

14 June 2011

From Richard Benyon MP
Minister for Natural Environment and Fisheries

Dear Anne,

Thank you for your letter of 5 May enclosing an email from your constituent, Lynn Myland of The Barley Mow P H, Barley Mow Lane, Colney Heath, St Albans about access for horse riders to Alban Way. I apologise for the delay in replying.

Past research has shown that user conflict on shared use routes is actually infrequent but exaggerated, and that additional maintenance cost to ensure appropriate surfacing is minimal.

I would urge all local authorities to allow horse riders to use cycle trails, routes and any other ways where it is in their power to do so, and to encourage that permission or dedication to happen where it is not in their power. Unless there are good and specific reasons not to expressly allow horse riders to use such routes, local authorities should take steps to accommodate them. Local authorities should be making the most their off-road networks through integration of use. Multi user routes have been shown to be readily adopted and well appreciated by local people. Where they are done well they bolster community cohesion and create a better understanding between users.

Horse riders are particularly vulnerable road users, and cycle routes can provide appropriate and important opportunities to avoid busy roads. There is potential for conflict in any situation where people share a public space, but the possibility of conflict is not reason enough to disregard ridden access; actual conflict could be resolved and any misplaced concerns reduced over time.

It seems sensible that where a change of policy, (or the making explicit or the start of enforcement to an existing policy) might increase danger to horse riders, the local authority should consult those users and the relevant local access forum.

I am aware that Defra officials are discussing equestrian access to cycling routes, as well as shared use generally, with the Department for Transport. Also it is important that we understand why local authorities exclude horse riders, and my officials have written to St Albans Council to enquire why it perceives that shared use presents such a significant risk.

Yours ever