



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Rebecca Pow MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State

Seacole Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

T 03459 335577
defra.helpline@defra.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/defra

Ms Sonia Kundu
Director
Transforming Somerset & Dorset Rail Links CIC

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sonia@railtotrail.org

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Dear Sonia,

Thank you for your email of 1 September on behalf of a number of organisations about the Somerset Rail to Trail Project.

I am afraid that I cannot intervene in planning decisions or formally lend my support to specific projects to avoid prejudice should they come before a Government Minister or Planning Inspector for a decision. Public rights of way and their designation are the responsibility of the local county council.

Local authorities are required to keep a Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP) to plan improvements to the existing rights of way network in their area, which are usually available on the authority's website. These plans may set out how local authorities create and maintain ways to be multi-use, providing access for multiple user groups and where possible to provide specific improvements for a range of users with limited mobility, including wheelchair users and those with young children in pushchairs.

As set out in our 25 Year Environment Plan, the Government has committed to making sure that there are high quality, accessible, natural spaces close to where people live and work, particularly in urban areas, and encouraging more people to spend time in them to benefit their health and wellbeing.

The Government is supporting and enhancing access to the countryside in a number of different ways. This includes completing the England Coast Path, supporting our network of National Trails, ensuring that rights of way are recorded and protected, and developing ways to support access through the Environmental Land Management (ELM) scheme.

The ELM scheme will reward land managers for the public goods that they will deliver, including beauty, heritage and engagement with the environment. Public access is a key way that people can engage with the environment. Supporting access is therefore an important aspect of achieving this goal.

We are looking at how the ELM scheme could fund the creation of new paths, such as footpaths and bridleways, which provide access for cyclists, horse riders and pedestrians where appropriate. We will determine in more detail what ELM will pay for as we further develop the scheme and we are engaging with stakeholders to inform this.

The Department for Transport has launched a £500 million Restoring Your Railway Fund to build or reopen lines and stations, reconnecting smaller communities, regenerating local economies and improving access to jobs, homes and education. It is inviting MPs, local councils and community groups across England and Wales to propose how they could use funding to reinstate axed local rail services and restore stations. It will be opening a third round of applications for the Fund in November and more information can be found on GOV.UK: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/restoring-your-railway-fund>

The Department for Transport encourages the best use of transport infrastructure as possible. Any permanent changes made, for example, to a disused railway line, need to consider the possibility that any change could impact on restoring the route back to rail use in the future. Another important consideration to note is that including multi-access routes alongside rail-tracks must be reviewed against health and safety for all users.

Thank you once again for taking the time to contact me about this important issue. Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance with this or any other matters in the future.



REBECCA POW MP