

British Standard 5709:2001

Gaps, Gates, and Stiles - specification

A new Standard for Gaps, Gates and Stiles has been published by the British Standards Institute, which provides advice to landowners and managers on reducing barriers to access in the countryside.

What is the new Standard for Gates, Gaps and Stiles?

The purpose of the new British Standard 5709 for Gaps, Gates and Stiles is to help improve access to the countryside by reducing physical barriers for all path users, while taking into account the needs of landowners and land managers. It forms part of emerging best practice being developed by a range of organisations, which aims to ensure that as wide a range of people as possible are able to enjoy access to the countryside.

Who has been involved in developing it?

The Standard has been developed through a BSI (British Standards Institute) Working Group, first set up in 1996, including representatives of the British Horse Society, British Trust for Nature Conservation, Countryside Agency, Country Land and Business Association, County Surveyors Society, Fieldfare Trust, Institute of Public Rights of Way Officers, National Farmers Union, Open Spaces Society, Ramblers Association and many others. Tom Bindoff of Centrewire, a specialist gate and stile designer and supplier, was co-opted onto the group to provide technical advice and expertise.

At an early stage, research was carried out by Centrewire with members of the public at a trial site in Lewknor, Oxfordshire, to test different gap, gate and stile designs. The Countryside Agency followed this with a trial at the Royal Show (1997), where over 1500 people took part and completed survey forms. The drafts have also been

subject to public consultation and all these processes have been important in finalising the Standards.

Who are the Standards for?

The Standards are aimed at local authority staff, landowners, tenants and land managers, user groups, stile manufacturers and contractors. They will help anyone planning, specifying or approving new gaps and gates, also those buying and erecting, replacing, maintaining or inspecting gaps, gates and stiles.

What is new about the Standards?

The new Standard is a practical guide based on performance requirements rather than specific designs. It emphasises better accessibility for users, whilst enabling enclosure of farm animals, and where appropriate and lawful, excluding those not entitled to use the way - motor-bikes on footpaths for example. A range of designs may meet the Standard, but in order to assist users some examples that comply are given for gaps, gates, kissing gates, stiles, horse stiles and dog gates. This performance-driven approach enables users of the Standard to adapt the specifications to meet the needs of the site.

If at any time during the lifetime of a structure the performance requirements are no longer met, it would no longer comply with the

Standard. This may make the Standard especially useful in Highways Act 1980 Section 147 approvals (local authority power to authorise erection of gates, stiles etc on footpath or bridleway).

Sometimes, there is not a need for a barrier at all. The Standards encourage the reader to think carefully about the site and possible constraints and then choose the least restrictive option to meet identified needs. Stiles are discouraged unless no other option can be chosen.

Conclusion

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 will provide a new right of access to many areas of open country and common land for the first time. It puts a duty on local authorities to produce rights of way improvement plans, which will have regard to accessibility of local rights of way to blind and partially sighted people and those with mobility problems. It requires authorities to consider those with mobility problems when authorising erection of new structures, and also enables them to make agreements to alter existing stockproof structures on footpaths and bridleways, and to make them safer or more convenient for people with mobility problems.

The legal implications of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 are not clear with regard to countryside access, but the Act has stimulated the debate about

providing access to the countryside for disabled people. In any event land managers have to cater for a wide range of countryside users, a proportion of whom have difficulty with physical barriers.

Landowners and managers are looking for a range of advice to help them with such demands. The Countryside Agency welcomes the publication of these Standards and encourages local authorities and land managers to use them to achieve the overall goal of providing better access for everybody.