost importance that anyone visiting our towpaths stays safe and free from accident and injury. This means that we will always ensure safety is the highest priority in any changes we make, aiming to design out risks and conflict through our work. Under the 1974 Health & Safety Act, as both an employer and land owner, we have a duty of care for all towpath users.

Environment and heritage

In accordance with our charitable objectives we will conserve, protect and improve the natural and historic environment of our inland waterways and we seek to protect the unique character of the waterway corridor in any changes we make. The heritage and environmental characteristics of the waterways are what makes them so appealing to many of our visitors and helps to enhance the wellbeing of those who use the towpaths. After safety, these are our highest priorities.

Many of our sites and structures are governed by statutory designations, such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Heritage Listing Status, including Scheduled Ancient Monument designation. Our waterways and docks also run through four UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Management

Access

Most towpaths are over 200 years old, designed for a horse to pull a boat and mostly never intended to be publicly accessible. This means that sometimes access can be challenging for visitors using a wheelchair, pushing a pram or with mobility issues. We'd like to change that and, wherever we can, make it easier for everyone to enjoy our waterway network. Unfortunately, this is not always possible due to historic built or environmental constraints, so in places where we have not yet provided good access, or where other obligations prevent us from doing so, we'll do our best to inform visitors of restrictions via our website or on-site signage.

Speed control measures

Towpaths are not roads and should never be seen as fast routes, but they do form an important part of a hierarchy of local active travel routes. When we make changes to towpaths, we bear this in mind, often employing 'softening' measures which encourage visitors to slow down, such as tactile surfaces or planting. In places where speed is a real concern, we will undertake risk assessments and consider introducing appropriate speed control measures, as long as this doesn't impact safety, prevent access or displace the risks elsewhere. As there is no evidence to suggest that speed control measures have an overall effect on speed, we will not use them to 'send a message' or as a comprehensive solution. We will, however, use signage, engagement events and other solutions to encourage visitors to use common sense and be considerate to other towpath and waterway users.



Restricting activities

Some sections of towpath are narrow, steep, have poor sightlines or other unique characteristics which mean that, even after sensible mitigation, it's not safe for people to take part in certain activities. We will always do what we can to be accommodating but if ultimately an activity is not possible, we will ask visitors to refrain from them – usually by putting up signs such as “no cycling”, “no fishing” or “no mooring”.

The Trust's towpaths should be as accessible as possible. Whilst the Trust has, in the past, installed barriers and chicanes, these can restrict legitimate access for some and introduce unintended consequences. On this basis, the Trust intends to review all such barriers through our health and safety risk, environmental, heritage and equality impact assessments, aiming to remove them wherever possible. New barriers will only ever be installed if no other practicable solution can be found.

We will work with stakeholders to apply the same principles to barriers that prevent people accessing towpaths from third party land. We will monitor and evaluate the effects of removal and publish any relevant reports.

Signage

Clear public signs are vital to give important safety messages, help visitors find their way and enjoy our waterways, but too many signs can detract from the towpath experience. We therefore aim to keep signage to a minimum.

The Trust publishes a comprehensive guide, separate to this document, to explain how we plan, install and maintain signs. Some signs are considered part of the towpath heritage (such as mile markers or wharf trade signs) and we will protect these.



Construction

Width

Given their heritage, it's not surprising towpaths are often narrow linear spaces. Despite this, many can accommodate a number of different users. Where appropriate, we have already widened the surfaced path in many places as this is often the best way to ensure towpaths are used safely and that conflict between visitors is minimised. We will continue to look for opportunities to optimise space where possible, without sacrificing the valued character of the canal. Front and back grassed verges are an integral part of this character and also have an important function, providing places for boats to moor, a safe space for anglers, a tactile warning of the water's edge and a boost for wildlife biodiversity. It is not possible or appropriate to set a minimum standard for path width as all canals have unique characteristics which are often defined by their original design.

Vegetation and hedgerows

People who use our towpaths tell us that they value the green space and natural environment they provide, so we aim to maintain this and to introduce more planting wherever possible. We will always use appropriate planting for a space, involving the use of native species. Good vegetation management is required to ensure that safety and access are maintained. In the case of hedgerows, it is particularly important to prevent them encroaching onto the path. This diminishes the usable space and the loss of the grass verge means that drainage and biodiversity can be compromised.



Lighting

Most towpaths are not illuminated routes. We recognise that some towpaths, particularly in urban areas, are used after dark. When lighting is installed, it is usually only done in partnership with others, such as local authorities who can help meet the costs of installation and maintenance. The addition of lighting needs careful consideration as it can quickly change the character of an area and adversely impact on navigation, boaters, local communities and local wildlife. In some areas it may even encourage unwanted behaviour. Any proposal for new lighting will be considered on a case by case basis.

Surfaces

Every towpath is different, so we do not have a 'one size fits all' approach to towpath surfaces. When we make improvements; we will aim to ensure longevity and choose an appropriate surface to suit the location, character and usage of the towpath. We will often select surfaces that provide some 'tactile feedback' (such as a fine crushed stone bound dressing to tarmac) as this encourages visitors on bikes to take it easy and provides better traction in winter. In particular, we aim to remove ruts and potholes, as these diminish the enjoyment of towpaths, cause trip hazards and puddling. Uneven surfaces also increase the chance of conflict between visitors as they are more likely to be looking at the ground than looking ahead.

Engagement & Impact

Engagement

We know the best way to understand the needs of all towpath users is to engage with people and we will always aim to do this before work starts on any major or long term project. We will promote these activities at the locations where changes are being made and through our website, taking care to identify and engage with key stakeholders and those with specific agreements in the area.

For some largescale projects, where appropriate, we will also hold drop-in information sessions or public meetings. We will publish the results of any feedback from these on our website.

Impact and insights

Where appropriate, we aim to collect data, including user counts and surveys, and through post-project appraisals, to evidence the outcomes of our towpath works. We are increasingly evaluating and measuring the outcomes and benefits of towpath improvement schemes, helping us to better understand the benefits of our work and to inform future projects and funding bids.



Designing towpaths as shared spaces

Front verge

The verge is an important space and should be included where appropriate. They provide a place to moor using pins, or to fish. They also allow for drainage and create a tactile feature to the water's edge. Verges enhance towpath character and improve biodiversity.

Towpath surface

A good towpath surface is level, dressed in crushed stone to achieve a natural worn look. This is tactile so encourages those on bikes to take it easy and gives an audible warning of other towpath users.

Trimmed hedges and trees

Unmanaged vegetation that restricts towpath width or head room makes it hard for people to pass each other and to see along the towpath. We aim for a neat but natural finish.

Towpath width

When designing new towpath schemes local context will inform the path and verge widths.

Front verge

Towpath

Back verge

* Please note: local context and character of towpaths vary hugely across the network, and will be taken into consideration when designing new towpath schemes

Case studies

Towpath improvement project

Kennet & Avon Canal - Aldermaston to Sulhamstead

In 2023 towpath upgrades were undertaken on 2.5km of the Kennet & Avon Canal, between Aldermaston Wharf and Sulhamstead, benefitting those with wheelchairs or buggies, walkers and cyclists via a newly surfaced 2.2m wide towpath. New bank protection put in place along the canal has also improved access to the water for boaters. The project has seen improvements made to bridges for pedestrians and cyclists, while a World War II pillbox along the route is being developed as a new habitat for bats to help boost wildlife.

Sustrans' Paths for Everyone programme has helped to finance the £1.2 million required to make the improvements, supported by the Department for Transport.



Towpath improvement project

Birmingham

This photo was taken from a bridge overlooking the Birmingham Main Line Canal where we have a 'double towpath'. We have made improvements to one side of the canal (where use is greater) and this image shows what a difference investment in the towpath can achieve.

This project was funded as part of the Birmingham Cycling Revolution, where we worked in partnership with Birmingham City Council to resurface over 50km of towpath and improve access points to the canal.



Towpath improvement project

Leeds & Liverpool Canal - Shipley to Kirkstall

The aim of this project, delivered between 2014 and 2017, was to increase the usability of the towpath for cycling and walking, largely by extending the periods of the year in which the towpath is accessible and unaffected by adverse weather conditions. The project was funded predominantly by the Department for Transport's Cycle City Ambition Grant, with smaller contributions from other stakeholders, with a total investment of c£2 million.

The primary objective of the scheme was to create a secondary route for walkers and cyclists away from the A road that links Leeds and Bradford. To do this, upgrades to the Leeds & Liverpool Canal towpath were carried out between Shipley (Bradford) and Kirkstall (Leeds). In addition, signage improvements were undertaken and barriers were removed to improve access. The images directly below provide an illustration of the towpath surface condition before and after the project.



Case studies

Towpath improvement project

Loughborough

Loughborough benefits from having the River Soar and Grand Union Canal passing directly through the town; it is a significant and unique asset for the local area. The canal runs for approximately 4.5km from South to North linking residential areas to the town centre and train station. It is also an important green infrastructure asset and wildlife habitat that provides a range of benefits: a valuable leisure and recreational resource for both local communities and visitors, supporting wellbeing; as well as offering a sustainable travel option for commuters, shoppers, and visitors.

The condition of the towpath was mixed, with different qualities of surfacing, poor access points, a lack of signage and poor links into the town. In addition, facilities for visiting boats were inadequate and not meeting demand.

This £885,000 Town Deal-funded project, delivered in Spring 2023, has improved 2km of the waterway through the town centre from Bridge 35 to Bridge 40. The project included upgrading the surfacing to a tar, spray and chip path to provide a consistent high standard finish. Improved signage, wayfinding and access points were also delivered, along with 100m of bank improvements and an increased number of moorings for visiting boats.



Towpath improvement project

Pedal Peak Project - Caldon Canal

The Trust worked with Local Authority partner Staffordshire County Council to initially secure £2.5m from the Department for Transport-funded national Pedal Peak programme, aimed at making the Peak District more accessible to cyclists through investment into cycling infrastructure and routes from the surrounding areas of Manchester, Sheffield, Derby and Stoke. The latter aimed to link the Potteries to the Peaks along the Caldon Canal in North Staffordshire. An additional £2m was awarded, resulting in the widening and resurfacing of 19km of towpath from Stoke-on-Trent to Leek in North Staffordshire, including new crushed stone surfacing, works to retaining walls, and washwall and lock repairs.

The investment made a huge difference to the local communities and visitors using the waterways in both the Potteries and the Peak District, in a rural area that usually doesn't attract such significant funding opportunities.

Towpath improvement project

Slaithwaite to Milnsbridge - Huddersfield Narrow Canal

This is the second phase of work in the local area, building on towpath improvements previously carried out between Huddersfield and Milnsbridge.

The project aim was to resurface an additional 3.8km of towpath and make improvements to access points where possible, to create an enhanced traffic-free multi-user route. The new towpath is 1.5m to 2.5m in width, with a tar, spray and chip finish.

The project demonstrates positive partnership working with the local council to secure a significant investment, £1,352,000, funded by West Yorkshire Combined Authority. It delivered a scheme that met both parties' objectives for wellbeing and increased visits to the waterways.



Case studies

Towpath improvement project

Trent & Mersey Canal, Fradley

Fradley Junction, where the Coventry Canal joins the Trent & Mersey Canal, is a popular destination for visitors to the canal whether by foot, bike or on boat, with many spending time in the local café and pub or exploring the Fradley Pool Nature Reserve. The towpath from Fradley Junction towards Kings Bromley Wharf and beyond is a widely used routeway to discover the local area.

The High Speed 2 Road Safety Fund was launched in 2017 to improve cycle and pedestrian safety in towns and villages affected by the construction of the new railway. Staffordshire County Council secured substantial Road Safety Fund monies from the Government, and the Trust asked for enhancements to be delivered on the canal, to provide a safe, traffic-free route through an area otherwise heavily impacted by HS2 construction activity. Supplementary funding was secured from the Transforming the Trent Valley scheme.

Although popular with visitors, the towpath was almost impassable during the winter months as it became muddy and rutted with the wetter weather limiting use to drier months. In 2023 a new year-round surface was delivered to provide a year-round, accessible path, which can be enjoyed by everyone. Given the rural setting the towpath surface is a type 1 sub-base with a limestone dust finish, a material often considered a waste product, which will self-bind over time. Due to the unusually wide towpath along this length, the new towpath is 3m wide in some sections, with the vast majority an average of 2m.

To safeguard the new towpath and to ensure its durability, bank protection was undertaken along some lengths using sheet piling and pre-planted coir rolls as appropriate. An advantage of using pre-planted rolls is that plants can quickly establish, softening the water fringe, while contributing important biodiversity to this key wildlife habitat. A grass verge has been retained between the water's edge and the new towpath surface, providing valuable grassland habitat and a functional space.



Case studies

Towpath improvement project

Leighton Buzzard

Building on previous improvement works undertaken in 2015 this project was completed in 2022 and is providing a better path for people to access the health and wellbeing benefits of being by water.

The towpath was previously narrow in places with an uneven surface but has now been resurfaced and widened using an all-weather surface that can be used year round. The works included raising a 50m section of towpath over a weir allowing people to use the towpath even when there is local flooding. Signage, vegetation trimming and biodiversity enhancements such as hedge planting were also included.

The project was delivered in partnership with national walking and cycling charity Sustrans, who received funding from the Department for Transport. This towpath forms part of the National Cycle Network. £500,000 of investment has been delivered, adding a further 2.9km of improved towpath resulting in a 4.1km stretch of continuous high-quality towpath through Leighton Buzzard and the surrounding areas. This is part of helping the nation's waterways to provide high quality off-road routes for walking, cycling and wheeling, and an important 'natural health service' across the country.



Before and after photos of the towpath improvement works:



Case studies

National Partnership Towpath Programme with Sustrans

As well as providing an important functional use the Trust's towpaths are a key part of the wider active travel network, providing vital links for communities and walking and wheeling opportunities for everyone. This is why the Trust works closely with partners, like Local Authorities, Transport Authorities, Combined Authorities, Sustrans, Active Travel England (ATE) and the Department for Transport (DfT) to help deliver towpath improvements.

Since the Trust was created in 2012, we've upgraded over 500km of towpaths, nearly a quarter of the Trust's network, that are now better for access, for more people than ever before.

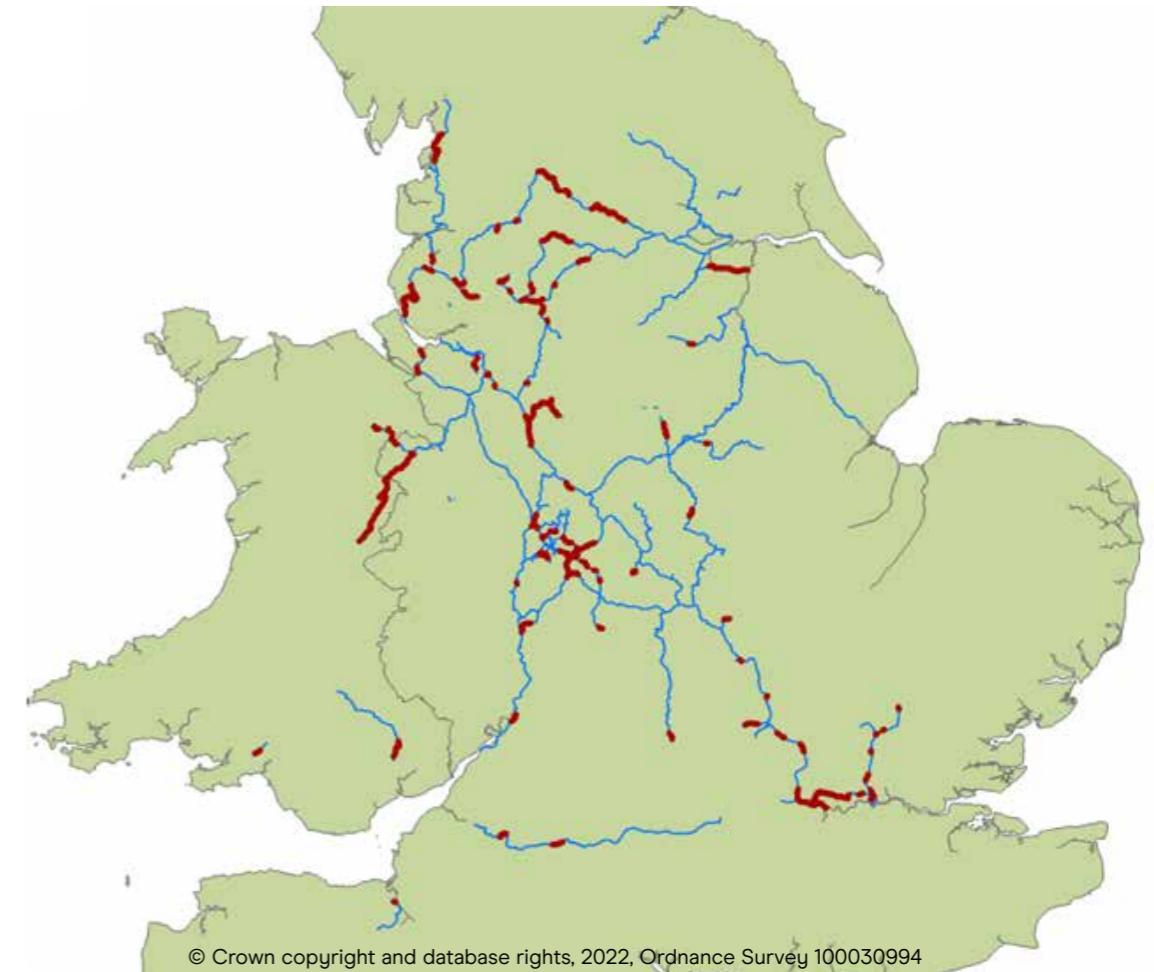
Towpaths are a key component of the strategic National Cycle Network (NCN), with significant stretches extending alongside canals and rivers. Being part of the NCN means that more people can easily access and enjoy towpaths and it's also helped attract many millions of pounds of investment into local walking and cycling infrastructure to help improve them for local communities and visitors. It also means that, through Sustrans' network of volunteers and local contacts, improvement schemes can benefit from local knowledge and expertise.

Since 2021/22 the Trust, with support from Sustrans, the DfT and other linked funding, has delivered £4 million of towpath improvements across all of our regions, and, in 2023, the Trust is on schedule to deliver a further £3.5 million of works offering over 15km of significantly improved towpaths through this partnership programme alone. These works include shared use towpath improvements, bank stabilisation, resurfacing, width increases, access point enhancements, and barrier removal or redesign, all designed to improve the quality and capacity of the towpaths for public use.



Towpath improvement works in progress (2023) between Birmingham and Sandwell, illustrating the delivery challenges these schemes can face.

Towpath improvement schemes completed between 2012-2022



“Of the 12,000 miles of National Cycle Network, nearly 400 miles is home to canal towpaths across the UK. More than just flat and good quality land, these paths connect people and communities, through countryside as well as town and city centres, and underline the significant role our waterways have played in the history of this country.

As for its future - Sustrans and the Canal & River Trust have regularly worked together with dedication in making these towpaths truly work for everyone and this new set of guidelines will help us go even further in achieving our shared mission, removing barriers to enjoying towpaths, physical or otherwise.”

Ed Plowden, Programme Director Paths for Everyone, Sustrans

Case studies

Behaviour change on towpaths

Unlike roads, where strict rules apply and are enforced, towpaths are free, open and relaxed spaces - so whilst our Towpath Code is great guidance it's up to everyone to play their part and be considerate to each other. Most people using towpaths do this naturally, of course, but it never hurts to reinforce our message and set the standards. The Trust does this through a programme of 'behaviour change' led projects.

Behaviour change has become a much-used term and it can mean many different things, but to us it's a range of simple techniques, interventions and raising awareness that aim to 'nudge' people to enjoy towpaths in harmony.



Probably the most obvious expression of this is through our signage, most of which has been updated over the past ten years.

We place 'pedestrian priority' signs at key points along routes and also put ground markings in places where they are most likely to be noticed, always being mindful to preserve our heritage. Better wayfinding signs, such as finger posts and maps can also help by informing people of better route choices – something that is especially important when it comes to avoiding busy towpaths at peak times or when people are in a hurry.

A little less obvious, perhaps, are the physical measures we employ to decrease conflict. These are often more subtle in nature but can be very effective. Cutting back vegetation and removing potholes, for example, mean that people find it easier to look ahead (as opposed to looking at the ground) and this means that people see each other more easily in busy or narrow spaces.



Whilst we can't completely rule out traditional speed measures like chicanes, motorcycle gates or speed humps, we only consider them as an absolute last resort. Measures such as these often create real barriers to legitimate use and often have limited effect on the issues they are trying to solve. Instead, we've found simple place-making features such as well-placed planters or rumble strips help to give 'visual cues' to slow down and encourage people to adjust their behaviour to match the relaxed nature of towpaths.

At particularly busy places or where conflict issues are more common, to help amplify our message, we like to get out on towpaths and raise awareness through pop-up events promoting our Share the Space, Drop your Pace campaign, often using a SID (Speed Information Device) to encourage people to take it easy.

These events are backed up through targeted social media posts and other online activity, which is often the most effective way we can reach people who are more likely to use towpaths.



All this work is supported by the Trust's fantastic volunteers, and, thanks to new AI-based technologies which allow us to monitor usage and speeds across the network, as well as new methods and techniques that help us to better understand how people feel about their towpath experience, we're better placed than ever before to make sure everyone enjoys their visit, now and into the future.

Case studies

Behaviour change on towpaths

Regent's Canal Alternative Routes - behaviour change intervention

The Regent's Canal in London has the one of the busiest towpaths on our 2,000 mile network, especially at commuting times. It's a vital route to work, connecting East London boroughs to the City via Cycleway 27 which crosses the Regent's, following the New River at Colebrook Row. The section of towpath from Sturts Lock to City Road Lock is especially narrow and very popular, with a café and the Hanover School Towpath Garden attracting visitors. This can sometimes lead to congestion and conflict between users.

The London Borough of Islington has created a Low Traffic Neighbourhood in St Peters Ward through its People Friendly Streets scheme, which now provides a safe and attractive alternative route for cyclists to the Regent's Canal. The towpath is still the more popular of the two routes, however, so working in partnership with LB Islington and King's College London we have undertaken a series of interventions to encourage cyclists, who are in a hurry, to use the alternative route.

Starting with a COM-B behavioural change analysis, students from King's College developed a programme of interventions which aimed to raise awareness of the alternative route and – quite literally – remove barriers to using it. This included holding pop-up events, handing out maps showing the route, signs and ground markings, a geo-targeting social media campaign and removing a chicane on a access point to the towpath from Packington Square.



Using AI monitoring devices, which give high accuracy user counts by mode, customer satisfaction surveys and observational studies of interactions between users, we were able to monitor the effects of the interventions from February to August 2023. Whilst it will take some time for the full results to be understood, early indications have shown a 36% decrease in the use of the towpath amongst cyclists and a decreased conflict rate from 22.3% to 16.2% with overall severity of the conflicts also being lower. The monitors will remain in place to understand if these early positive effects remain, and we will be using many of the techniques developed to undertake, and understand, the effects of similar interventions to “nudge behaviours” at other towpath hotspots across England & Wales.

Operation Adhesion - partnership working

Motorbikes, whether powered by batteries or fossil fuels, are not permitted for use on towpaths and never have been. Sadly, this doesn't stop some people from doing so and, with over 2,000 miles of open access paths, the Trust simply does not have the resources or powers to stop them. In many cases even the barriers that we have installed in the past, and are now keen to remove as they often prevent legitimate use, fail to control the problem.

One such “hotspot” area for motorbike use is on the Walsall Canal around Bloxwich. The towpath here is relatively quiet and with little “natural surveillance” is sometimes used for drug-related activity and other anti-social behaviour, often involving motorbikes and e-scooters. In addition to the safety concerns this can also lead to damage of the towpath.

Working with Walsall Police, Walsall Council, McLean Way and Sustrans, the Trust has been a key partner in Operation Adhesion, an ongoing cross-agency initiative which targets such behaviour. By sharing intelligence, data and local knowledge the group has been able to build up a detailed picture of the issues and share resources on focus access days in specific areas.

One such action day, on 18 June 2023 in areas around Chase Water, Pelsall, Goscote, Rushall, Bloxwich, Sneyd, Rough Wood, saw Trust teams, in plain clothes, spotting motorbikes and assisting police with local knowledge on how best to intercept them. This led to seven off-road bikes being seized and destroyed, and three arrests related to thefts of the motorbikes and drug-related crimes. The Trust is keen to replicate this way of working with other police forces and local authorities and remains an active partner in this project.



Case studies

Biodiversity and climate change

Climate change is one of the biggest threats the planet is currently facing. We believe that our waterways can play an important role in mitigating the impact of climate change, offering valuable habitats and much-needed corridors for wildlife.

Green Recovery Fund

In Manchester, as a result of a Green Recovery Fund project, people can now enjoy more wild flowers, spring bulbs, flowering shrubs, over 600 metres of hedgerow and new rowan, crab apple and ornamental cherry trees along the towpath. Bare concrete lock sides and paved paths have been brightened with the installation of 17 large planters, including rainbow-painted planters in the Gay Village.

In Birmingham we're working on a £1.7million project to improve nature habitats along our canals in the West Midlands. This funding will develop a nature recovery network across the West Midlands and will deliver environmental enhancements, including the creation of wildlife corridors reconnecting fragmented habitat for endangered species such as water voles.

The project seeks to improve over 30 miles of waterway habitats linking seven nature reserves.



Biodiversity and climate change

Towpath management

The way that we manage mowing depends on the type of towpath. We look at the local waterway character, surface type, structure, width, type of edging, location and level of use when we set our mowing schedule.

In 2021 the Trust conducted a trial to see if we could successfully cut the grass on our towpaths differently. This sought to increase habitat coverage across our canals by allowing grasses, plants and wildflowers to grow and flourish along the towpath, whilst still ensuring that the safety and key requirements of all our users were achieved. Learnings from this trial are now being implemented as part of our towpath management standards.

Benefits of the trial included:

- 10% net increase (60km) of towpaths with fringe on the trial canals
- Reducing the Trust's carbon footprint by cutting 1,814km less grass
- Delivering an improved customer experience
- Improvements in how we cut the grass on canals
- Helping to encourage wildlife and biodiversity, especially in urban areas

We want to provide a towpath that's safe for all users, as well as creating spaces that enhance biodiversity and benefit the wildlife they support wherever we can.



Supported by:





Canal & River Trust

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All information correct at the time of issue



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