

Northumberland National Park and County Joint Local Access Forum

Position Statement on Disused Railway Tracks (DRT): Rails to Trails

Bringing back railway heritage to life

The JLAF strongly believes that where possible, disused railway tracks should be open as traffic-free **Greenways** available for shared use by walkers, cyclists and horse riders.

It is our view this will be hugely beneficial for all non vehicular users in three ways:

1. To relatively easily provide access to, and through, the countryside along existing corridors
2. To provide much needed improved access between bridleways and quiet minor roads for walkers, cyclists, horse riders and people with varying degrees of mobility impairment
3. As a means of delivering some of the 2019 Glover recommendations which relate to improving and / or creating inclusive access in England.

Converted railway paths provide level traffic-free Greenways that provide useful, often interesting and enjoyable routes for walkers, horse-riders and cyclists of all ages and abilities as well as people with impaired mobility. They are especially appreciated by families and less confident access users. Greenways also provide wildlife corridors and a range of habitats for small species.

By dint of necessity and design, disused railway tracks (DRT) are linear, flat and effective man-made transport corridors linking urban and rural communities. In Northumberland, a number of DRTs pass through some of the finest scenery in the county and provide viewing enjoyment which is otherwise denied to the public. The public do not want to trespass on private land and re-opened disused railway tracks ensure that visitors have well-defined, maintained routes to use.

We recognise:

Many miles of disused railway tracks are sitting dormant and unused in Northumberland and can again provide a useful transport function for both recreational and utility journeys whilst at the same time, play a part in fighting the climate emergency.

DRTs can once more quietly link rural communities bringing traffic-free users whose spend factor is known to provide economic benefit to rural businesses.

We believe:

DRTs are a sleeping resource for access and the best way to awaken their potential is to reopen as many sections of disused track as possible for safe traffic-free access for the public to enjoy.

Managed traffic-free access to, through, and from the countryside can sit in harmony with rural industries and most forms of flora and fauna; it is proven wildlife soon adjusts to sharing with humans.

Disused railways have two side boundaries and invariably a sound sub-base. Flooded cuttings can either be bypassed along one rim or causeway-ed thereby protecting established habitat. Private track bed properties like old stations, now private houses, can be bypassed and / or suitably screened. Shared use with farming practice is demonstrably achievable.

Examples of Best Practice can be seen in many part of the UK and even more so in other countries.

It is sad to see Victorian history in the form of disused railways lie dormant and / or be ploughed out when they could be revived and regenerated to benefit the rural economy and once again provide quiet enjoyment of the countryside as well as offer unparalleled opportunities for local people and visitors to take exercise for their enjoyment, interest, health and wellbeing.

The quote “railways are an enterprise which promised so much will achieve nothing more” is far from true.

We acknowledge:

DRTs and associated infrastructures are wonderful linear heritage and a fine tribute to Victorian engineering. They are as much part of our history as Hadrian’s Wall and should be preserved long into the future for current and future generations to enjoy and benefit from.

There are some landowners with sections of disused railways on their land, whose antecedents originally agreed the construction of railways. These, and new landowners, have it within their power to allow those same railways to make a significant positive pain-free contribution to traffic-free rural tourism in their area. The landowners who have diversified into tourism will definitely benefit as will their visitors.

It is the JLAF’s priority in 2020 to invite landowners to give seriously consider opening up sections of disused railway tracks which cross their land in a carefully managed way for which the JLAF can provide support and guidance. Liability is not a barrier and there’s even the possibility of payment depending on circumstances and timing.

There are some 18 facets that need to be considered when converting disused railway tracks into shared use trackways not outlined in this position statement.

Northumberland Joint Local Access Forum is available to landowners in the first instance for a confidential talk without obligation. Hosted by Northumberland National Park, the JLAF is committed to improving suitable access all over the county.

<http://www.northumberlandnationalpark.org.uk/about-us/looking-after-the-park/joint-local-access-forum/>

On behalf of Northumberland Joint Local Access Forum

Updated November 2022

Background

The **Beeching cuts** (also **Beeching Axe**) were a reduction of route network and restructuring of the [railways in Great Britain](#), according to a plan outlined in two reports, **The Reshaping of British Railways** (1963) and **The Development of the Major Railway Trunk Routes** (1965), written by [Dr Richard Beeching](#) and published by the [British Railways Board](#).

The first report identified 2,363 stations and 5,000 miles (8,000 km) of railway line for closure, 55% of stations and 30% of route miles, with an objective of stemming the large losses being incurred during a period of increasing competition from road transport and reducing the [rail subsidies](#) necessary to keep the network running.

Protests resulted in the saving of some stations and lines, but the majority were closed as planned. A few of these routes have since reopened, some short sections have been preserved as [heritage railways](#), while others have been incorporated into rail paths for public use including the [National Cycle Network](#) or used for road schemes; others now are lost to construction, have reverted to farmland, or remain derelict. (Source Wikipedia)