



THE ICKNIELD WAY ASSOCIATION

National Trail Status Briefing Paper

Summary

This briefing paper proposes a new National Trail (NT) for the Icknield Way (IW). This is an existing long distance path connecting The Ridgeway NT and Peddars Way and Norfolk Coast Path NT. It is part of the Great Chalk Way and is well known, well supported and well-marked.

New NT status will improve the route and encourage more people to use it. This will have public health and economic benefits for people and local businesses along the route. Achieving NT status will bring fresh impetus to the small group of volunteers currently promoting and maintaining the route by giving it the higher status.

The Icknield Way

This 110 miles route is largely off-road, through Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, and Suffolk. We welcome the opportunity to work with Natural England to refine this route to enhance access, engagement and economic benefits.

- The IW is an ancient route claimed to be the oldest trading route in Britain. It combines history and ancient landmarks with beautiful countryside and varied flora and fauna. It is part of the much longer Great Chalk Way family of routes from Dorset to Norfolk, two sections of which already enjoy National Trail status.
- The IW route is a continuous long-distance route that can be completed as a single journey or in stages. It offers many opportunities for local circular walks and is accessible from a number of modern conurbations along its route.
- To champion the route, the Icknield Way Association was founded in 1984 by leading academics and local politicians of the day. The Association continues to function: it produces a Walkers' Guide which describes the route and what to see along the IW route; manages a website promoting the route; and coordinates the work of volunteers who act as Wardens.

A small team of volunteers have maintained the Icknield Way as a navigable route for 40 years. Achieving National Trail status would enable a step change in maintenance, signage, accessibility and promotion.

The Icknield Way Association (IWA) promotes a series of braided long distance routes for walking, off road cycling and equestrian riding. If a single NT route is required, the walkers' route is the most established and best promoted. Most sections are easy access, but more could be done to improve accessibility, such as removal of the four remaining stiles along the route.

Natural England Quality Standards

This paper outlines how the IW route meets Natural England's four quality standards.

Experience

Allow as many people as possible to enjoy a wide variety of walking and riding experiences

- The majority of the IW route is accessible by national and local public transport, allowing nearly half of England to enjoy the walking and riding experiences. This includes c.14m+ people living within an hour's drive of the trail corridor, and c.10m+ people living in London and the Midlands (Waymark study, 2005).



- In particular, the route passes close to the conurbations of Luton, Dunstable, Letchworth, Baldock, Royston, Newmarket, and Thetford. More vigorously promoted, therefore, it has the potential to encourage access to the countryside for a substantial number of people living in urban areas. For example, encouraging residents of Luton to walk on Dunstable Downs, or residents of Thetford to visit the nature reserve at Knettishall Heath.
- The IW route has a varied terrain and landscape which introduces users to a variety of flora and fauna across chalk and sandy soils. The ambition to achieve National Trail status for the Icknield Way aligns with the wider National Landscapes Association's Big Chalk ambitions.
- The IW route provides connection with nature and history, including nearly one hundred Scheduled Monuments.

Enhancement

Improve the route and the enhancement of the landscape, nature and historic features.

- The IW route uses a mix of footpaths, bridleways, byways, and roads. The route is largely traffic free and uses safe road and rail crossings. The route is easy to follow with consistent, accurate, unobtrusive way marking and destination signage. To ensure access for walkers, horse riders, and cyclists, there is some reliance on permissive paths and byways.
- Surfaces are consistent with the geology and soils over which the trail passes.
- Over the past 40 years, the IWA has supported many improvements to the route to enhance users' accessibility and enjoyment. NT status would allow further improvements.
- There are multiple conservation measures within the route corridor that protect and improve habitats including more than 55 Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Continued protection of the environment through which the route passes must remain an objective should National Trail status be achieved.
- The IWA websites promote circular and linking walks and rides, and the Walkers' Guide describes linking routes to Toddington (Bedfordshire) & Thetford (Norfolk).

Engagement

Build and sustain a community of interest in caring for the trail and the landscape.

- The IWA promotes the route and collaborates with local authorities and land managers/owners.
- The IWA maintain two friendly websites, one focused on walking (and governance), and the other on riding (both horse riding and off-road cycling). Both websites provide information to help with planning, information links and providing feedback.
- We promote the involvement of local users and the local community when making changes by publishing notices on our website.
- We have an active community of wardens monitoring the route, as well as members of the Association, and subscribers who receive website updates. The number of wardens is small (8 currently), and their activity is unfunded. Natural England funding would allow activities that enhance the route rather than simply maintain it.
- We hold an annual AGM often with a walk and/or an external speaker. We also circulate a newsletter twice a year to members and other stakeholders.



Economy

Create opportunities for local businesses to benefit from the use of the trails.

- NT status would make it easier for people to find out about and access local businesses and facilities. This would boost UK expenditure on tourism and travel. This includes accommodation services (e.g. hotels, B&Bs, Airbnb's), and food and beverage services (e.g. restaurants, pubs, tea rooms, farm shops, village shops).
- A new IW NT could also reduce future healthcare costs by encouraging exercise, improving heart health and reducing obesity and other health issues. Spending time in nature provides mental health benefits, reducing stress, anxiety and depression.
- A 2005 report for the Countryside Commission captures the key benefits of the route ('Sustainable Access to the Icknield Way'). This reinforced a 2003 report highlighting the IW potential to become a new Economic corridor ('Icknield Way Corridor Study'). Both reports are on the [IW website](#).
- Organisations along the IW route promote a diverse programme of initiatives. These include the [Chilterns National Landscape](#), [Brecks Landscape Partnership](#), and [National Trust](#). We believe this offers an attractive prospect for further investment.

Conclusion

We believe a new IW NT route offers a tremendous opportunity for the UK, with clear economic and health benefits that will outweigh the costs of maintaining the route. It forms a key part of our vision for a Great Chalk Way NT linking the Dorset and Norfolk coasts.

*The Icknield Way Association
17th June 2025*



Addendum – Additional Information

National Trails

National Trails provide access to the UK's most special places. Three factors set these routes apart from other long distance promoted trails:

- They have national quality standards
- They are created using statutory powers set out in an Act of Parliament
- Their upkeep is partly paid for by central government through grants by Natural England

Collectively, 15 routes across England and Wales are promoted as the family of National Trails and identified by the acorn symbol.

These National Trails are managed locally within a framework of guidance and support. Natural England provide Central government support, through standards and investments in trail maintenance. Local trail partnerships take responsibility for delivery, with lead partners receiving funding and reporting to Natural England on progress.

National Trails provide public enjoyment, and they also bring local economic benefit through tourism as well as opportunities for improving the environment and for getting local communities involved in caring for them.

The Icknield Way

The Icknield Way (IW) was first proposed as a National Trail over 40 years ago and has been marked as a long-distance footpath on Ordnance Survey maps since 1992.

Following an ancient chalk ridge, it starts at the end of The Ridgeway National Trail at Ivinghoe Beacon in Buckinghamshire and ends where Peddars Way and the Norfolk Coast Path National Trail begin at Knettishall Heath on the Suffolk/Norfolk border.

Population centres along the route include Tring (12.4k), Dunstable (40.7k), Luton (227k), Hitchin (35.2k), Letchworth (34k), Baldock (10.6k), Royston (17.5k), Melbourn (4.6k), Cambridge (147k), Saffron Walden (16.6k), Newmarket (16.8k), and Thetford (25.2k).

Great Chalk Way

The IW is part of a longer route (c. 375 miles) connecting Lyme Regis on Dorset's Jurassic Coast to the Wash in Norfolk. The Great Chalk Way is a re-creation of what is thought to be England's oldest coast-to-coast trading route. The oldest prehistoric route in Britain, it has been in use for several thousand years.

The Icknield Way forms a key section, linking Peddars Way National Trail with The Ridgeway National Trail. The Wessex Ridgeway connects this south west route to Lyme Regis, whilst Cranborne Doves Way and Sarsen Way provide alternative routes.

Icknield Way Association

The Icknield Way Association (IWA) is a non-profit organisation with charitable aims. We urge the official adoption of the Icknield Way as a new National Trail, promote the use of the Way and its amenities, and provide information for users.

More information can be found at www.IcknieldWayPath.co.uk (for walkers & governance) and www.IcknieldWayTrail.org.uk (for riders).

