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In England and Wales a public footpath is a path on which the public have a legally protected right to travel on foot. Public footpaths often form a dense network of short paths, offering a choice of routes to many different destinations. Facility managers may find that they are responsible for land or buildings where a footpath exists giving the public a right of way across their property.

Local authorities (usually county councils or unitary authorities) are required to maintain the definitive map of all public rights of way in their areas and these can be inspected at Council Offices. If a path is shown on the Definitive Map and no subsequent order (e.g. a stopping up) exists then the right of way is conclusive in law. But just because a path is not on that map does not mean that it is not a Public Path.

The Countryside Agency has estimated that over 10% of public paths were not yet listed on the definitive map. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 provides that paths that are not recorded on the definitive map by 2026 and that were in use prior to 1949 will automatically be stopped up on 1 January 2026.

Such rights of way are usually waymarked with a 'Public Footpath' sign, by a yellow arrow on a metal or plastic disc or more informally by coloured paint dots on posts and trees. Property owners may not remove these signs or put up misleading signs to prevent people from using a public right of way or do anything else to deter members of the public from using it.

There are other legal restrictions FM's should bear in mind. For example crops may not be grown on a public right of way, however grass can be grown for hay and silage. Dairy bulls over 10 months are not allowed to cross over a field with a right of way. Stiles or gates may not be erected without the permission of the local authority. It is an offence under the Highways Act 1980 to put up barbed wires, electric fences or exposed barb wire that prevents or obstructs a public right of way.

The right of access on a public footpath normally only extends to walking, so there is usually no right to cycle or ride a horse on a public footpath. However, it is not a criminal offence to do so, unless there is a traffic order or bylaw in place specifically, instead it is classed as a civil wrong to ride a bicycle or a horse on a public footpath and action could be taken by the landowner for trespass or nuisance by the user

The Institute of Public Rights of Way and Access Management is the professional body which represents individuals involved in the management of public rights of way and other access in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland www.iprow.co.uk