



Practice Guide

# Wild trail & desire line management



# Contents

Who is this Guidance For?	3
What are Wild Trails?	3
What are Desire Lines?	3
Our legal responsibility	4
A risk based approach	5
Management options	6
A Adopt and Inspect	8
B Intervene and Make Safe	9
C Tolerate and Monitor	10
D Closure and Removal	11
Communication with users	13
Monitoring	13
Sharing knowledge and experience	13
Further help and support	13
Appendix one	14
Appendix two	16
Notes	17

The construction shown in this photograph is an example of poor practice.



# Who is this Guidance For?

If you work on a Forestry Commission (FC) site that has cycling activity of any kind, this handbook is for you.

It describes the types of wild trails and desire lines that you might have to deal with, helps you make decisions about the

future of the trail and explains the procedures that you should have in place. Lastly, details of further help and support are provided.

## What are Wild Trails?

Wild trails are unofficial cycle routes established without the permission or knowledge of the landowner or land manager.

They are separate from the managed trail network. They are trails that have some degree of construction or vegetation management which may range

from simple ground level berms or areas of tree brashing, to specifically built timber structures.

## What are Desire Lines?

A desire line is created by the repeated passing of cycles or walkers along a non-formal route on the forest floor, open moor or field.

A desire line has no construction or vegetation management used to create it. They are often created by cyclists wishing to cut corners or create a direct route between two locations for example the end of a trail and the car park. Whilst they are made by a deliberate action, they are often created sub-consciously and less deliberately than wild trails.

thought. You will need to assess both the risk posed by desire lines and the effect they are having on wider site management including the landscape impact.

For the purposes of this guidance both features can be managed in the same way. It will be for you to decide at what point a desire line has gained a degree of construction (any degree of construction makes it a wild trail) or vegetation management, and therefore requires additional

# Our legal responsibility

It is FC policy to be a responsible land manager that welcomes visitors to the National Forest Estate under the provisions of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (2000) (CRoW) or the Land Reform Act (2010)

It is FC policy to encourage the public to use our woodlands for both organised and informal recreation. This means that the public on FC land will normally be lawful visitors and are likely to expect to roam freely, especially when the land is dedicated under CRoW or if in Scotland the Land Reform Act 2010 applies, unless you make it clear there are restrictions, for example, leasehold woods may have reserved access rights or where hazardous work is taking place.

Landowners and occupiers have responsibilities both to their employees and to anyone who uses their land. Those responsibilities mean that as an organisation both employing people and welcoming visitors, the FC must be aware of its responsibilities and have procedures to meet them. You will find a full description of our legal responsibilities in **OGB 42 Managing Recreation**.

For the purposes of this guidance your duty of care is summarised as follows:

- You have a duty of care to anyone exercising a statutory right including using a Public Right of Way or accessing land under CRoW in England or in Scotland the Land Reform Act (2010).
- You also have a duty of care to those using a facility that has specifically provided, for example a way-marked cycle trail.
- You should consider the impact on the care of both of these groups of users when managing desire lines or wild trails.
- In addition, you should ensure that visitors using official facilities do not accidentally access unofficial wild trails or desire lines.

# A risk based approach

Both wild trails and desire lines will need to be managed on a risk based system. This means you will need to make an assessment based on the following questions:

1. How technical or difficult is the trail or desire line? To assess this you must use the FC's advice to managers grading of Easy / Moderate / Difficult / Severe / Extreme trails. You will find a description of these grades in Appendix 1.
2. Can you effectively manage the trail or desire line. For this you will need to consider how accessible the feature is, how often you will be able to visit it and is it an effective way to use FC resource i.e. time, money and staff effort?
3. What are the interactions with other users and other rights of way including statutory Public Rights of Way, public roads, walkers and horses riders?

## You must also consider

1. What are the interactions with environment / conservation interests, including Schedule 1 Protected Species, Sites of Special Scientific Interest, and Scheduled Ancient Monuments? You will also need to think about the effects from any erosion on watercourses.
2. How does this feature fit with your site master plan? All major Forest Centres in England will have a site master plan, this document maps out all trails, car parks and access routes. It will have already considered all

of the topics above when planning trails and access routes. You should consult with your Landscape Architect to consider the implications of adopting or removing a wild trail or desire line.

3. Are there any statutory planning consent requirements and is the wild trail or desire line compatible with Forest Design Plan and Forest Management requirements?

When you have done this analysis, you should have all the information you need to make an informed decision about future management.

If you need further help or advice on risk / benefit then follow this link to the **Managing Visitor Safety in the Countryside** book.

# Your management options

There are four approaches to management that you might take. Note that monitoring over time may highlight a change and any decision may have to be reviewed.

## A. Adopt and inspect:

The site should be adopted and monitored as a formal recreation facility in line with guidance in **OGB 42 Managing Recreation**. This would mean you would need to ensure that FC construction standards are met and inspection regimes are at regular intervals (a frequency of every 3 months is suggested). In addition, each visit should be recorded and notes / photographs kept of any actions, maintenance and work completed.

It might be necessary to facilitate the relocation of some wild trail developments to more acceptable sites to minimise continuing wild build activities and management conflicts.

This is likely to be a much bigger and longer-term project and in the meantime, you should implement an interim action plan from one of these options.

**Wild trail or desire line**  
(unofficial route on site)

Acceptable according to

- FC resource and ability to manage
- Ownership
- Conservation and Archaeology
- Safety of others users
- Planning

Yes

Does the trail or desire have  
Constructed features

Yes

No

**Figure 1:** Decision Making Flow Chart

This flow chart is designed to help you manage your wild trail or desire line. You will find descriptions of each answer in the following pages.

**B. Intervene and make safe (then tolerate and monitor or adopt):**

The construction of features might need to be challenged if you and / or FC experts feel that standards are not acceptable. Speak to your Recreation lead for details of both District and national colleagues who can help you with this assessment.

**C. Tolerate and monitor:**

This option is potentially applicable where other

legitimate users of the public Forest Estate are not at risk from the development of wild trails or desire lines. In this case, riders are generally understood to have accepted the inherent risks of their own activity.

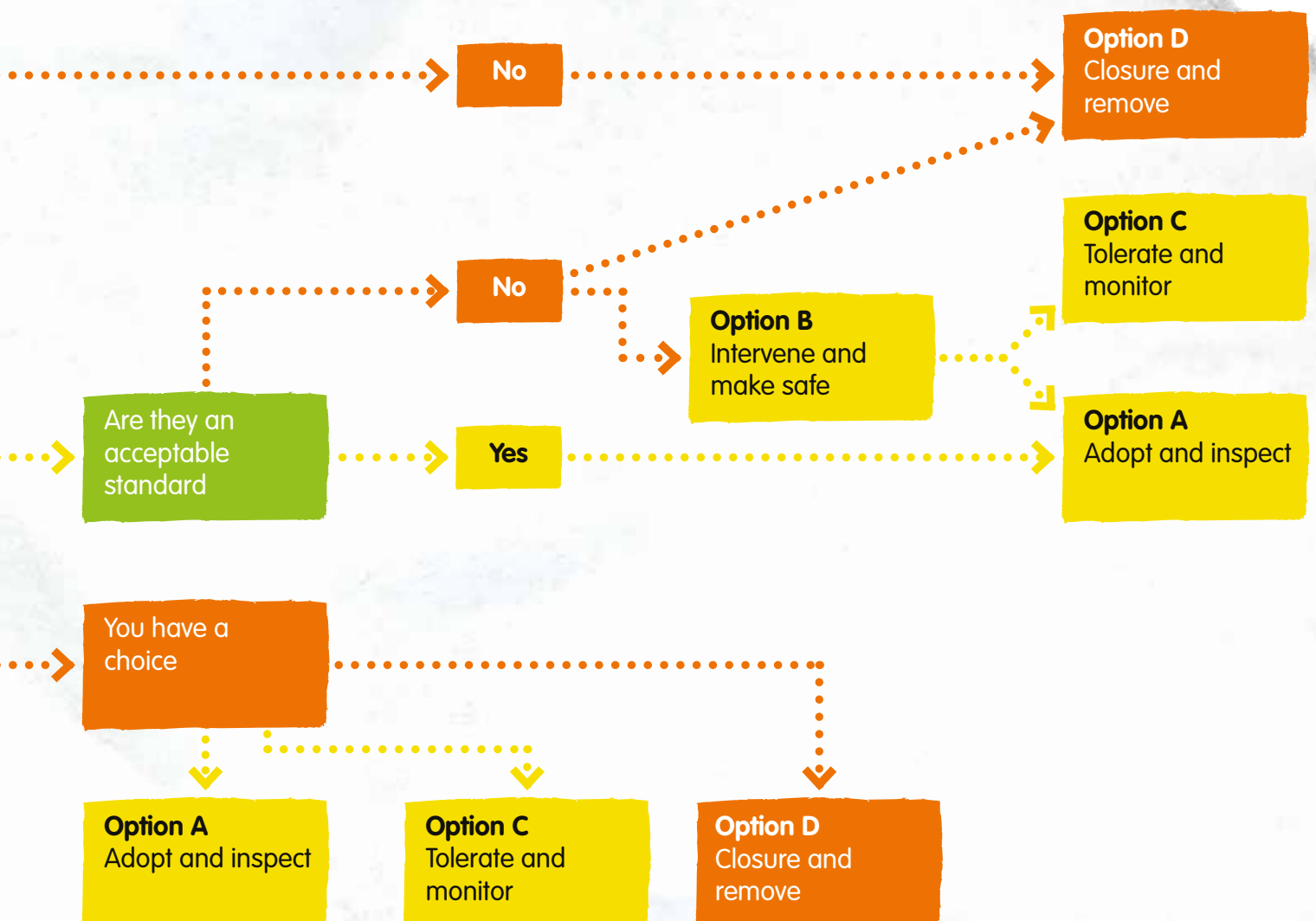
**D. Closure and removal:**

In this scenario the risks to both the land manager / owner, riders and general visitors are considered to be too great. Your actions will need to be swift, and you may need line manager

approval depending on the level of resources required.

Ensure that you photograph all the features before you remove them and keep them on record for a minimum of six years.

For more information, see our guide to de-commissioning trails / facilities. You will find this guide on the Safety Health and Environment - visitor safety page of the intranet or click **De-commissioning trails** for direct link.





# Option A

## Adopt and Inspect

This action is taken when your assessment indicates that the trail could be managed effectively. It is important to remember that staff time spent adopting and managing the trail must result in a better outcome than simply removing it.

Inspections should be made at least quarterly. Each visit should be recorded and a record kept of any actions, maintenance and work completed.

A combination of dialogue (it's useful to keep notes) and written operating agreements should be used to convey a code of conduct to trail users. The trail assessment may need to be repeated every two years to confirm the effectiveness of management measures and to take account of changing trail features, location and user group composition.

If a trail is adopted, it becomes formalised and should follow signage and other guidance as set out in **OGB 42 Managing Recreation**.

## Monitoring the site

Monitoring is a key part of demonstrating you are doing all that is reasonable to prevent harm coming to users of your woodlands and open spaces.





# Option B

## Intervene and Make Safe

The construction of features might need to be challenged if you and or FC experts feel that standards are not acceptable but you want to keep the site operating while further decisions are made. Speak to your Recreation lead for details of both District and national colleagues who can help you with this assessment.

You should adapt the site to what is considered an acceptable standard for FC to tolerate and easily monitor.

Having decided to follow this approach, notices should be placed on site informing users and builders of any impending actions. You should provide details of how riders can get in touch with you and give them a reasonable time to respond. **However, you should also act immediately should you see an obvious, high risk feature that could provide a hazard to the riders or the general public.**

Photos should be taken before and after any intervention, and these should remain in the inspection file. Regular monitoring following discovery can be reduced in frequency should the use and development of the site stabilise.

## After intervention and making it safe.

If forming a partnership consider the following options:

Agree site rules with the users.

Develop an operating agreement for the site. You should consult within your organisation where similar cases exist. Where there is no formal group to work with, and no likelihood of one being set up, there are some simple site rules in **Figure 2** below, which can help you to manage the site, the activity and the users.

You should also consider these points:

- Who will cut down trees if required?
- Who will provide materials or tools? and
- Who will plan the site?

You can post these rules on the site and agree them in writing at a formal meeting.

## Monitoring the site

It is important that you monitor the effects of your management. Depending on what you do currently, this may mean informal or formal checks on the site.

Monitoring is a key part of demonstrating you are doing all that is reasonable as an occupier of land to prevent harm coming to users of your woodlands and open spaces. Once sites have been notified and inspected, monitoring will be a key part of demonstrating competent management.

**Figure 2: Establishing site rules**

Site rules	
Essential	Desirable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Type of construction that is acceptable or unacceptable</li> <li>– Different grades of route/jump (plan for progression within the facility)</li> <li>– Location of pits and jumps</li> <li>– Spread of the site – define the boundary</li> <li>– The defined Area / Routes access to ride them – to be recorded on a plan</li> <li>– Site signage plan</li> <li>– Litter control plan</li> <li>– Avoiding damage</li> <li>– Don't leave tools and equipment lying about on site</li> <li>– Inspectors must be trained</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Safety rules – like helmets and gloves</li> <li>– Inspections – users to help (they will need training in this)</li> <li>– Accident reporting</li> <li>– Conflicts or hassle with others</li> <li>– Mentoring – experienced riders help inexperienced riders</li> </ul>



The constructions shown in these photographs are examples of poor practice.

## Option C

### **Tolerate and Monitor**

This option is suitable where users have not constructed any permanent built features but are merely exploiting the natural landforms at the site and creating desire lines for others to follow.

Some soil and rock features may have been created but no timber structures. In such instances there may be little intervention possible / required. You should record details of the wild trail or desire line, take and store pictures and set a monitoring frequency and record all of your actions.

Keep all your records for a minimum of 6 years.

# Option D

## Remove

This option involves removing unsafe built features, trails in the wrong place and causing management conflicts. It also involves monitoring the effect of removal.

The construction of jumps, usually of timber, soil or rock, or erection of "North Shore" style (elevated sections made of interconnecting bridges, logs and woodwork) will usually need to be challenged. Where the construction is not to an acceptable standard, you should aim to remove the features soon after the inspection. If the facilities represent a significant risk to other forest users, such as a built jump crossing a forest road or public right of way, action should be taken without delay.

At an initial inspection where you decide removal of features will need to take place, ensure that a notice is placed on site to inform the users / builders of the impending action. Your site inspection should also record the action taken and pictures of the site.

There will be instances where it is obvious from the first inspection that the problem is unlikely to be removed by one simple intervention, or where the scale of the facilities requires substantial expenditure. You will probably need to refer this to your Recreation manager and seek advice and opinion from colleagues. All

interventions should be fully recorded. Substantial intervention may involve, for example:

## Forest operations

Bringing forward felling / thinning plans to disrupt use of the site and assist in removal of the unauthorised facilities. Often, heavy thinning may result in growth of ground cover to deter use.

## Site signage

Erecting signage at persistently used sites to discourage use of unauthorised routes and to explain the reasons for the removal of dangerous structures and routes which are unsafe for use.

## Closing the site - planning and preparation

Closing an unauthorised site requires as much thought and planning as opening up a new trail or park. This is because these features and trails are important to the people who have built and use them. The builders have assumed ownership and have invested their time and even money. Any changes to trails, including closure, may have an impact on the feelings of people in the community – on their sense of place and motivation - as well as an impact on individual builders and riders.

Planning to remove trails will require tact and diplomacy to keep everyone on board with the process, if not the outcome. Land managers must be

confident about why they are closing the site. You must be well prepared to discuss and explain the rationale for your decision. You should set out the case:

- for change or removal:
- the advantages and disadvantages; and:
- the costs and savings, fully, clearly and openly.

The reasons are likely to be:

## Safety

If this is your reason, do you have records and evidence of hazards, and reports of accidents?

## Internal needs

- it does not fit with strategy / planning:
- it is disruptive to management of forest or woodland:
- it is causing damage to habitat or the environment:
- you do not have the resources to manage the area:
- it is diverting maintenance funds from other recreation facilities.

## External needs

- complaints have been received from the public, neighbours or others:
- planning permission may be required.



### The consultation process

Effective consultation is key to this whole process. If the process gains respect then, for the great majority of people, so will the outcome. There is no legal requirement to consult, but it is good practice. You can achieve this by:

- posting information on site and in local places to help people know what is happening and possible plans for the trail:
- using social media and online consultation tools to reach a broad range of people. Giving you the chance to get feedback and ideas from those affected by decisions:
- canvassing the views of other organisations and potential partners i.e. are they supportive, neutral or against it? How might they help? What communication channels might they be able to use on behalf?

Experience and 'good practice' in community engagement show that it is important to consult

well and widely. Community decisions are important. A wide range of people, from motivated professionals to disadvantaged young people, can be involved in the building of unauthorised areas and cycle routes. You need to include them all in your approach.

### Taking the final decision

If after consultation the site cannot be improved, made safe or managed in another way, then you will have to take the final decision to remove the features. There may well be poor publicity from your actions, therefore it is advisable to involve your manager in the process, and brief your Communications manager. This ensure that they are prepared for any press interest.

The final decision may be one that is unpalatable to local trail builders or community – it will rarely please everybody. But as a land manager you need to reach a decision, which takes account of and balances all the complex and sometimes conflicting factors about the particular site. In this way you will fulfil your statutory

duties and other responsibilities.

### The removal process

The process of removal also needs to be handled effectively. Assuming the trail has to be removed, make sure that you:

- do it to a high standard:
- leave the site safe for those who may try to visit and use the site:
- clear any debris quickly to show positive management of the site:
- post information about the removal on site, including:
  - the reasons why it was done:
  - refer to alternative facilities that are available nearby:
  - who requested the removal and when: and
  - give contact information such as a telephone number, name and address.

# Communication with users

You will need to decide how often and by what means you will be able to communicate with wild trail builders and users. It can take considerable time to establish and continue with regular communication however, you will need to convey key messages to riders no matter what your chosen course of action. For example;

if you choose 'closure and removal', you will need to tell riders what has, and will continue to happen to further unauthorised activity at your site.

Where 'intervene and make safe' is chosen it will be necessary to communicate with users and spell out what is acceptable and what is not.

For 'tolerate and monitor' it may not be necessary to communicate intensively, however you might want to let riders know that you are monitoring the site, that certain sites are allowed but there is a limit to future limit site development.

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## Monitoring

Recording and ongoing monitoring of sites is important as it may highlight changes and therefore a need to alter your management decision, i.e. to another option. The frequency of monitoring will vary from site to site and should take account of usage and impact within a risk based and District approach. So for example you may monitor a wild trail quarterly on a moderate use site and then decide to extend that to annually if the

usage and impact remain low. Exception reporting for lowest risk locations is also acceptable as management practice. You could undertake this when you are at a woodland for other management purposes or following extreme weather events. Again, taking a risk approach, you may decide that a desire line with very low risk does not require ongoing monitoring. Recording new sites and ongoing monitoring is probably best done with a site

diary. Include details of decisions made and actions taken with photographs to highlight work carried out or change. Note that monitoring is not the same as inspection - inspections should be done for those trails you have adopted under Option A 'Adopt and Inspect'. It may also be that you suggest a one off / more formal inspection, following a monitoring visit, for example for tree safety.

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## Sharing knowledge and experience

It saves us all time if share our experiences, both good and bad. Please feedback your experiences or any comments on this document to your national Recreation team.

## Further help and support

This Guidance has been produced by the Safety, Health & Environment and the FC England Recreation teams. Contact your District Recreation lead or a Safety, Health and Environment team member for further help and support.

# Appendix one

## FC Standards for designing and grading way marked recreational cycle trails

### Suitable For

<b>Green Easy</b> ●	Beginner / novice cyclists. Basic Bike Skills required. Suitable for most people in good health. Most bikes and hybrids. Aim to make green routes accessible to bikes with child seats or trailers, and bikes for those with disabilities. Consider fourcross bike access for some sections.
<b>Blue Moderate</b> ■	Intermediate cyclist / mountain bikers with basic off road riding skills and reasonable fitness. Mountain bikes or hybrids. Consider fourcross bike access for some sections.
<b>Red Difficult</b> ▲	Proficient and fitter mountain bikers with good off road riding skills. Suitable for better quality off-road mountain bikes. Consider fourcross bike access for some sections.
<b>Black Severe</b> ◆	Expert mountain bike users, used to physically demanding routes. Quality off-road mountain bikes. Consider fourcross bike access for some sections.
<b>Orange Extreme</b> ■	Riders aspiring to an elite level of technical ability, incorporates everything from Full on downhill riding to big-air jumps. Consider fourcross bike access for some sections.
<b>Forest road &amp; similar</b>	Describe the likely gradients, length of route, estimated time required. General nature of the trail experience. Wide range of cyclists and abilities. A good standard of fitness can help. Suitable for mountain bikes, hybrids or robust touring bikes. Consider fourcross bike access for some sections.

### Trail Types

<b>Green Easy</b> ●	Relatively flat and wide. The trail surface may be loose, uneven or muddy at times. May include short flowing singletrack style sections. No challenging features.
<b>Blue Moderate</b> ■	As Green and Forest roads plus specially constructed single track. Blue level trails can have small amounts of challenging features man made and natural.
<b>Red Difficult</b> ▲	Classic mountain bike route. As Blue but steeper and tougher for longer. Mostly singletrack with variable TTF's and technical sections.
<b>Black Severe</b> ◆	As "Red" but with an expectation of greater challenge and continuous difficulty. Can include any usable trail and may include exposed open hill sections, or considerable distances.
<b>Orange Extreme</b> ■	Severe constructed trails and / or natural features. All sections will be challenging. Includes extreme levels of exposure and or risk. Jumping ability obligatory. Parks should have progression designed in within the routes.
<b>Forest road &amp; similar</b>	Railtrails, towpaths, reservoir trails, estate or forestry tracks and those regulated by byelaw or other restrictions plus brideways, byways and unsurfaced unclassified roads. Lightly trafficked lanes.

### Gradient

<b>Green Easy</b> ●	Shallow climbs and descents capable of being ridden by children and non fit adults.
<b>Blue Moderate</b> ■	Most gradients are moderate but may include short steep sections, which may have to be walked?
<b>Red Difficult</b> ▲	A wide range of climbs and descents of a challenging and committing nature will be present.
<b>Black Severe</b> ◆	Any rideable or usable gradient. Expect large, committing and unavoidable TTF's. Sections will be challenging and variable. May also have "downhill" style sections.
<b>Orange Extreme</b> ■	Will include a range of small medium and large TTF's including downhill trails, freeride sections and mandatory jumps.
<b>Forest road &amp; similar</b>	Description of the overall route May include sections of steeper climbs and descents, which may have to be walked.



## Surface / Width

<b>Green Easy</b> ●	Well constructed and maintained. Essentially smooth with a minimum content of loose surfaces. Ideal width 2 to 3m. With wide radius in turns.
<b>Blue Moderate</b> ■	Aim as "Green" Mostly stoned surfaces. Short sections of narrower natural trail are acceptable. Trail surface may include small obstacles of roots and rock for short distances.
<b>Red Difficult</b> ▲	Proficient and fitter mountain bikers with good off road riding skills. Suitable for better quality off-road mountain bikes. Consider fourcross bike access for some sections
<b>Black Severe</b> ◆	Predominantly single track any usable surface and other technical sections natural or man made.
<b>Orange Extreme</b> ■	Predominantly single track any usable trail and large technical sections natural or man made with challenging surfaces.
<b>Forest road &amp; similar</b>	Relatively flat and wide. The trail surface may be loose, uneven or muddy at times. Occasional potholes may be present.

## Acceptable Hazards

<b>Green Easy</b> ●	These trails should carry a very low risk. Any unavoidable hazards should be identified in promotional literature and through notices at trail head and site of hazard. E.g. Forest road section or multiuse trail.
<b>Blue Moderate</b> ■	Small challenging TTF's features Some loose surfaces, ruts, potholes and / or tree roots may be expected. Short sections of boardwalk.
<b>Red Difficult</b> ▲	Variable hazards expect Boardwalks, berms, large rocks, medium steps, drop-offs, cambers, water crossings.
<b>Black Severe</b> ◆	Hazards and associated risks are expected.
<b>Orange Extreme</b> ■	Managed Hazards and associated risks are expected. These are not cross country trails.
<b>Forest road &amp; similar</b>	These roads may be used by vehicles and other users, including Horses and dog walkers.

## Target Length

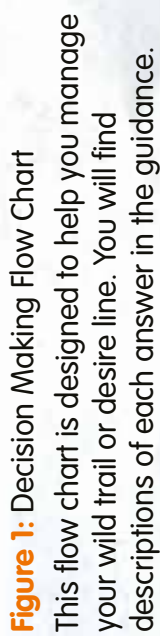
<b>Green Easy</b> ●	2.5 – 10 km Ideally with escape routes and stacked loop system.
<b>Blue Moderate</b> ■	5 – 20 km Ideally with escape routes and stacked loop system.
<b>Red Difficult</b> ▲	5 – 25 km
<b>Black Severe</b> ◆	10-50k
<b>Orange Extreme</b> ■	N/a
<b>Forest road &amp; similar</b>	Consider the target users.

## Maximum Climb

<b>Green Easy</b> ●	<25m
<b>Blue Moderate</b> ■	<50m
<b>Red Difficult</b> ▲	<250m
<b>Black Severe</b> ◆	<500m
<b>Orange Extreme</b> ■	N/a
<b>Forest road &amp; similar</b>	N/a

..... Advisory Parameters .....

## 16



## Notes



Handwriting practice lines consisting of 20 horizontal dotted lines.







This handbook has been written and produced by Safety, Health & Environment and Forestry Commission England Recreation teams.

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