

How can we make it easier to visit the river?

People like watching and walking by rivers. However, large parts of many river systems are privately owned and inaccessible to the public, while publicly owned areas near rivers are often difficult to visit for other reasons.

WHY make it more accessible?

There is growing evidence that people's health and wellbeing benefit from access to nature such as rivers. Encouraging people to visit their local river will encourage them to care for and value it now and in the future.

Even though 98% of the River Avon system is privately owned, there are plenty of places from its source to the sea where people can get close to it or can enjoy views from the surrounding countryside. Sometimes access at these places is difficult but with a little effort they can be made more inviting.

WHAT can be done?

Assess the existing ways and places where people can visit the river and how accessible they are at the moment. You can then identify changes that could improve access to the river and its use by the community. Please be aware that if the area in question is not already open to the public any access can only be provided with the permission of the landowner.

Ask yourself whether the improved access would actually be used and how it would benefit the community. Work to improve access for one section of the community is likely to improve it for everybody else who uses and enjoys the area.

Consider how appropriate any changes would be to the area. Think about wildlife and protected species such as water voles. It may be necessary to keep a buffer of dense vegetation and discourage access right up to the riverbank to allow habitat and shelter for wildlife.

Things as simple as a bench or a picnic table to encourage people to stay and enjoy the area may be all that is needed. Physical barriers such as slopes, fences and uneven ground can often be overcome by simple steps, ramps or surfacing of existing paths. This will make it easier for people of every age and ability to safely access and enjoy the area around the river. Dipping and viewing platforms can make the river come alive for children by allowing them to get right down to the water.

WHO can do it?

Small scale projects can be carried out by teams of volunteers, increasing 'ownership' and value of the area. Remember you are likely to need a range of tools and equipment. Support from somebody with experience in supervising volunteers would be useful. Larger scale projects may need to be undertaken by contractors used to working in rivers.

Different ways of how Living River has improved access to the River Avon system



Resurfaced footpath along the river at Durrington



Dipping platform at River Bourne Community Farm



New sculptural bench at Figheldean Mill Pond

WHAT needs to be considered?

- ▶ Before planning any work find out who owns the area of river concerned and contact everyone who has an interest in the river: landowners, farmers, river users such as fishing clubs etc. A coordinated approach yields the best results.
- ▶ Get the necessary consents and permissions for work in the river and along the river bank – early contact with the Environment Agency, Natural England and your local authority is vital.
- ▶ Cover insurance and health and safety issues. Risk assessments are crucial at the outset of any work in and around the river. The BTCV handbook 'Health and Safety Overview' provides useful advice for community groups (see right).
- ▶ Avoid disturbing protected species such as otters or water voles. Plant and animal surveys may need to be undertaken by an ecologist. Your local Wildlife Trust or Natural England can provide advice. Any sightings of protected species should be reported to your local biological record centre (see right).
- ▶ Have a good look for funding – local authorities can often provide funding advice. The Environment Agency, for example, does sometimes have funding available for water related recreation schemes.
- ▶ Choose a reputable contractor.

WHO can help?

There is plenty of written and direct help available from the organisations listed right. The Fieldfare Trust is a good first point of information on improving access for people with disabilities.

WHERE can I get more information and ideas?

- ▶ **Fieldfare Trust:**
www.fieldfare.org.uk
- ▶ **British Trust for Conservation Volunteers:**
www2.btcv.org.uk
- ▶ **BTCV handbooks:**
'Health and Safety Overview', 'Waterways and Wetlands' and 'Environments for All' (<http://handbooks.btcv.org.uk/handbooks/index>)
- ▶ **Environment Agency:**
www.environment-agency.gov.uk
- ▶ **Natural England:**
www.naturalengland.org.uk
- ▶ **Wildlife Trusts:**
Wiltshire (www.wiltshirewildlife.org);
Hampshire (www.hwt.org.uk);
Dorset (www.dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk)

