

More paths for more people

An accessible paths toolkit

June 2026



Cairngorms
National Park

Pàirc Nàiseanta a'
Mhonaidh Ruaidh



Introduction

Accessible paths are routes for everyone and are suitable for people with limited mobility. This includes wheelchair users, families with pushchairs, people using mobility scooters, people with visual impairments, and anyone who wants an easier walk with no steps or steep slopes.

Background

There is widespread evidence to show the health and social benefits that come from spending time outdoors and connecting with the natural environment. However, these benefits and access to the countryside are not equally available to everyone. People living with disabilities or health conditions and older people are particularly impacted by physical barriers to access.

This toolkit provides information and advice for path managers about accessible paths, the required standard, how to audit existing paths and identify any improvements required to improve the accessibility of a path.

It is impractical to make all areas of the countryside accessible to everyone, but simple interventions can improve accessibility. This guidance aims to provide a realistic, practical and effective approach to delivering access improvements, creating more paths for more people across the Cairngorms National Park.



1. Accessible path standards

There is no statutory standard for access in the countryside and the huge variation in landscape character and terrain make a one-size-fits-all approach challenging. However, a national access standard has been developed for paths, detailed in the *Outdoor Accessibility Guidance* (2023) document produced by Walking Scotland and The Sensory Trust.

This recognises different standards for urban / formal landscapes and for countryside landscapes. Countryside paths are defined as being those in wilder, lightly managed landscapes eg open countryside, nature reserves, woodlands, and for these the accessible standard is lower.

This toolkit summarises the key points from the guidance relevant to countryside paths (identified in the guidance as 'Zone C' paths). For more specific information on any point or design standards please refer to the [Outdoor Accessibility Guidance](#).

Any path improvements should always adopt the approach of **least restrictive access**, aiming for the highest standards possible. For example, a gap is less restrictive than a self-closing gate, which is less restrictive than a manually closed gate. The first option would be a gap, but if that is not possible, the highest specification of wide, easy latching, self-closing gate that meets the British Standard would be the next option.



The accessible standard for countryside paths is summarised in table 1 on page 6.

Any new accessible paths being constructed should be built to meet this standard. It may be more challenging to bring existing paths or structures up to this standard, but any improvements made towards the standard are of benefit and are worth undertaking.



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While features such as moderate slopes, narrow sections and rough patches are acceptable within the countryside accessibility standard, ideally these would occur infrequently and be considered as exceptions, rather than the norm. Multiple challenging features can impact on the overall accessibility of the path for some users. A single element such as a patch of rough surface may be manageable for most users to cope with, but repeated rough patches, numerous gates to open or repeated slopes can cause fatigue or create a poor user experience.

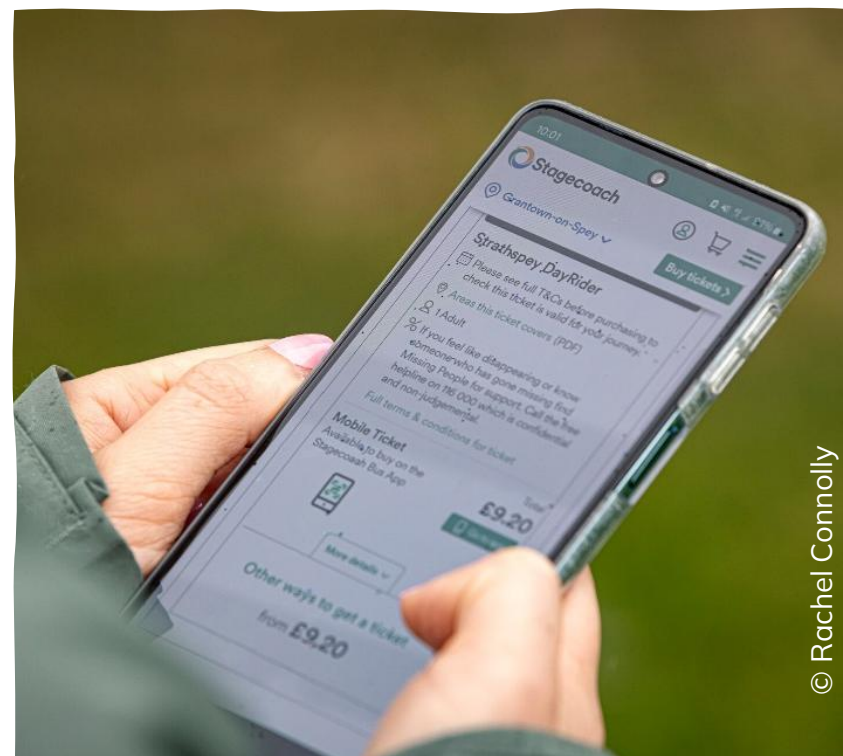
If the accessible route is a 'there-and-back' path, then an adequate turning space needs to be provided at the turn-around point. Any there-and-back route should still deliver a quality visitor experience, ie offer a pleasant user experience and ideally lead to a destination, feature or viewpoint.

Additional barriers to access

In addition to the physical path standard other barriers to access exist for many people living with a disability or health issue, or people with concerns about personal safety or lacking in confidence. The improvement of any accessible path should be considered within this wider context.

Common barriers to access include:

- Limited information about accessibility, lack of information in alternative formats or languages
- Lack of confidence, not feeling welcome, fears over safety or getting lost
- Lack of accessible toilets near the path
- Lack of parking options or accessible transport, and costs of both
- Poorly maintained environment



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The Access Chain

[The Access Chain](#) was developed by the Sensory Trust to look at access from the perspective of the visitor. It recognises multiple steps, starting with the decision to visit. This is made at home and relies on off-site information providing adequate detail about accessibility in relation to parking, transport, toilets etc as well as the path itself. If there is insufficient information then the decision to visit the path might not be made at all.

Table 1 Countryside paths – accessible standard

Criteria	Path standard requirement	Notes
Barriers	No barriers	Barriers are any physical features that create an obstacle in the path, including steps, stiles, cattle grids, large rocks etc. These are impassable to many users.
Surface	Generally firm, even, well-drained and non-slip. Occasional tree roots, odd rough patches or some loose material, are considered acceptable in the countryside.	Avoid loose materials like gravel or bark, these are particularly challenging for people with limited mobility and often impassable for wheelchair users.
Surface breaks	Maximum surface break should ideally not be more than 12mm, but up to 75mm would be acceptable in existing structures.	Surface breaks run across a path and are things like cross drains or gaps in board walks. They can trap walking sticks or wheels or may pose a trip hazard.
Width	Minimum useable width of the path should be 1.2 metres. Where permanent features like trees or walls force a pinch point the path can narrow to 1m.	Path width is important to ensure a wheelchair can pass along easily or two people walking side-by-side (one may be an aide).
Slopes	Most of the path would ideally be flat (<2% gradient) or with gentle slopes (2-5%). Moderate slopes up to a maximum of 10% gradient over short distances are acceptable but ideally wouldn't exceed 8%.	Slopes (including ramps or gradients) are one of the most significant barriers limiting access to paths and routes. They are potentially hazardous and exhausting to people with limited mobility. Mobility scooters are only rated to use on slopes of less than 10% gradient. The steeper the slope the greater the impact on people. Aim for smooth gradual changes in gradient.

		If gradient can't be reduced, the priority is to reduce the impact, eg improving the surface (loose materials make slopes more challenging) and adding features like seating and handrails.
Camber / crossfall	Ideally the crossfall should be less than 3% gradient. A camber from the centre of the path is more useable (but ideally crossfall still wouldn't exceed 6%).	Crossfall is the slope across the path. Any crossfall makes wheelchair use very difficult and is uncomfortable to walk. A cambered path, with a higher centre and crossfalls to either side, is easier for wheelchairs or mobility scooters to use as wheels can run either side of the centre line providing level travel.
Clarity	Route should be visually clear enough to distinguish on the ground but may be undefined. Drops-off on the edge of the path to lower height levels should be avoided.	The edges of the path should be easily defined; this is particularly important for anyone who is partially sighted or struggling with depth perception.
Height clearance	No solid structures limiting headroom. Clear head height walking corridor (2.5m high across the width of the path) should be maintained free from overhanging tree branches etc. A higher head height clearance (3.5m) is required for horse riders.	Overhanging branches can pose a hazard particularly for blind and partially sighted people. Not everyone is agile enough to bend and duck under obstacles.
Resting places	There is no formalised guidance for regularity of benches, ideally there would be a resting point at least every 1km.	Resting places can include benches, seats, picnic tables or perches, or can be less formal such as boulders, walls and logs. Resting places should be placed at logical locations eg the half-way point of a route, at a viewpoint or at the top of a slope.

		The approach to the bench should also be accessible (ie firm level surface). A hard standing surface should be created on one side of the bench to allow a wheelchair to be positioned alongside.
Gates and gaps	The minimum internal width to pass should be 1.5m. Gates should ideally be 2-way and self-closing. Catches and latches should be within easy reach, easily operated from either side and with good colour contrast.	Gates that are too narrow or awkward to use are a barrier to access. Gaps are always preferable to a gate. There is a British Standard for gates, any new gates should meet the BS5079 standard.
Boardwalks / bridges	○ Useable width should be either 2m wide (two-way traffic) or 1.2m with passing places every 100m. ○ Decking boards must be at right angles to direction of travel ○ The join of the decking to path surface should be flush with no change in level (max of 5mm height change) ○ Gaps between deck boards should ideally not be greater than 12mm (and not exceed 75mm in existing structures) ○ Surface – level or gentle slope, smooth and slip resistant. Chicken wire should <u>not</u> be used as there is a risk of it breaking and puncturing tyres. ○ Boardwalks should have an edging, at least 75mm high, to act as a wheel stop / indicator for blind and partially sighted people.	

2. Reviewing and auditing existing paths

An access review identifies barriers to access and what improvements would benefit the widest range of visitors.

A route audit of an existing path assesses the specific characteristics of the path, such as surfaces, width and slopes. The audit should also include the route from the car parking area eg the car park surface and any route to reach the start of the path, as this must all be accessible too.

The audit can be completed by anyone, but ideally by or with a person who has a mobility disability. If you or your group would like assistance in auditing a path or have any questions, please get in touch with the access team at

outdooraccess@cairngorms.co.uk



Accessibility considers people walking unaided as well as those using a walking stick or frame, wheelchair, or other mobility device to travel at human speed. When using the term 'walk' it refers to people travelling in any of these ways, and this should be kept in mind while completing the audit.

A path audit form is provided in Annex 1, complete this as you walk the route. You will need to measure path widths, path gradients (slopes) and note locations of benches and any issues or problem sections that don't meet the accessible standard. Further guidance on how to take these measurements is given in Annex 1.

In addition to undertaking an audit it is valuable to invite communities to highlight issues that are limiting them from using the path. Resolving these issues can support confidence and encourage greater use of the route.

3. Action plan for improvements

Once the audit is complete the next step is to identify the improvements required to resolve barriers to access and to improve the accessibility of the path. The path audit should have helped identify any areas where the path has failed to meet the accessible standard.

For each fail point / barrier to access consider and identify what actions need to be taken and get quotes and costs for these. Actions might include identifying which barriers can be:

- removed – eg remove a gate to leave a gap
- avoided – eg create an alternate route to bypass steps
- mitigated – eg adding seating and a handrail on a slope, or upgrading an awkward gate to a self-closing model

The form in Annex 2 can be used to identify improvements and can then be submitted as the basis of a funding application, along with the path audit as supporting information and evidence of need.

Some improvement tasks such as cutting back overhanging vegetation, scraping back verges to re-establish path width or simple surface repairs could be undertaken by volunteers. Many paths in the Cairngorms already benefit from the support of local volunteers and local path groups. If you would be interested in discussing how the Park Authority can support in establishing a local path group, please get in touch with Volunteer Cairngorms by emailing volunteers@cairngorms.co.uk



To be classed as 'accessible' the path must meet all the criteria and be maintained in such a way. That includes the need for ongoing maintenance to ensure that the path width and height clearance continue to be met, ie the path corridor is kept clear from infringing vegetation.

If only some of the criteria can be met, it is still worth implementing improvements. Every person is an individual, with unique access needs; the path may not be suitable for absolutely everybody, nor meet the accessibility standard, but small changes will still improve the accessibility of the path for some users. These paths that just miss the standard are often referred to as "easy access paths".



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4. Promoting the route

Low-level paths in Scotland are graded to a national standard which classifies them as one of four grades: Easy-accessible, Easy, Moderate or Strenuous.

If a path has been brought up to accessible standard (ie meets all the criteria) it can be referred to as “**accessible**” and would be in the path category “Easy-accessible”, and the corresponding ‘easy / wheelchair’ grade symbol can be used in promotional material.

If the path is mostly accessible it would be in the path category “Easy”, but it is worth referring to it as “**easy access**” in any descriptive text and highlighting any specific features where it misses the accessible standard for example, a steeper slope.

For more information about path grading and to download the symbols refer to the [Path Managers Guide to Grading](#).



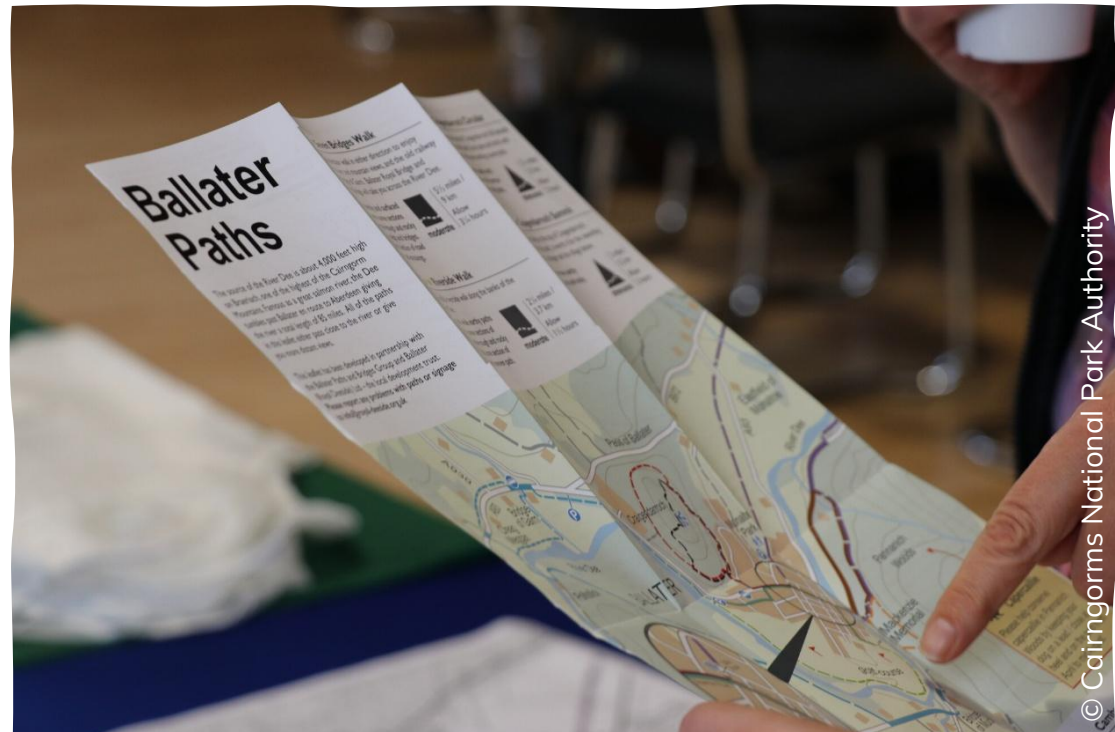
Path description

For accessible routes and easy access routes an expanded route description with more detail about the route and photographs is helpful and can help people make an informed decision about if the route is for them, and what to expect.

Additional pre-arrival information such as parking, public transport and nearest toilet provision is as important as the detail about the path itself. Taking this inclusive approach to information will make the path more accessible for more people.

A template for creating an accessible / easy-access path description, including pre-arrival information is provided in Annex 3. This should be accompanied by a map of the route.

Please let the Access Team know if you have identified an accessible / easy access path, so we can help promote these routes. If you complete and return to us the path description form (and photos) we can add your route to the [section on the Cairngorms National Park website](#) specifically to promote accessible and easy-access routes. Email: OutdoorAccess@cairngorms.co.uk



5. Support and resources

Please reach out if you need any help or support.

- Guidance and support in undertaking a path audit. We can answer your questions and may be able to provide training to local community groups or undertake the audit for you.
Contact the Outdoor Access team: OutdoorAccess@cairngorms.co.uk
- Support in undertaking small scale maintenance tasks, guidance and advice about establishing a local path group and to borrow hand tools.
Contact Volunteer Cairngorms team: volunteers@cairngorms.co.uk



Further information and resources

- [Outdoor Accessibility Guidance](#)
- [The Sensory Trust](#) – information about inclusive and sensory design in the outdoors
- [Path Managers Guide to Grading](#)
- [Walking Scotland](#) – technical path advice and guidance resources
- [The Access Chain](#)

Annex 1 – path audit

Equipment

- **5m retractable measuring tape** for measuring path / gate widths
- **1m measuring stick** for gradients (or straight piece of wood)
- **Clinometer app** on phone (eg “Clinometer + bubble level”)
- **Grid ref app** on phone (eg “OS locate”) or a mapping app with ability to mark points / drop pins

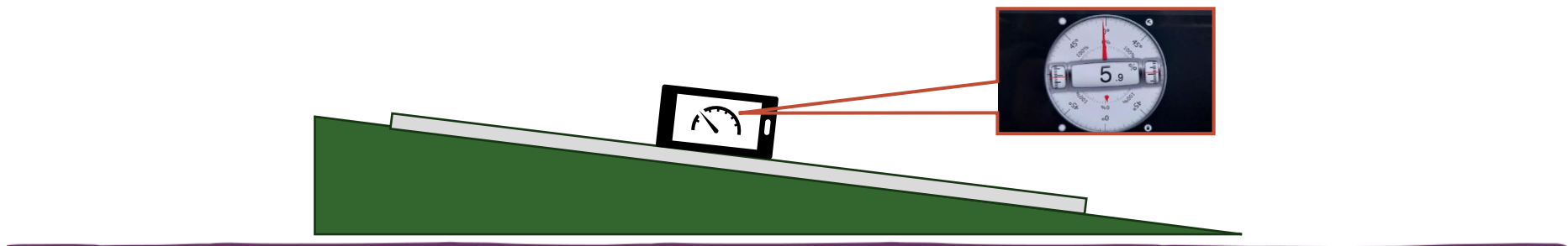
Measuring notes

- **Location** – either write down a grid ref or drop a pin on a map app.
- **Distances** – eg between benches – if locations have been logged distances can be worked out later using a GIS programme or website like plotaroute.com. Alternatively, a tracking app like Strava can be used to measure length as you go.
- **Gradient** – the standard convention in the UK is to measure gradient as a percentage eg 5%. The larger the number, the steeper the slope.

To measure the gradient of a slope:

- Open your clinometer app and go to settings and check the unit is set to “percent”
- Place your metre stick on the ground, on the slope
- Place your phone horizontally on the stick and read off the gradient, rounding to the nearest full number
- Measure the steepest section of the slope for an accurate gradient

This slope would be classed as a “moderate” slope as its gradient is 6% (clinometer reading of 5.9 rounded up)



Cairngorms National Park countryside accessible path audit form

Path name _____

Path location _____

Auditor names _____

Date of audit _____

1. Parking and getting to the path

An accessible path requires people to be able to reach it in the first place.

Meets criteria? ✓ or ✗	Criteria	Considerations	Notes
	Parking or drop-off zone close to start of walk	• Designated disabled bay • Location of parking • Suitable car park surface	
	Route between car park and the path start is accessible	• Distance • Surface (wide, firm, flat) • Ramps or slopes • Road crossings	

2. The path

The path must be continuous, firm and sufficiently wide and flat with no barriers.

Meets criteria? ✓ or ✗	Criteria	Considerations	Notes
	Barriers: path is free from barriers	Note locations of any steps, rocks, cattle grids, cross drains etc	
	Width: path is at least 1.2m wide	Note locations of any narrow sections or pinch points (min 1m)	
	Surface is firm, well-drained and even.	Note locations of any fail points eg surface erosion, deep potholes, large loose stones	
	Slopes: path is mostly flat with gentle to moderate slopes	Note any locations where slopes along the path are greater than 10%	

	Camber / crossfall: path is mostly flat	Note any locations where cross slopes (across the path) are greater than 3%	
	Clarity: path has clarity and clear edges	• Consider if path is visually clear enough to distinguish on the ground • Note any drops at the edge of path	
	Gates (or gaps) are 1.5m wide and easy to open	• Passable width of 1.5m • Self-closing • Latches reachable, gate opens / closes smoothly and easily	
	Bridges / boardwalks are 1.2m wide with appropriate surfaces, gaps and edging	• Width 2m / 1.2m passing places • Flush joins to paths • Gaps between deck boards • boards at right angles to travel • Surface – level, smooth, slip resistant • 75mm high edges on boardwalks	

	Path corridor is clear to head height	• No solid structures limiting headroom. • Consider overhanging branches.	
	Benches: resting places every 1km	• Note locations and type eg benches, picnic tables, perches, logs. • Consider if approach firm and level.	
	Turning space (there-and-back paths only)	Consider if there is adequate turning space for wheelchairs (2m x 2m) and mobility scooters (2.2m x 2.8m)	
	Easy to follow	Note if waymarking present and if the route is easy to follow	
	Interpretation panels and signs	• Consider if accessible eg approach, space around and height. • Consider if the content is inclusive eg clear contrasts, colours, language, audio / digital / tactile options.	

Annex 2 – improvements

The table below summarises the identified actions required for each criterion to bring the [enter path name] up to a more accessible standard.

¹ Please record all barriers to access for the path, even if they cannot be resolved and note under 'action required' why there are no possible actions (eg steep slope, no alternative route) and any mitigation measures,

² Please confirm if after the actions are carried out if this will result in that element now meeting the accessible standard (enter 'meet') or not meeting the standard but will improve accessibility (enter 'improve').

Criteria	Barrier to access ¹	Action required	Estimated cost	Meet or improve ²
<i>Example: Path is free from barriers</i>	<i>Two steps at big tree</i>	<i>Remove steps and install 100m of surfaced path with slope</i>	<i>£500 contractor costs</i>	<i>Meet</i>
<i>Example: Path width</i>	<i>Only 1m wide for section after viewpoint</i>	<i>Scrape back verges to reinstate original path width of 1.5m</i>	<i>In kind volunteer works</i>	<i>Meet</i>
<i>Example: Path slope</i>	<i>Steep slope of 12%</i>	<i>No alternative route, mitigation – re-surface and add handrail</i>	<i>£200 contractor costs</i>	<i>Improve</i>

Annex 3 – accessible path description

For an example of how this information will be presented please see [Cairngorms National Park | Capercaillie trail - Boat of Garten](#)

Path name	Name of route
Path promotion*	Path description, focusing on the user experience, such as highlights of the route, viewpoints, wildlife etc. A very concise sales pitch! (Max 40 words)
Terrain description*	Helps users choose the path that's right for them. Give an impression of the overall terrain while also specifically mentioning any obstacles or unusual sections. (Max 30 words) You can expand on this information later below.
Distance (miles + km)	Miles (rounded to nearest ¼ mile), and kilometres (rounded to nearest 0.1km).
Time (hours and minutes)*	Time based on walking. Base on actual walking time at a social, relaxed pace. (30 mins per mile as an estimate).

*Please refer to the [Path Managers Guide to Grading](#) for more information

Additional information	Additional information about route accessibility
Start / finish: [location and address] Path description: [expand on terrain description, specifically surface, width, any gates or bridges etc] Resting places: [describe any benches, their locations / distance apart, and type eg if bench with backrest and arms etc] Parking: [parking information including if any disabled bays, distance from start etc]	

Public transport: [provide basic bus / rail information, including seating] <i>Example: There is a bus stop near the start of the route: the stop for eastbound buses (from <town>) is xxx m away, this is a [pavement roadside stop or shelter with bench / perch], and the stop for westbound buses (from <town>) is xxx m away, this is a xx.</i> Nearest public toilets: [location, if wheelchair accessible / Changing Places] Route description • [Detailed route description, describing how to follow route, include turn left / right etc] • [More information about any difficult points eg tree roots or slopes] • [Describe in detail any gates eg passable width, type of opening] • [Describe any significant path surface or width changes] • [Include points of interest and what can be seen]

Route map	Add link to a map on a webpage, or photo of a map showing route (or send attachment)

Supporting photographs	Please include 4 general photographs of the route, eg typical path section, viewpoint

Feature details	Please include photographs and locations of benches, moderate slopes and any barriers to access or difficult features. These will be featured on the online route map with a pin and pop-up box.	
Photo name	Location of bench / feature	Short description