THE TRAIL – ITS PEOPLE, PLACE AND TIME

PROJECT LEAD

Developing Mountain Biking in Scotland

PROJECT FUNDER

SRAM

STEERING GROUP MEMBERS

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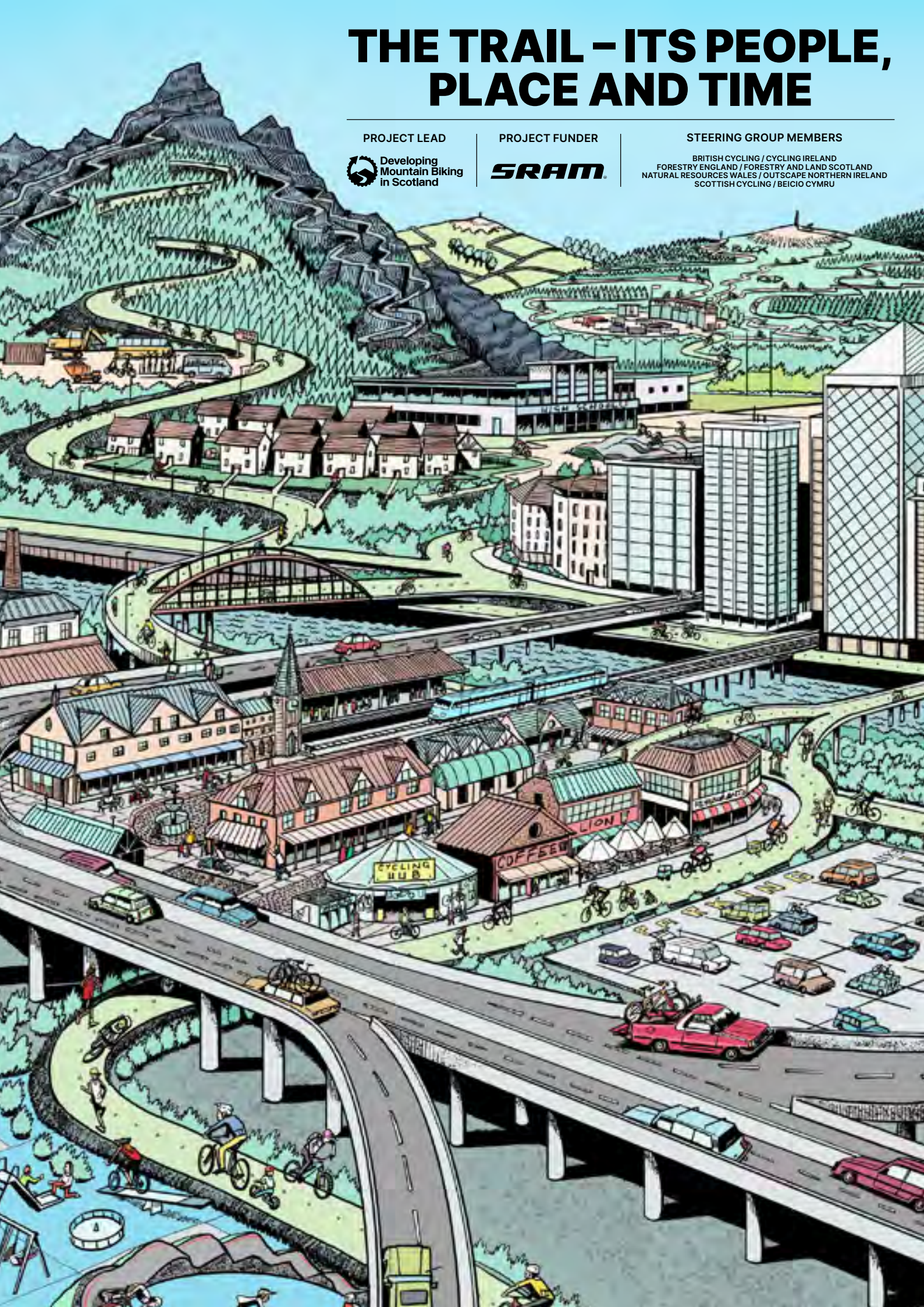

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Image Credit: Forestry England

UK Trails Project Foreword

The UK Trails Project has been launched into a critical moment in mountain biking's history. Although mountain biking still provides the sense of freedom and exploration that the early founders enjoyed, the pressures of commercialisation and rapid growth have threatened to make our once grassroots sport a victim of its own success.

Throughout the world, riding communities have struggled to balance the well recognise physical health and mental wellbeing benefits to individuals, with the need to integrate our activities with others enjoying the shared environment. Unplanned development in the Covid era has heightened the need to move to more sustainable practices, to prevent riders harming the landscapes they love. To tackle these challenges and leave a legacy for the next generation, SRAM are proud to present UK Trails Project.

In its first year, the Project has brought together riders, trail builders and land managers in a vision of shared understanding and cooperative learning. This report presents our learnings so far and outlines the next steps required to make the UK trails network not only more sustainable and secure, but also more suitable and enjoyable for its users.

By using the evidence from our research and the trust built between stakeholders, I am confident mountain biking can finding its place to contribute to a changing world, while maintain its core values of freedom and fun.

Rob Cappucci
Director of Advocacy & Industry Partnerships at project sponsor, SRAM

Cover Image Designed by Graeme Stewart, @stormstatic

Introduction

Welcome to "The Trail – Its People, Place and Time", the summary of the first year's work by the UK Trails Project (UKTP).

Sponsored by SRAM and hosted by Developing Mountain Biking in Scotland (DMBinS), this unique project aims to enhance the sustainability, security and suitability of the UK trails network by bringing together the mountain biking and land management communities.

The Project is divided into three phases: research; delivery and analysis. This report presents and discusses the findings of the research phase, before setting out what actions will be delivered in phase 2.

2024 was a critical moment in mountain biking's history, with pressures of commercial boom-and-bust threatening to make the once grassroots sport a victim of its own success. Struggles over trail sustainability and inclusion were being more frequently highlighted and the need for a fresh approach recognised.

Even before publication of this report, UKTP has done much to develop positive relationships between the mountain bike and land management communities. Through this renewed collaboration we are fostering the trust and building the confidence required to improve trail sustainability and security, exploring opportunities for enhancing mountain biking's appeal to a wider range of users through greater trail provision. As this trust deepens, we can also apply our learning to include unsanctioned trails into a managed network where appropriate and beneficial.

Many Lifetimes' Experience

This Project's strength is the level of experience in the people behind it. Its Steering Group comprises senior personnel from major public sector land managers, cycling National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and those involved in developing and planning outdoor recreation across all four home nations of the UK. These bodies have two roles: To guide the project with their expertise and to use feedback to help shape the Project's next phase.

All members of the Steering Group have a lifetime of experience in their fields, providing help as work progresses and peer reviewing findings prior to publication. Project Manager David Evans has significant experience in trail management in the voluntary, public and private sectors, and a lifetime on the bike. The experience and reputation of this team has for the first time facilitated land managers, trail builders and mountain bikers to participate in a common project with the shared goal of finding the best way forward for all parties.

Listening Far and Wide

Its wide range of needs, desires and styles makes mountain biking one of the most diverse sports going. Understanding the breadth and reach of the sport is critical in planning for its future, so the project travelled far and wide, hosting workshops, online surveys and one-to-one interviews to gather evidence and opinion from as wide a group as possible. And this is not just a study – The Trail Report has evaluated these findings in partnership with Napier University to provide the evidence as to where change is required, and outlines work packages and partnership to deliver it.

The last large-scale attempt to fully understand mountain biking was Cycling UK's 2016 Off Road Survey. Since then, mountain biking has evolved and changed immensely. This study will provide a fresh platform from which all stakeholders can work forward.

We hope the report will be an inspiring and informative read for anyone involved in the mountain bike trail community, helping all stakeholders to acknowledge and understand each other's positions. It also shows why mountain biking generates such passion in many people's lives and why provision needs to be carefully integrated into not just countryside and forests, but also the urban environment to continue to provide physical and mental health benefits for generations to come.

Project Timeline

2023	
Summer	Project Set Up by Steering Group.
Winter	UK Wide Workshops Captured Key Themes.
Spring	Outline surveys of riders, trail associations and land managers. Turn Themes into Data.
2024	
Summer	Key Stakeholder Interviews. Explore themes in detail. Collate opinions and create evidence. Data Analysis and Reporting Turn data into evidence lead report.
Autumn	Report Delivery. Publish findings and set out next steps.
Winter	Start Phase 2 Work Packages

1.1
What is Mountain Biking?

Mountain Biking (MTB) enjoys one of the widest participant age ranges of all sports – from toddlers on balance bikes to retired riders able to further extend their enjoyment of the sport thanks to electrically assisted bicycle (ebike) technology.*

* Please note that this report refers to the use of UK-legal ebikes and not electric motorcycles.

Emerging from late 1970's Californian counterculture, mountain biking reached the UK in the early 1980's bringing its ethos of freedom and adventure. As it grew in popularity in the 1990's the sport became more formalised, with international competition in Cross Country (XC – fast circuit racing) and Downhill (DH – individuals racing against the clock in a time-trial format) making the sport more professional and product focussed. Governed by the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) this small but strong scene launched many UK athletes onto the world stage, with international and Olympic success continuing to this day.

In the early 2010's a third racing discipline, Enduro, emerged. This style of riding combined untamed uphill sections with several timed downhill "special stages" in route of typically 20km or more. Sitting outside UCI control, this new style had a more informal "riding with friends" style, making it highly popular with riders and manufacturers alike.

Although commonly referred to as a "sport", early research by the UK Trail Alliance suggests only 1% of the mountain biking population enter races, with the majority identifying more closely with the early pioneers in valuing riding for recreation and to explore the countryside. Riders surveyed by this project cited exercise, with its associated physical and mental health benefits, as their primary motivation to ride, with the ability to challenge and improve their skills in second place. Reasons placing equal third included escape and solitude, connecting with nature, and simply, the fun of playing on a bike.

Early recreational riding required riders to plan their own routes to explore the countryside using guidebooks and route maps published in MTB magazines. Today, recreational riders can choose from a range of dedicated trail centres and bike parks, or turn to a wealth of apps, vlogs and YouTube channels to locate new trails.

As well as being a sport and recreation, mountain biking can be considered a culture, with many subcultures in both competitive and recreational riding. These distinct subcultures vary from the thrill of downhill racing and dirt jumping to the peace of long-distance touring. Each subculture has its own unique riding preferences, bikes, clothing styles and language.

Despite the differences in technical ability and equipment used, most riders are united by the desire to exercise, develop skills and play in green spaces, since an opportunity to spend time in nature is highly valued. These communities are often based around a common set of trails, or nearby cafés, and provide friendship groups which can offer routes into riding for newcomers both to the sport and the area.

Mountain biking is a broad church, meaning different things to different people.

As the sport reflects and evaluates its values, mountain biking is starting to acknowledge the need for more responsible trail use and greater commercial input to tackle issues such as environmental impact, trail maintenance and the sport's image. There are a range of NGBs, charities and other organisations operating in this space, but perhaps due to the wide diversity within the sport, a single organisation that unites riders and advocates on their behalf across the UK is yet to emerge.

To fully integrate into society, mountain biking must prove more widely that its own community can take responsibility for issues like environmental impact, access, and inclusivity. Thanks to the hard work of volunteers and forward-thinking land managers, there are already good examples of success across the UK. This project will celebrate these successes and develop pathways to make a collaborative approach more achievable.

Quote

Riders' Survey respondent, April 2024

"Social. For me going mountain biking is my social life. It's the whole package: meet, chat, catch up, ride, then coffee n cake or pizza and beer."

1.1.1
Current Access Provision

Mountain bike trail provision varies widely across the UK, largely influenced by factors including topography, population density and land value.

Variations in access laws and permitted access to state owned forestry across the Home Nations also dictate where riders can legally access suitable terrain. This complex subject is best summarised from a mountain bikers' perspective as:

- The widest access provision is found in Scotland, where a rider may travel on any trail in a manner determined "responsible use" under the Scottish Outdoor Access Code 2005. It must be remembered that "Responsible Use" means to pass along the trail, and not create or modify the terrain. "Responsible Use" does not give Scots the right to dig trail anywhere.
- England and Wales have a complex Rights of Way (RoW) network which divides access into several categories of pedestrians, horses and cycles, and vehicles. These classifications were applied in 1932 leaving a legacy of legislation which may no longer be appropriate to the terrain. For example: cycles may be denied travel access to some apparently suitable trails, while other permitted rights of way which appear on maps do not exist on the ground. Cyclists have permitted access to some publicly managed forest roads, but this varies with the Freehold ownership and boundaries are not always apparent.
- Public access to land in Northern Ireland is more restricted than any other part of the UK. This is due, in part, to the way in which access to the countryside is governed – through the Access to Countryside Order (NI) 1983. Today, there is a very small public rights of way network (less than 240km) and a higher proportion of the population with land owning rights. Most access is therefore through public land which comprises just over 6% of the total land area, and which mainly caters for walking, horse riding (by permit) and designated off-road cycling trails. Access for mountain biking is only officially allowed on designated trails, these are typically within trail centres based on Forest Service Northern Ireland (FSNI) land but operated through licence with a local council. Several other local arrangements with public and private landowners also exist. FSNI allows walking across its whole estate, and horse riding is available at certain sites with a purchased annual or day permit.



Mountain bikers have been enjoying the UK countryside for over 40 years.

1.1.2
Trail Breakdown by Home Country

Cycling UK's 2016 survey revealed that over three quarters of riders in England and Wales felt the RoW network was unsuitable for mountain biking.

A slightly greater number reported difficulties in creating legal routes due to gaps in the network, with a third saying they cycled illegally on footpaths at least once a week due to the lack of appropriate RoWs. These finding were echoed in public workshops hosted around our country, with areas within the UK National Parks appearing most likely to suffer from conflicting RoW provision.

Cycling UK also lead the 2015 Trails for Wales campaign, calling for increased access to RoWs and public land. This multi-sport campaign appeared to be gaining momentum with Welsh Government, but since the issue of NRW's "Final Access Report" in November 2021 there has been no progress. In April 2023 Cycling UK renewed pressure on Welsh Government with its updated "Trails for Wales – We Can't Afford To Wait" document. Response to this project's surveys suggests legislation review would be highly beneficial to the mountain biking community in many parts of the UK as well as Wales.

Perhaps aided by the confusion and restriction of access to the countryside, the trail centre and pay-to-ride "bike park" models have proved popular across the UK, especially in areas of higher population. These venues provide MTB specific trails, designed to maximise riders' enjoyment by allowing the bike to "flow" through the terrain on dedicated directional tracks without the distraction (and risk) of encountering other users or livestock. Skilled designers will incorporate undulations, bermed (banked) corners, drops and jumps to maximise the play-value of the trail. A well designed MTB trail can provide a lot of enjoyment in a short distance. For this reason, riders have taken to constructing their own trail where official provision is lacking.

Types of Trail

The term "Trail" is used widely across mountain biking and can have several meanings. It can broadly be defined as "a track on which you can ride a mountain bike", but there are several subcategories. This report will use the below terminology throughout:

- Public Rights of Way are shared use tracks which mountain bikes are allowed to use.
- Authorised Trails are tracks approved for mountain bike use by the land manager. They may be designed and constructed professionally, or built by volunteers, but all have an agreement with the land manager for appropriate inspection and maintenance to ensure the safety of riders, 3rd parties and the environment.
- Unauthorised Trails, often referred to as cheeky, wild, informal or unsanctioned trails, are paths or tracks created and used by mountain bikers without official authorisation or planning by land managers. These trails may be constructed by users in a short space of time, or emerge organically as rides repeatedly move through an area, following natural lines or terrain features. They can be highly valued by the local MTB community who often take pride in their location, but they have not been approved by land managers. An agreed management plan can allow such trails to be formally adopted by riders provided they meet specified criteria.
- A Trail Network refers to a location containing several trails.
- A Trail System can link several locations or Trail Networks.

There are also other trails which fall outside of the above categories but have been ridden for decades. These may be described as unofficial trails or desire lines. We will explore several management strategies which may be applied to these trails later in the report.

1.1.2.A MTB Access Provision in the UK

	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
Governing Law	Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW Act)	Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 (LRSA2003)	Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW Act)	Access to the Countryside (Northern Ireland) Order 1983 (ACNI)
KMs of all Rights of Way	267,000km	13,000km	29,800km	less than 240km
KM (%) available to legally ride	42,200km (16%)	99%* *Access may be reasonably denied due to landowner operations.	4,050km (14%)	100%
Total KM MTB Trails (Trail Forks)*	4,415km	5,028km	1,023km	533km
Public Forest Body (PFB)	Forestry England (FE)	Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS)	Natural Resources Wales (NRW)	Forest Service Northern Ireland (FSNI)
KM Waymarked MTB Trail Operated by PFB	1,300km	460km	540km	148km

*This figure includes trails in all categories, including unauthorised.

1.1.3
The Need for a Variety of Trail Grades

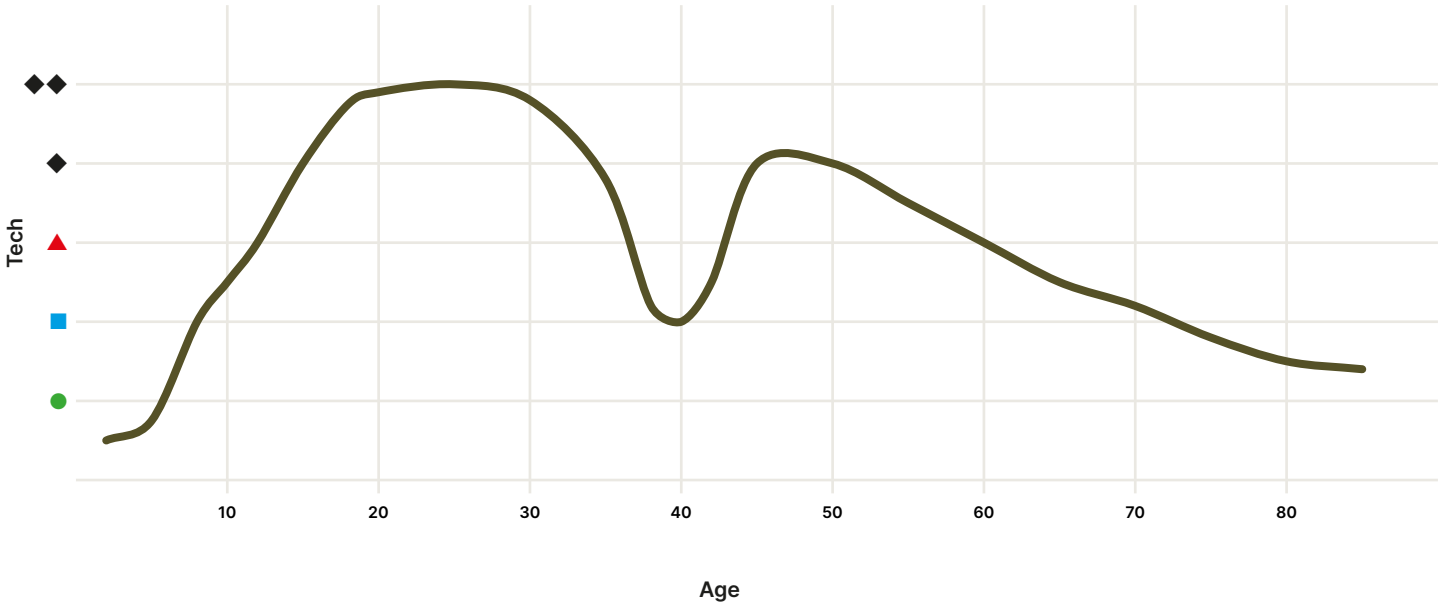
The grading of official mountain bike trails broadly follows systems established in the ski industry, with a range of colours and symbols used to indicate the difficulty of the trail. The systems used vary between continents, with the UK previously following the European model of Green = Easy; Blue = Moderate; Red = Difficult; Black = Severe. Each grade has several criteria such as track width, gradient and size of features such as drops and jumps.

Some bike parks use slightly different systems with multiple "Black Diamonds" to indicate trails of additional severity. At the time of writing, national forest bodies were an updated rating systems to include additional categories for trails more difficult that the previous offerings, and those not constructed to existing standards.

One of the best things about mountain biking is that the wide range of technical trail grades allow riders to enjoy the sport for the whole of their lives. Several different phases may be encountered in this journey:

- Younger childhood needs a safe environment where children can experience gentle yet fun progression within their family group.
- In teenage years, progression is at its most rapid, with a sudden increase in strength and ability. The opportunity to gain mastery of a skill and learn independence, for this age group is highly valuable.
- Entering adulthood, riders consolidate their skillset and may seek greater technical challenges (such as racing), or a wider variety of experience at their given technical level. Many riders in this phase of life are keen to get involved in trail stewardship and to support trail building and development.
- At some point in middle-age, riders may experience a step-change in the amount of time they dedicate to the sport or the risks they are willing to take. At this point the rider still values the physical and mental benefits of mountain biking, but increased time constraints and desire to reduce risk exposure is shown by the demand for less technical trails.
- Later in life, a rider may either increase their time and dedication to previous levels, or return to the sport at a lower level of participation following injury or medical condition. The emergence of ebikes has enabled riders to return to the sport after absence and continue mountain biking following lifechanging injuries or medical conditions which would have been previously impossible. They also can extend a rider's upper age well into retirement – the oldest rider encountered by this project was still enjoying trail centre riding at an inspiring 95 years old.

1.1.3.A The MTB Lifecycle of Participation



The 2015 Outdoor Industries Association report Getting Active Outdoors contains a wealth of research on reasons people engage in outdoor sports, many of which apply to mountain biking. Most interesting for this report is the concept of all outdoor sports having a "Lifecycle of Participation". The Lifecycle of Participation graph shows the author's interpretation on how this may be applied to mountain biking in terms of preferred trail technicality, but it is equally valid to consider frequency of riding or distance covered as the factor to measure participation

To support life-long riding, a trail network needs two key factors:

Progression

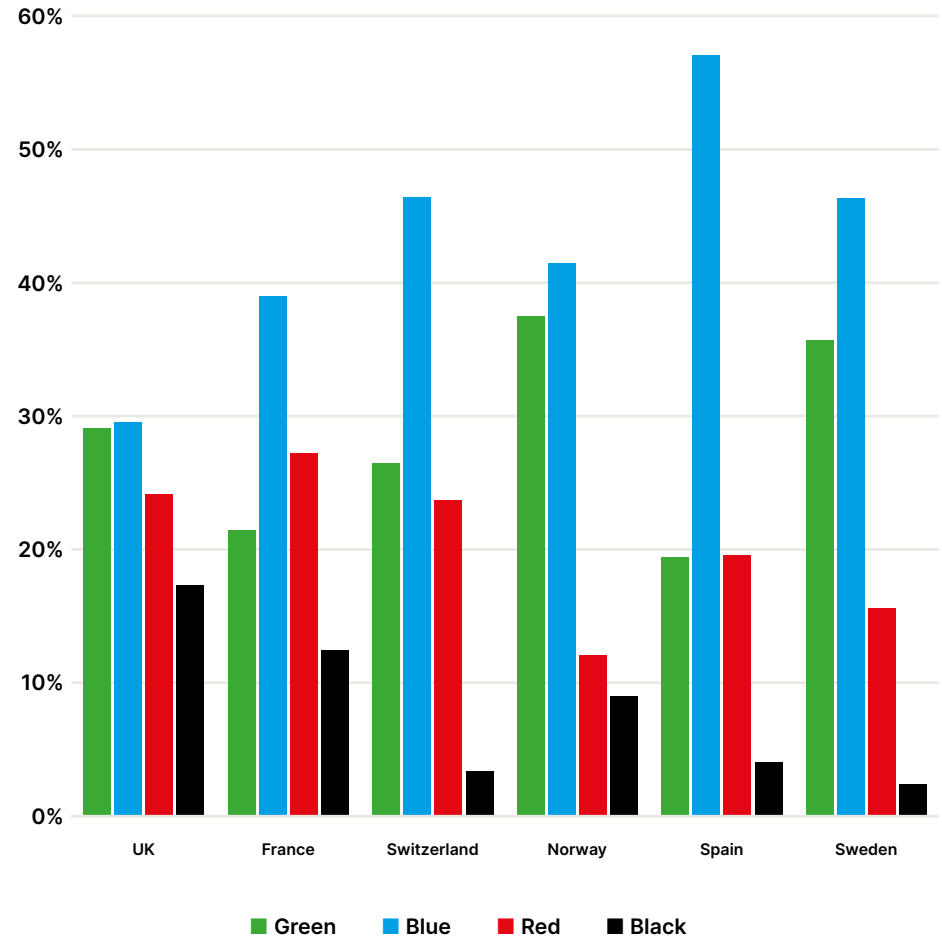
Progression is provided by having a range of trails of increasing grade. This is critical to allow new riders to improve their skills and confidence, so not to feel they are remaining a beginner in the sport. Well designed trails can include "opt-in" features of a higher grade to assist riders' progression, without forcing them to commit to a whole trail of a higher grade.

Variety

Variety, both across the grades and within a given grade is desirable to allow riders to create a route of their choice at a given location. This flexibility is highly valued by riders as it allows uses to choose their trails to match their fitness, mood and desires on the day.

The website Trail Forks is an online trail management tool built around a crowd-sourced and user-moderated database to create a global resource of over 700,000 trails. This large single source of data allows us to make provisional comparisons on trail provision between countries, however due to its use-generated content this data must be taken as indicative and not absolute: E.g. A user's perception of what constitutes a particular trail grade may be governed by their location and experience: A black trail in a lowland forest will not be the same as one found in Alpine mountains.

1.1.3.B Distribution of Trail Grade by Country



This plot shows a useful estimate of the composition of trail networks around Europe.

The different distribution of trail grades in the UK is interesting but not fully understood.

The initial investment required and the need for a higher maintenance budget for blue and red graded trails may have restricted the number of these trails. As identified through several expert interviews and riders' surveys they are essential as an entry point and then for progression.

Many riders enjoy these grades of trails and may never wish to explore more difficult terrain. However, with modern bike technology and the sheer enjoyment of riding modern trails, riders wishing to progress onto Black and Double Black trails, including natural surfaced trails, can so do relatively quickly. We believe the UK's relatively good provision of harder graded trails demonstrates the demand for more technical riding.

Riders surveyed stated the lack of official provision of more technical trails has led to them building their own trails. Whilst this brings land management challenges, it does indicate that riders using this level of trail value the opportunity to give input into how trails are designed and built to progress their riding and the sport.

1.2.1
Introducing Land Management

Except for dedicated trail venues, mountain biking takes place on land with a different primary purpose than just riding bikes.

Except for dedicated trail venues, mountain biking takes place on land with a different primary purpose than just riding bikes. Regardless of business sector, landowners must balance their core operations against a range of additional pressures to maintain a viable business. All decisions on allocation of resources and funding are influenced by moral, legal and financial constraints. Although public forest organisations made up the steering group, the findings of this report can equally be applied to small private landowners and larger bodies with a team of land managers dedicated to overseeing the owners' obligations.

Each public forestry body is a land management organisation responsible for creating and operating Land Management Plans to deliver the policies of that nation's elected government. These include targets for timber production, conservation, and renewable energy development as well as recreation.

Although a layperson can easily identify a timber crop being harvested (Ref. 1.2.1.B), it can be difficult to understand the difference between a forest earmarked for recreation and a similar looking forest set aside for conservation. Many riders engaged with this study reported confusion as to why mountain biking can be promoted in Forest B, but not allowed in an apparently similar Forest C.

Over a decade of public sector cuts has left national forest bodies' budgets severely restricted, and recreation must be seen to be paying its way. While this payment can be measured by direct factors such as car parking and café income, it is vital the value mountain biking adds to society in terms of better physical and mental health, lower obesity rates, improved sickness absence rates, tourism income and community cohesion are not overlooked.

In phase 2 this project will produce a work package to educate policy makers on the benefits of mountain biking and help them identify how it can help their organisation achieve the policies and priorities set by their country's government.

1.2.1.A Timeline of Forest Management and Bicycle Evolution

Forest Management

1919 Forestry commission established. First commercial crop planted.

1930 Seedling stand management.

1940 First thinning of trees.

1960 Second thinning of trees.

1970 Felling for harvest and second crop planted.

1980 Seedling stand management.

1990 First thinning of trees.

2000 Second thinning of trees.

2020 Felling for harvest and replanting.

1920 · 1940 · 1960 · 1980 · 2000 · 2020

Bicycle Evolution

1860 First true bicycle invented by Ernest Michaux and Pierre Lallement, known as the velocipede.

1920 The Kids Bike invented. This design, weighing in at around 65 pounds, mimicked aspects of the motor vehicle as the automobile became more desirable than bikes.

1930 Schwinn adds spring fork and fat tire to handle the abuse of teenage boys. This later became the preliminary design for the mountain bike.

1955 "The Rough Stuff Fellowship" formed as a club for UK cyclists favouring "rougher and less beaten ways".

1970 Several groups of riders in Marin County, California, experiment with modifying Schwinn cruiser bikes for use on forest dirt roads.

1978 First purpose built mountain bike manufactured by Joe Breeze in Marin County. Other manufacturers quickly emerge.

1983 Mountain bike sales begin in the UK.

1989 First UCI Mountain Bike World Cup held in Durango, Colorado with XC and DH race categories. Racing influences MTB design and marketing.

1995 V-brakes and suspension fork design becomes established.

2000 Full suspension frames become established. Frame and component designs split for XC or DH use.

2003–2013 Mountain biking searches for "the middle ground" with several marketing tags between XC and DH racing. New wheel sizes emerge.

2005 Hydraulic disk brakes become commonplace.

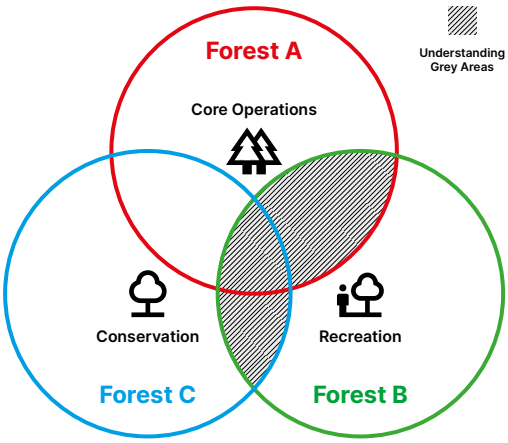
2013 "Enduro Style" riding emerges. First EWS held in Punta Ala.

2013–2019 Period of rapid evolution in all aspects of MTB design. "Enduro" now established as The Middle Ground.

2020 Ebikes become commonplace.

2024 Frame design and wheelsize appear to have consolidated.

1.2.1.B Land Management Priorities Applied to Different Forests



1.2.2
Moral and Legal Obligations

All landowners find themselves at the centre of multiple and sometimes complex and potentially conflicting legal responsibilities whilst going about their daily business. Where example laws are given for England and Wales, corresponding legislation is applicable in Northern Ireland and Scotland. This is omitted only for readability.

- Under UK law (Occupiers' Liability Acts of 1957 and 1984), landowners must take reasonable steps to protect both invited visitors and trespassers from harm whilst on their property.
- The Health and Safety at Work Act (HSW Act 2015) holds the landowner responsible for safety of the public, as well as their workforce, during management operations.
- The landowner is also legally responsible for environmental obligations under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.
- Finally, although it may seem easiest to meet the above laws by excluding the public from the land, landowners must provide access according to the laws of their home country and are under increasing pressure for greater public access.

The Need for a Robust Defence in Court

Lack of understanding of legal precedent in mountain bike case law causes significant anxiety within the Land Management communities. As a claim in this area is most likely to be under civil law, the proportion of blame, and compensation owed, would be determined by a judge. A private business can take out insurance to cover these claims, where as public bodies are "self-insured" with no upper limit on the amount of compensation a court can award in the event of a claim, they reasonably fear the impact of successful claims which could amount to a significant proportion of a public bodies' annual budget. More serious than civil claims, failure to meet environmental and safety laws can potentially expose the organisation to criminal prosecution and individuals to criminal records and custodial sentences.

Balancing Risk and Benefit

Land managers engaging with this project appreciate the benefits visitors get from using their sites, and do not wish to "sanitise" the countryside. In fact, the opposite is true, with all land managers on the steering group following the Visitor Safety Group (VSG) principles of balancing risk and benefit to visitors and keeping as natural an appearance to their estates as practicable.

To make up their legal defence, land managers have a range of tools to prove their MTB trails are fit for purpose. These include:

- Design and build specifications.
- Inspection and maintenance schedules.
- User information provision.
- Risk Assessments and Method Statements (RAMS) for all work being carried out.

Since mountain bikers have expanded the trail network by constructing their own trails, land mangers require similarly robust processes to provide a comparable level of defence in court. At present only a small proportion of volunteer trail groups have been successful in signing a management agreement, often as a result of long and hard work from both parties, with timescales typically in months and years. If formal adoption of trails is required, standardised processes and templates are needed to ease the workload for all involved and produce fair and consistent results. Other longer-term options could include changing legislation to reduce landowner liability, reducing duty of care in relation to risk, and therefore exposure to claims.

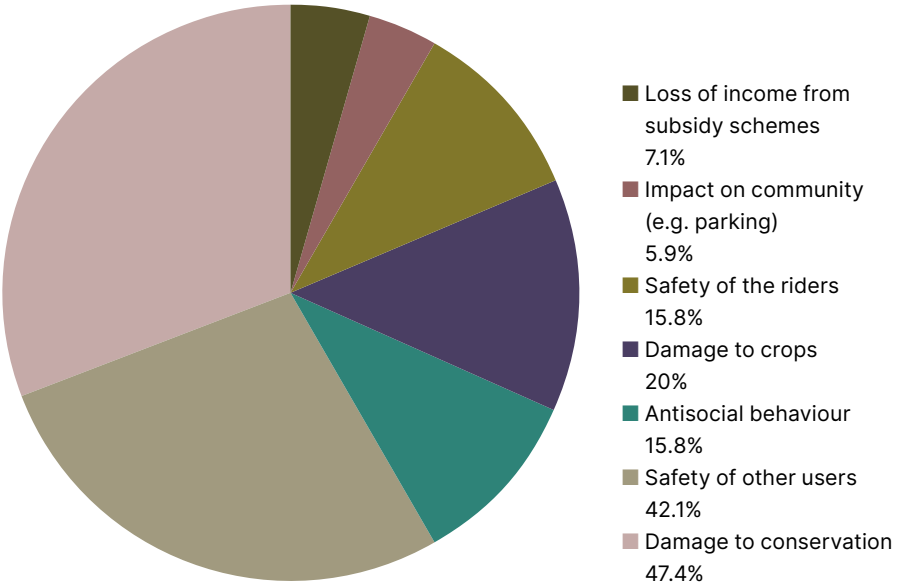


Land managers have a wide range of responsibilities, often over large geographic areas.

1.2.3
Concerns that Need Addressing

On top of their legal constraints, throughout their engagement with the Project, land managers were keen to express their concerns about other impacts mountain biking is having on their land. Initial workshops highlighted environmental damage, safety concerns and rider behaviour as the three highest concerns. This was backed up by the managers' survey (Ref 1.2.3.A), where damage to conservation and safety of 3rd parties made up over 50% of issues considered Extremely Concerning. All these themes and actions to help mitigate them are explored in greater detail later in this report.

1.2.3.A Areas Considered "Extremely Concerning" by Land Managers Surveyed





Many land managers welcome stewardship schemes such as Trash Free Trails. *Image Credit: Forestry England.*

1.3 Opportunities

All National Forest bodies have a variation of "improving access to the countryside" written as part of their national policies:

FLS:

"Maintaining walking and biking trails to promote fun in the outdoors, focussing on improving entry level experiences for everyone to enjoy and gain health benefits"

FE:

"We believe forests enhance people's quality of life by providing places to enjoy watching wildlife, walking, riding bikes or horses and playing among the trees. The Active Forests programme is a small part of what FE does to contribute to the wellbeing of the nation."

NRW:

"We encourage people to get outdoors and connect with nature by promoting the benefits of connecting with nature and the natural environment through looking after sites across Wales where people can go walking, running, bike riding, horse riding and more."

FSNI:

"... to provide public access to forests and protect forest environments, to enhance plant health and standards of production, and to work with partners to deliver public services and promote economic development".

Representatives interviewed pointed out these policies cover many aspects of countryside access, with mountain biking estimated to account for around a quarter of visitor numbers when averaged across all sites (in Forestry England's estate). Land managers acknowledged that some sites, through design or evolution, have become mountain bike hotspots. While many recognised the value that these site bring to the mountain bike community, the need to fit within safety, conservation and operational constraints was stressed by all managers.

In addition to examining the current situation, identifying the work that needs to be done, this report is also announcing the creation of work packages designed to assist land managers and mountain bikers in achieving mutual goals.



National Forest organisations value the benefits of people exploring their landscapes. *Image Credit: Outscape.*



Public forests provide enjoyment for people of all ages and abilities. *Image Credit: British Cycling.*

2.1
What is a Trail?

The term Trail is used widely across the mountain bike world and often gets applied to both short pieces of track and multi-day journeys. For the sake of clarity, we will say:

A Trail – is a relatively short section of track which is ridden for pleasure and forms the highlight of the riding experience. The trail may be official or unofficial as discussed in section 1.1.2.



A named, purpose built trail.

A Route – are the Trails linked together to make up “The Bike Ride”.



Many trails are joined together to form a Route.

2.2
Where Are Trails Found?

For a trail system to be valued by its community, it needs to meet a wide range of needs as well as being a great place to ride. Riders interviewed and surveyed placed a high value on the convenience and connectivity of local trails, allowing them to ride directly from their homes. Naturally, this cannot be achieved in every location, with riders in rural and urban areas having to travel by car or public transport to reach their destinations.

From looking at a wide range of trail locations, we found several recuring themes in typical trail provision style:

	Sanctioned	Unsanctioned
Urban	• Pump track, dirt jumps or urban bike park. • Some urban trail centres.	• Small tracks and jumps on wasteland or edges of parks.
Peri-Urban	• National forest parks with MTB trails. • Dedicated Trail Centres. • Pay-to-Ride bikeparks. • RoW networks directly from urban areas to outskirts. • Active Travel routes to travel from urban centres to outskirts	• Enduro-type trails in forestry and woodland on urban fringe. • Use of footpaths to extend and link the RoW network.
Rural	• National forest parks with MTB trails. • Dedicated Trail Centres. • Pay-to-Ride bikeparks. • Long distance a-to-b "routes" using RoW network • Self-created routes using RoW network	• Enduro-type trails in forestry. • Use of footpaths and private dirt roads.

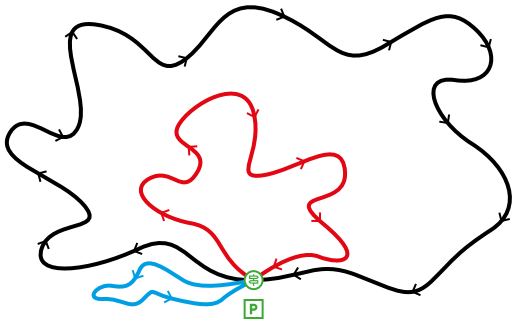


With careful planning, mountain biking can be integrated in the urban environment. *Image Credit: Bike Corris Ltd.*

2.3
How Are Trails Arranged?

Trail network layouts have evolved considerably since the first planned trail centres of the 1990s. Earlier designs favoured loops at set grades whereas more modern networks, built by both professionals and amateurs, allow riders to create their own routes by combining a choice of trails at a variety of grades.

2.3.A The "Loop"



Here riders set out to create a circular route combining several trails to form a route. The highlight of this experience is Journey Undertaken. Original trail centres were laid out following this model.

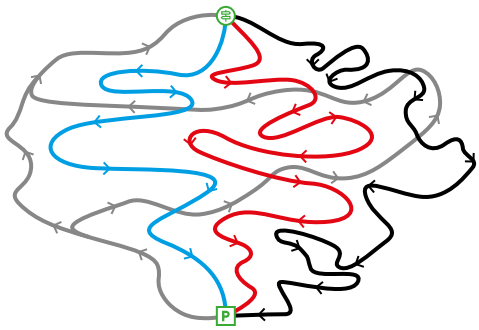
Advantages:
- Sense of journey.
- Ability to take in multiple aspects of scenery and features. Loops can be stacked to allow rider progression.

Disadvantages:
- If each loop is a separate undertaking, riders can feel "I couldn't possibility try the [next hardest grade]"
- Takes up larger amount of space in the forest, affecting more operational areas. More time consuming to inspect and maintain.



Older trail centres offer longer, predefined routes. *Image Credit: Bike Corris Ltd.*

2.3.B The "Ski Piste"



This style involves riding multiple trails in a smaller area. The area may be looped repeatedly, allowing riders to repeat a trail multiple times, or try several at the location. This style focusses more on the technical riding experience than the distance covered or journey undertaken.

Advantages:
- Facility for mixed ability groups to ride together with greater opportunities for riders to progress their skills.
- Occupies a smaller land area, being more convenient for access and maintenance.

Disadvantages:
- Can lack sense of journey or connection with area due to being enclosed in forest.
- Concentrates mountain biking in one place, which may present more sustainability challenges.



More modern sites allow riders to swap between trails and build their own routes. *Image Credit: Bike Corris Ltd.*

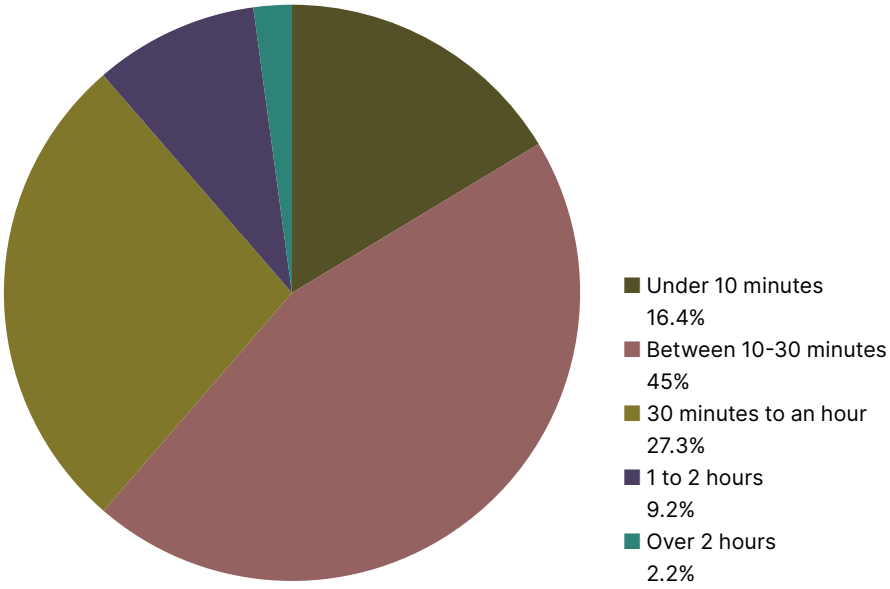
2.4
Getting to the Trails

"Over 60% of riders surveyed travelled less than half an hour to access their local trails"

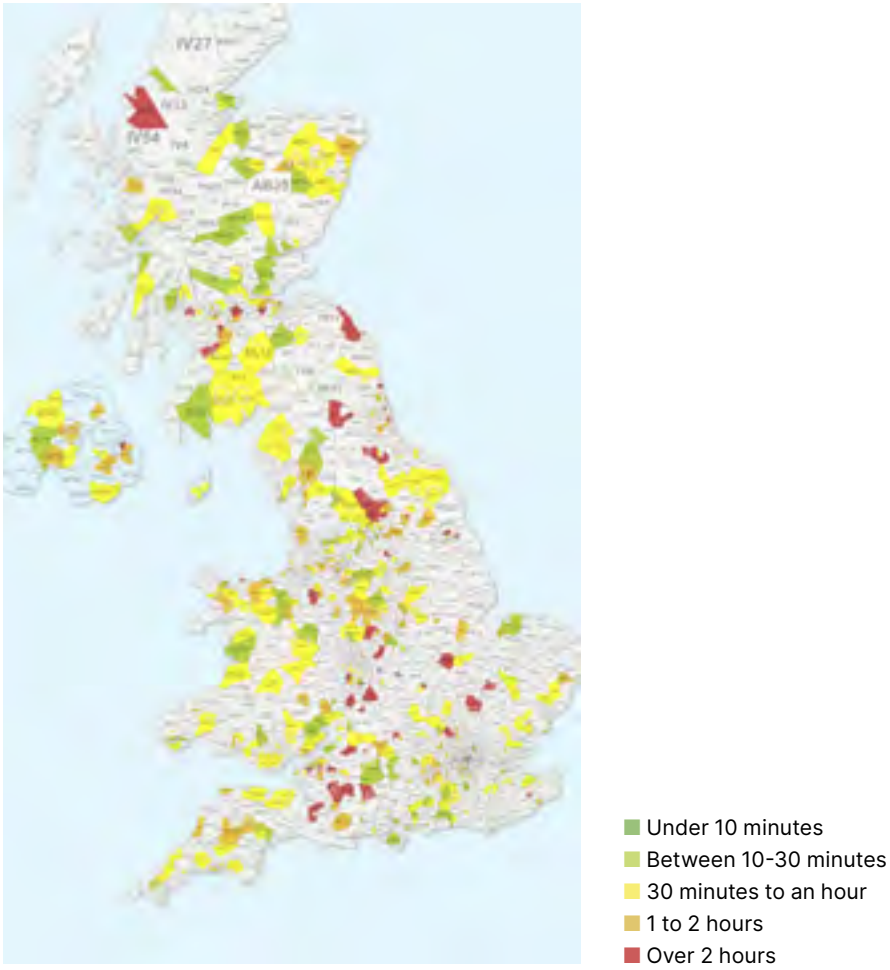
"A further quarter travelled between 30 minutes and an hour"

"39% of those surveyed rode from their door. 58% travelled by car or van"

2.4.A National Average Travel Time to Local Trails



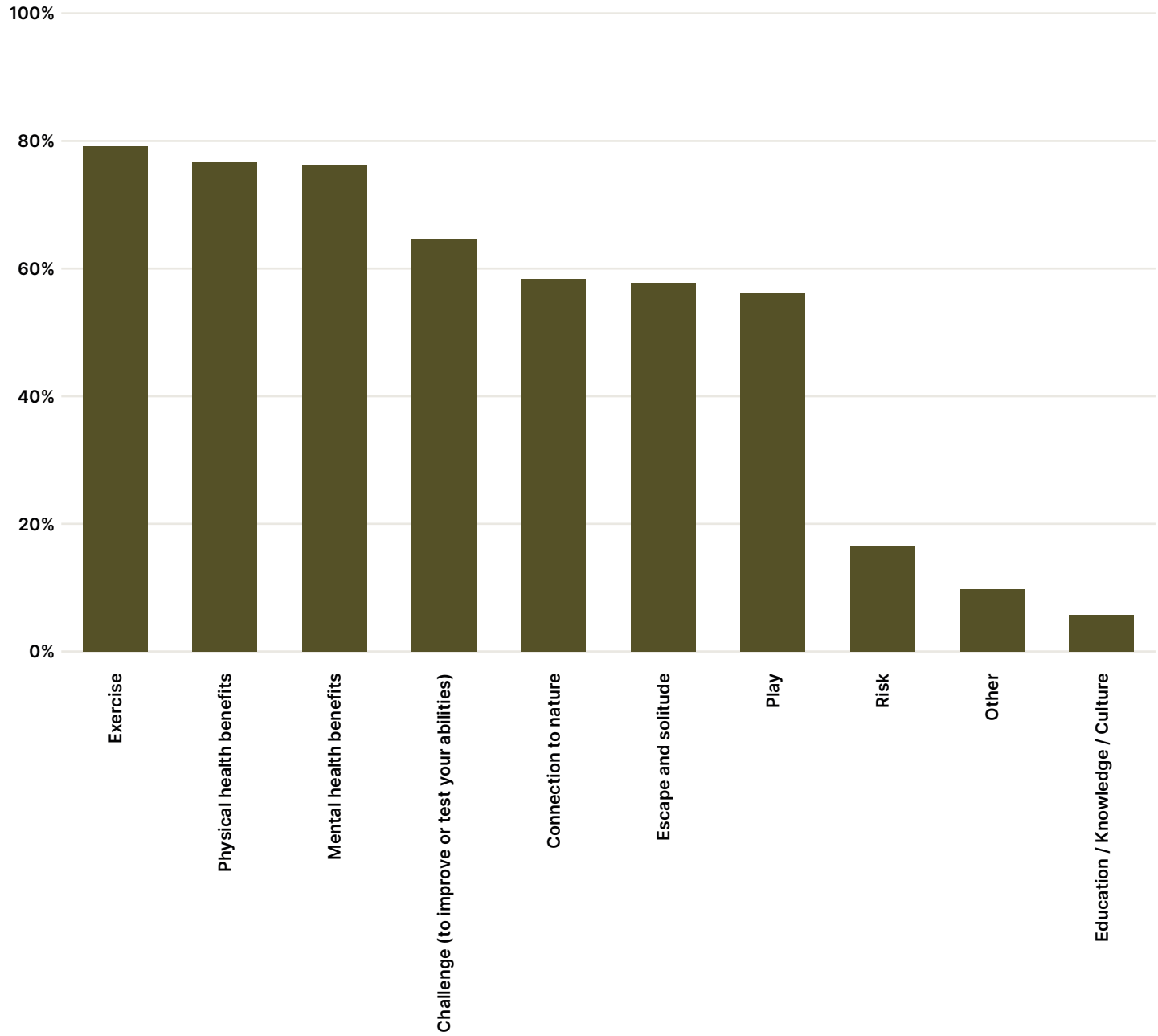
2.4.B Map Showing Travel Times Across the UK by Postcode



2.5
What we like About Our Trails

The association between people and place varied across the UK, but the most positive feelings were expressed for sites with good social opportunities. Kids' clubs, group rides, maintenance days and simply socialising at cafés were all engaging additions to the site. These trail networks catered for a wide range of rider ability and ages, promoting riders mixing outside of their own preferred niche.

2.5.A What makes this riding location good or unique in your opinion?



Place Association
Dr Tom Campbell BSc (Hons), PhD, FHEA, an Associate Professor in sport and exercise science and sustainability theme lead at the Mountain Bike Centre of Scotland explains:

"Place attachment broadly refers to the emotional and cognitive bonds that a person forms with a physical location and is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon. The current project measured subdimensions of place identity (the meanings, emotions and sense of belonging associated with a riding spot) and place dependence (the ability of a place to meet individual needs for MTB-related recreation). In general, UK mountain bikers reported very high levels of place identity and slightly lower, but still relatively high, levels of place dependence. In essence, this suggests that while regular riding spots may not always be considered the "best possible" riding location (in the world), mountain bikers still feel very attached to them due to their ability to promote a sense of identity and purpose. This is significant as there is an increasing body of evidence to suggest that place attachment is positively associated with both wellbeing and pro-environmental behaviours."

The lack of dependency on a given spot is reflected in only 25% of survey respondents reporting active involvement with trail maintenance. Just over another quarter stated that lack of time and confusion over work permitted are the main reasons preventing them doing so. When asked what would help engage them in trail maintenance, the majority expressed a desire to join organised dig days where they would be guided into appropriate tasks.

Volunteers who had built successful relationships with their land managers reported being trusted to carry out a range of tasks. Looking at the breakdown of volunteer tasks, we found nearly 2/3rds of the tasks reported were to improve ride quality (clearing vegetation, maintaining drainage and features). Riders' pride in their sites was reflected in litter picking making up almost 20% of the responses. Trash Free Trails have been instrumental in empowering communities to care for their trails.

Although almost all trails referred to by survey participants were "free at the point of use", riders showed clear understanding that maintenance requires funding, with over 75% stating they would be willing to pay.

Riders were also asked what they thought would help the sustainability of their local trails. Results showed riders are willing to adopt more sustainable trail management methods and are open to guidance on land managers' operations, conservation and expected behavior.

What we ride. And what we want more of
Despite the perceived multitude of niches within the sport, riders across the UK reported enjoying a wide variety of trail types. Survey data showed a close correlation between the "available trails" and "trails chosen to ride", suggesting riders appreciated variety when it was available.

When asked "what type of trails would you most like more of", the current popularity of enduro was reflected by the highest demand for these trails. However the love of variety was shown by strong demand for additional Bike Park, Trail Centre and Rights of Way style riding throughout the country.

Quote

Land Manager one-to-one interview, Summer 2024

"We need to be working together to recognise good practice, to encourage legitimate riding and support the local mountain biking community. We need to find out how can we better communicate with these groups. The difficulty is finding the time and resources to create and maintain a quality relationship where open discussion is welcome and people with a range of views can take part to work towards a site that is in good ecological condition and cared for."

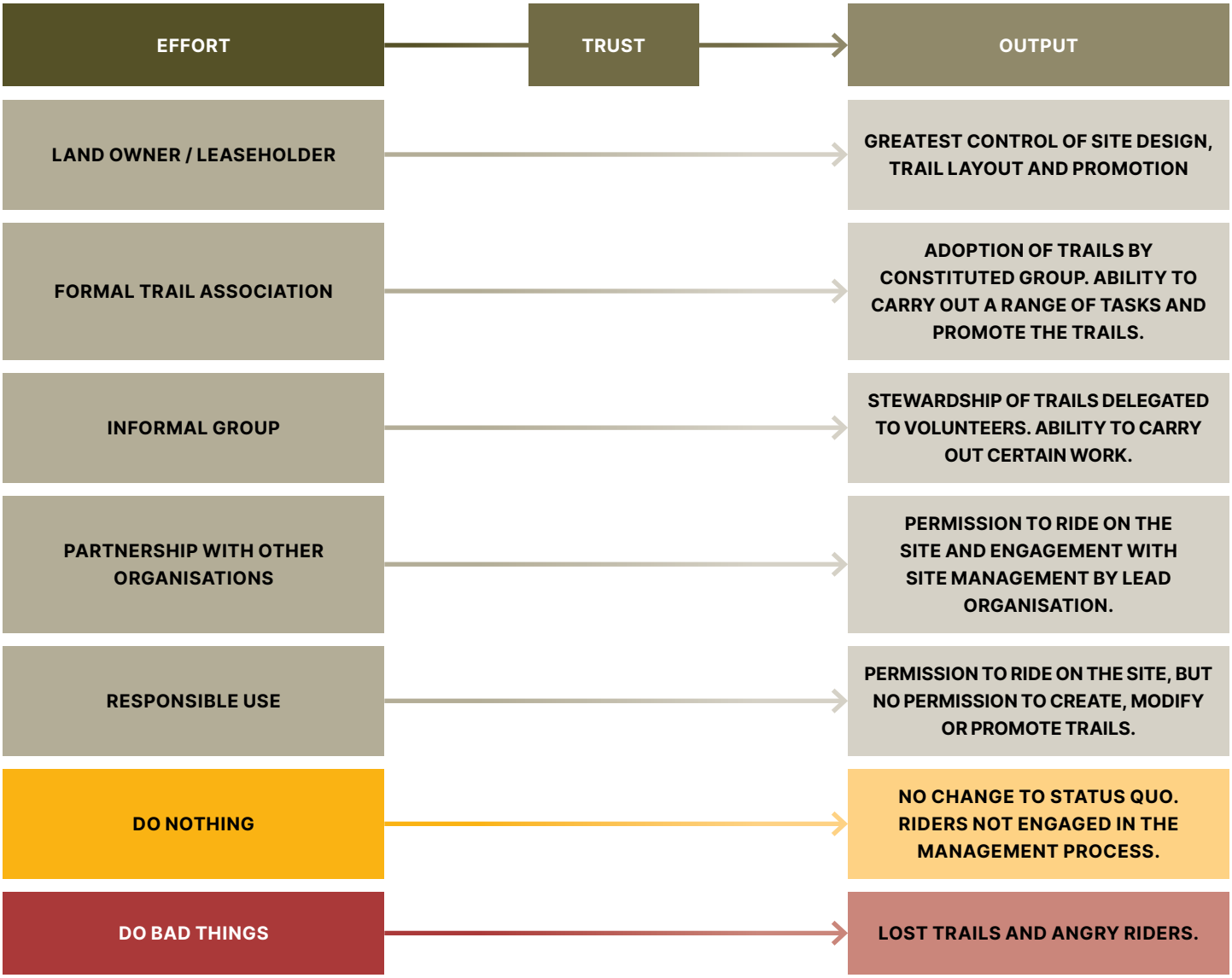


Working together to maintain trails can connect and unite communities.
Image Credit: Cavehill MTB Club

2.6
How Trails Are Managed

Visiting sites across the UK revealed a wide range of trail management models being used to good effect (Ref 2.6.A). As the workshops and interviews continued, it became increasingly clear that there is no “one size fits all” solution. Instead we found a range of tools being applied, with the appropriate level of management varying from site to site. It quickly became clear that all management models were built on trust and clear communication between the mountain bike community and land management team responsible. All parties were keen to express that this trust took time to build and must be cultivated and maintained.

2.6.A The Management Model Hierarchy



Managers showed a strong desire to move away from ignoring or tolerating mountain biking and, to provide the most robust defence in court in the event of a claim, use management methods as similar as possible to their own (Ref 2.6.B). Of the 34 Trail Associations to respond, 67% reported successful dealings with their land manager with 44% having secured adoption of their trails through agreement or permission with the land manager.

However, there are several examples of other management models such as partnership working and "trail stewardship". A further 14% of responding associations had reached a less formal position with permission or stewardship agreements in place.

Looking into the Other responses we found a mixture of established Trail Associations awaiting progress with the land managers and informal groups unsure how to make progress.

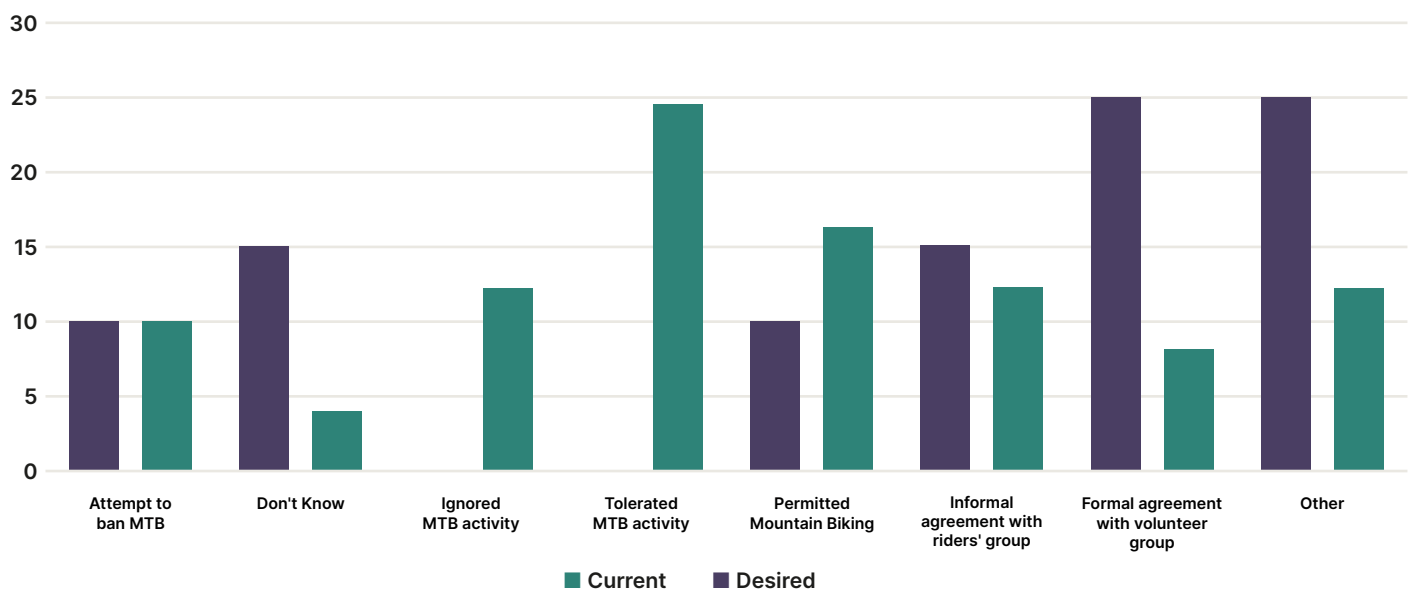
This project will examine all management options with the critical elements being to understand the scope and limitation of each model, and how the characteristics of any site determine which one suits it best. Each site will have individual rider characteristics such as user numbers, proportions of locals or visitors, and media exposure. The site manager's constrains surrounding conservation and operational factors, and personal risk tolerance will also be a significant driver to the model required.

Quote

Land Manager one-to-one interview, Summer 2024

"Engaging the local community in trail development and maintenance builds support and ensures the sustainability of the trails."

2.6.B Current and Desired Management Strategies



The Effect of Media Exposure

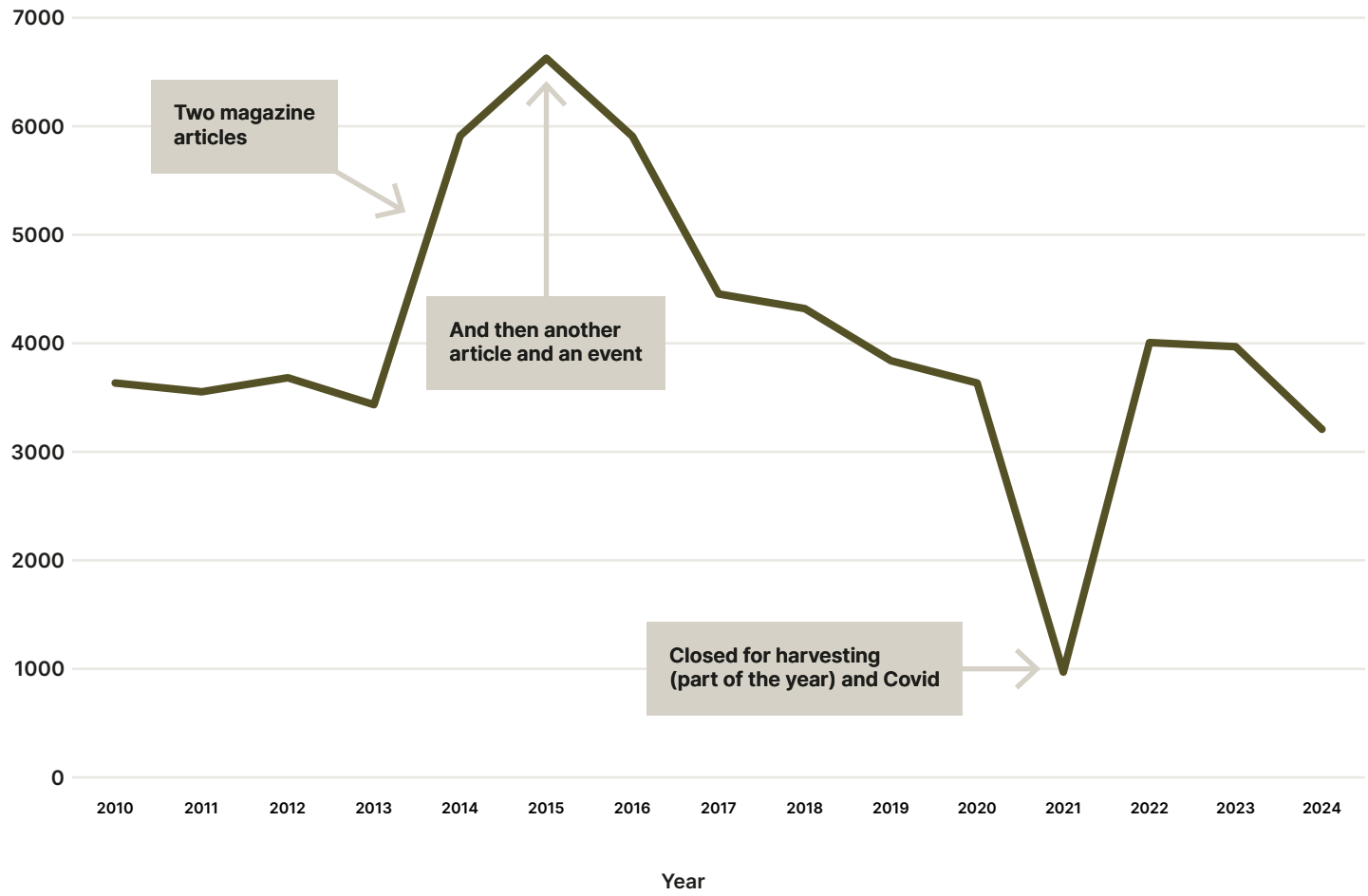
When considering management models, we must remember all sites are live entities which can change in character and use, meaning the most appropriate model can change. E.g. If a race is held and the site becomes massively more popular, increased management and maintenance may be required; if tree disease become an issue, the site may need additional mitigation measures or alteration. The mountain bike community, especially social media creators, need to understand the impact they are creating on user numbers and attitudes by exposing trails to a global audience.

Quote

Rural Police Officer one-to-one interview, Summer 2024

"After media exposure we suddenly have people travelling from quite far afield to try out these trails. The issue is there is not the infrastructure for people to drive and park up. That's where we start to see conflict."

2.6.C Rider Figures Showing Media Exposure Impact at Cwm Rhaeadr Trail



2.7
Where Is Help Required?

To determine how trails could be made more sustainable and secure, the many elements needed to facilitate effective trail management were examined through surveys and interviews with key stakeholders.

Four themes emerged:

- Policy: Organisations have a stated position on mountain biking as part of their recreation offering in a given strategic period.
- Process: Organisations needing to have written pathways to follow to enable the provision and management of trails on their land.
- Practical: Delivering the training and providing the materials and equipment required to allow groups to carry out safe and effective management of trails.
- People: Underpins all the above. For any project to succeed, it is essential to bring together the right mix of people with the commitment, skills, knowledge, aptitude, training and expertise to be successful.

Land managers displayed strong preference for help with the People theme, with Processes also having high demand. Practical advice was less strongly sought after, being viewed as something that would come in the later stages of development. It is encouraging to see the land management community wanting to learn more about the needs of mountain bikers, and this will be provided through a dedicated work package in phase 2.

Trail Associations responded with Practical and Process themes emerging most strongly with many expressing concerns with the pace of progress in their dealings with land managers. Land managers also stated they lacked time and resource within their organisation to deliver a rapid response. This slow response could be due to only 51% of organisation reported having existing processes to follow. Other challenging areas highlighted by trail associations were getting permission to use the land and working around conversation constraints.

General riders expressed a desire to help, but asked for organisation and leadership to feel comfortable getting involved.

The final part of the survey asked land managers how the mountain bike community could help improve its interaction and image across the board.

2.7.A Top 5 Ways Mountain Bikers Can Help Land Managers

Rank	Field
1	Have better respect for the environment
2	Be able to disseminate and respect land managers' requests
3	Improve interactions with other site users
4	Have reliable points of contact for communications
5	Hold public liability insurance for any trails created

Quote

Land Manager one-to-one interview, Summer 2024

"Educating users about responsible trail use and the importance of sustainability and security promotes a positive trail experience."

2.8
Right, Wrong, or Making the Best of It?

All land managers stated any project within their organisations must be compatible with the three pillars of sustainability: Economic, Environmental and Social.

In terms of economic sustainability, riders across the UK gave many examples of previously popular trails suffering from neglect, highlighting the need for properly funded maintenance plans to be part of the planning and design criteria. This was echoed by bike park operators and professional trail constructors who stated maintenance was critical to rider experience and safety.

For Environment and Social sustainability, land managers expressed an initial preference towards having a single set of criteria to determine if a trail is "right" for its environment. Further discussion revealed that one list would not capture the complexities of the situation, and the steering group moved in favour of a trail needing three factors to be in harmony for it to meet Environmental and Social criteria:

- Place: The trail must be sited in a suitable landscape to provide good ride quality, without causing undue negative impact on conservation, other users and site operations.
- Time: The trail must be used at an appropriate time in the landscape's lifecycle. For example, a trail may be closed during timber harvesting operations. Some trails are more suitable to permanence, whereas others may have a limited lifespan to coincide with other land uses.
- People: Any project must have the collaboration of the right representatives from each affected group, with riders as users of the trails being a key consideration. If the trail is not right for the users, then no matter how good its construction, riders will simply go elsewhere.

MTB experts and land managers agreed that the concept of "right" is fluid and constantly changing: For example, the discovery of a protected species. It may not be possible to achieve the perfectly "right" solution in every case and the best-compromise may be required. Phase 2 will include case studies to examine not just what has worked, but where compromise was needed to make each management method successful.



A community organisation must be able to evolve with the trails and people it supports. *Image Credit: Bike Corris Ltd.*

2.9 Insurance

The question of insurance was raised by all parties, especially the self-insured public forest bodies. All recognise that mountain biking has inherent risks and there is the need for appropriate insurance cover, both for riding the trails and for trail management across the levels introduced in section 2.6. By clarifying what each level of trail management entails, this project will help insurers to understand the risks involved and provide appropriate cover. This space is evolving rapidly and will form part of future work.



For insurers to provide cover, risks must be understood and managed effectively. *Image Credit: Bike Corris Ltd.*

“Mountain biking offers freedom from the daily grind like nothing else”





3.1
The History of MTB "Governance"

"How can anyone govern a country with 246 varieties of cheese?" Charles de Gaulle

Early mountain bike pioneers were closely involved with 1970's Californian Counterculture, whose art and anarchy had a great influence on the young sport. Ever since, "governance" has been considered a dirty word, as MTB Pioneer Gary Fisher explains:

"With those fat balloon tyres, we have this incredible golden key to go wild and get lost. It was back to that mantra of "No Cars, No Cops, No Concrete", and not many cares about anything else."

The sport's early period was marked by a sense of freedom and exploration, but as it began to attract mainstream attention, larger brands entered the scene and professional racing drove product development and marketing focus from the 1990's onwards. Recently the cycle industry has returned its focus to riding offroad by creating the "gravel" category of bicycle for use on less technical offroad terrain.

Sporting Governance

Leadership of mountain biking varies across the UK, with British Cycling and its subsidiaries responsible for Wales, England and Scotland. Northern Ireland comes under Cycling Ireland and Cycling Ulster. These National Governing Bodies (NGBs) have long histories, with many mergers and splits along the way.

All NGBs have strong sporting focus, organising racing at national, regional and local levels, and creating talent development pathways for athletes to succeed at international level with great success.

They also have substantial programmes to increase participation in cycling. British Cycling's "Places to Ride" scheme has invested £2.8m in mountain bike facilities over 5 years, creating 23 trails and 49 BMX and Pump Tracks. Sheffield Hallam University calculated the Social value generation in from these facilities to be £2.26m in 12 months.

Along with investment programmes, the NGBs also run engagement schemes such as women-only Breeze in The Forest MTB rides and family friendly Festiva (bike festival) programmes to enable children, women and under-represented communities to get involved with the sport.

The broad and varied nature of recreational mountain biking makes it difficult to place under a single governance model. There are several bodies working in this space approaching the sport from different angles, but there is no single organisation taking the lead. E.g. In a recent case in Wales, five main organisations organised a joint letter to the Welsh Government with 90+ signees to voice concern about the potential impact of NRW funding cuts to trail provision.

This split leadership has led to confusion among landowners over who to contact to enter discussions with mountain bikers, with over 85% of land managers surveyed saying a reliable communication channel would be very or extremely useful.

Recreational Governance

Scottish Cycling also have a sport development focus, however in response to challenges between the MTB community and land managers in the late 2000s they worked with Scottish government and all the national agencies involved in mountain biking to create a 'Framework for Scottish Mountain Biking'. This pioneering Framework contains three themes of promoting tourism, facilitating international sporting success and improving the health and wellbeing of the population.

Scottish Cycling were provided with seed grant funding, and together with partners formed Developing Mountain Biking in Scotland (DMBinS) to oversee the delivery of the Framework. Over its 15 years, DMBinS has successfully delivered the Framework and advanced its delivery to a national strategy for Scottish mountain biking.

This strategy supports organisational thinking and delivery, providing a rationale for investment to help the whole industry grow in a sustainable manner. The work of DMBinS and partners in delivering the five themes of the strategy (Trails, Destinations, Health, Sport and Innovation) has helped Scottish mountain biking grow to contribute £252m per annum of Gross Value Added (GVA) to the Scottish economy, increased participation to 2.8m trips per annum on a mountain bike, and Scottish riders achieve on the world stage.

In 2022 DMBinS was recognised for its work in supporting Trails Associations by International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA Europe), being named the most outstanding 'National Trails Association' that year.

Mountain biking in Northern Ireland is governed by Cycling Ireland, and regional subsidiary Cycling Ulster. It uses a club model to facilitate racing and kids' MTB clubs and can strike local agreements with councils for clubs. However the organisation has a limited budget with few paid staff, and faces the difficulty of operating across 2 jurisdictions with differing priorities. There have been difficulties with forestry management on both sides of the border in terms of access for recreation and racing, but it is hoped with the recent return of devolved government to NI things will improve.



NGBs have offered many programmes encourage underrepresented groups, such as Go Girls.



Adaptive technology allows more people to enjoy the trails.



Governing Bodies provide support to the sport all levels from newcomers to elite athletes.

Image Credits: British Cycling

3.2
Organisations in the Governance Space

Group 1 Sporting Governance

Cycling Ireland (& Cycling Ulster)

Established: Current form 2007. Historic line traceable to 1878.

Advantages:

- Club model facilitates racing and kids' clubs.
- Has achieved Stewardship trail management agreement via club at Rostrevor trail centre.
- Small government so easier access to politicians.
- Ability to strike local agreements with councils.

Disadvantages:

- Limited overall budget and paid staff, relies heavily on volunteers to deliver programmes.
- Governance can only reflect what its members inform it. Does membership reflect all riders adequately?
- Traditionally focused on road/track and only recently broadening to focus on other disciplines.
- No current remit for operating rider constructed trails.
- Has had difficulties in engagement with forestry management on both sides of the border in terms of access for recreation and racing.
- Currently does not appear to represent small independent groups in engagement with land managers.
- Lack of devolved government has slowed/ stopped progress until very recently.

Beicio Cymru (formerly Welsh Cycling)

Established: 2002

Advantages:

- Recent relaunch with greater grassroots focus including "Festiva" family friendly events.
- Work with Sport Wales to help strategic investment into cycling infrastructure in all disciplines, including mountain biking.
- Smaller size and devolved status may increase organisational flexibility.

Disadvantages:

- Had MTB Development Officers developing clubs and talent pathways as recently as 2019, but no longer has human resource available for this.
- Historically not a large player in the mountain bike space, but becoming more involved via the Festiva (bike festival) programme.
- Governance can only reflect what its members inform it. Does membership reflect all riders adequately?

British Cycling

Established: 1988

Advantages:

- Size and establishment.
- "The Governing Body" seen as expert point of contact by land managers and third-party stakeholders.
- Established entry level and elite rider programmes.
- Provider of coaching and leader training, and insurance at all levels.
- Works with Sport England to help strategic investment into cycling infrastructure in all disciplines, including mountain biking, via the Places to Ride scheme.

Disadvantages:

- Size and history can create organisational inertia.
- Perceived road and track bias by MTB community.
- Governance can only reflect what its members inform it. Perceived lack of representation of the "typical rider".

Scottish Cycling
Established: 1952

Advantages:
- History of supporting pioneering mountain bike initiatives including Scottish Mountain Bike Leaders Association and DMBinS.
- Support for Scottish national race series' SXC and SDA.
- Delivering Rock Up & Ride – an initiative to inspire children into cycling by providing fun MTB & BMX sessions and providing bikes to those who can't afford them.
- Supported many young athletes to go on to the British Cycling athlete development programmes.
- Work with Sport Scotland to help strategic investment into cycling infrastructure in all disciplines, including mountain biking.

Disadvantages:
- Perceived as a road and track based organisation by some as it was founded by clubs from those disciplines.
- Does not run its own individual membership product, rather counts British Cycling members that are based in Scotland as its membership base. This can lead to confusion of its role.
- Clubs are the membership of Scottish Cycling and support to clubs is prioritised through its funding allocation from Sport Scotland.

Group 2 Recreational Governance

Cycling UK (formerly the Cyclists Touring Club CTC)
Established: 1878

Advantages:
- Long history of advocating successfully for cycle access to the countryside.
- Creator of several long distance offroad journeys, the latest being the 2022 Traws Eryri in North Wales.
- Contributor to transport planning.
- Provider of insurance.
- Provider of basic cycle training.

Disadvantages:
- More road and transport focused with no clear policy for mountain biking.

Developing Mountain Biking in Scotland (DMBinS)
Established: 2009

Advantages:
- Works to deliver a National Strategy.
- Internationally respected.
- Creates network of key stakeholders.
- Negotiation and solution focussed.
- Regional staff to deliver projects.

Disadvantages:
- Model potentially restricted to certain size of country / area / population.
- Relies on annual grant funding for national and regional posts – this is time consuming and is fragile.

Walk Wheel Cyclet Tust (formerly Sustrans)
Established: 1977

Advantages:
- Strong record in cycling advocacy and policy influence.
- Provider of toolbox of cycling resources for design and planning professionals.
- Facilitator of the National Cycle Network.
- Recognise the need for better connection of people to green and public space.

Disadvantages:
- Primarily road and transport focused.
- Do not focus on the progression from cycling for travel, to cycling for sporting pleasure.

UK MTB Trail Alliance
Established: 2023

Advantages:
- Generates excitement in the MTB community about "something new".
- Grassroots base in touch with engaged enthusiast mountain bikers "on the ground"
- Online platform and monthly Zoom meetings for networking and knowledge sharing.
- Forming an umbrella organisation to bring together trail associations, informal trail groups and bike parks across the UK.

Disadvantages:
- Voluntary structure risks resilience and capacity.
- Yet to develop formal membership structure to act on behalf of others, but currently in the process of registering as a charity.
- Not recognised as "expert" by some land management stakeholders, who expressed preference for dealing with NGBs.

Group 3 Other Governance

Bicycle Association
Established: 1973 (Traceable to 1890)

Advantages:
- Consumer focussed.
- Large reach into the cycle industry.
- Provider of training pathways for the industry
- Could leverage funding from industry.

Disadvantages:
- Focussed on supporting retail, not use of bicycles.
- Not mountain bike specific.
- No funding distribution pathways to support trails projects.

IMBA Europe
Established: 2012

Advantages:
- International cooperation on advocacy and trail development.
- Provision of training for volunteers.
- Wide range of resources available.

Disadvantages:
- Centralised European focus needs "translating" to each UK home nation.

MB Wales

Established: 2004

Advantages:

- Set up as a Community Interest Company (CIC) to draw down funding, with Directors and a Steering Group overseeing investment.
- Has previously acted as the voice of the mountain bike sector in Wales.
- Direct links to the Welsh Government.
- Website promoting Wales trail centres, bike parks approved trails.

Disadvantages:

- Irregular funding limits investment in trails
- Has lacked leadership and governance in recent years, limiting its reach and relevance for the sector.
- No clear strategy for developing MTB.

Outdoor Industries Association (OIA)

Trade body for manufacturers, retailers and others providing products and services for the outdoor leisure pursuits market. Established: 2009

Advantages:

- Understanding of physical and mental health benefits.
- Discusses industry issues at governmental level.
- Feed into National Strategies ie. Sports Strategy.

Disadvantages:

- Not clear how MTB would fit within in the structure at present (Who would join to represent MTB?).



Formal trail development can produce durable and beautiful places to ride.

3.3
What is Good Governance?

The governance of mountain biking in the UK is a rapidly evolving space, with the need for advocacy, provision, pathways and sporting management. All interviewed stakeholders identified areas where good governance at national, regional and local levels can help support both volunteers and land managers in a range of areas to assist collaborative trail management.

How Good Governance Can Provide Support

Policy

- User representation and advocacy (ie need for provision and access).
- Define ethics for the sport.
- Promote sustainable growth and diversification.
- Create clear structures to work within.

Process

- Standardised Regulations ie grades and management templates.
- Funding and Resource Allocation.
- Collaborative Efforts and Partnerships.
- Environmental Protection and Sustainability.

Practicalities

- Training, Education and Outreach.
- Facilitate Community Engagement and Participation.
- Technological Integration.
- Conflict Resolution.

Quotes

MTB Key Stakeholder interview, Summer 2024

"Engaging the local community in governance processes ensures that the needs and preferences of local users are considered."

"Partnerships with stakeholders help pool resources and knowledge, leading to better trail management and user satisfaction."

"Outreach efforts help build a sense of community and encourage users to take ownership of the trails."

3.4
Governance Examples from Other Sports

Land managers described good experience when dealing with National Governing Bodies of other sports. The below NGBs were recommended as examples of good practice in communications between the land manager and participants in the sport. This project will investigate these more thoroughly as part of its second phase.

The British Mountaineering Council (BMC)

Representing the climbing community, the BMC has salaried and voluntary officers who engage in access negotiations across the country. The organisation disseminates access information: For example, BMC provide live information via website on nesting seasons and the climbing routes that will be inaccessible due to nesting birds.

Several land managers across the UK cited BMC as a good example of an NGB providing the information and ethical guidance to allow its members to be effective in self-regulating and self-policing access to time-sensitive sites (ie bird nesting areas).

The British Horse Society (BHS)

Represents all equestrians in the UK and coordinates around 70 Equestrian Access Groups who campaign for greater countryside access for horse users at a local level.

The BHS website has a range of useful information including advice on accessing the Rights of Way network and the Defence Training Estate.

Multiple land managers cited the BHS as being knowledgeable and easy to contact when stakeholder input was sought.

The Ramblers

Campaigns for upkeep and expansion of the RoW network in England and Wales, with active engagement and advocacy at national and local levels. Recognises the benefits of walking to society's health and wellbeing and is actively campaigning for greater countryside access closer to homes. The Ramblers' website contains good explanations of current access law, and reasons behind their campaigning for improvements.

Land managers' experience with Rambler's Association inputs to consultation processes varied across the country, but knowledge of the group as a point of contact was noted.

Paddle UK

Umbrella organisation representing all self-powered watercraft (kayaks, canoes, paddleboards) across the UK. Negotiates access to waterways at local and national level and campaigns for greater rights of navigation. Currently embarking on a 4-year strategy "To encourage everyone to go paddling; for enjoyment, health, challenge and achievement."

Referenced by a few members of land management whose site consultation has included water users.

4.1
What Mountain Biking Can Be

“Politics is the art of what is possible”
Otto von Bismark (1815 – 1898)

The UK Trails Project looks to a future where mountain biking can play an even greater role in improving people’s lives through widening opportunities to engage in the sport. We want more people to choose to cycle, as this improves the health and wellbeing of the nation through exercise and connection to nature.

The benefits of cycling to riders’ mental and physical health are well documented in previous studies by British Cycling and Cycling UK, and were reiterated by comments the survey received:

Quote

Rider’s Survey, 2024

“I work a corporate job so getting out of the house/ office and into the hills/woods takes me away from modern life and helps me slow down and connect with nature.”

“I love to ride trails that test my abilities in beautiful surroundings of the Peak District. They are much appreciated by the local riding community.”

“The trails bring together a community from all walks of life, together under a common pursuit of connection and belonging.”

To increase these benefits, it is essential that we build and maintain a sustainable and secure trail network with varied, well mapped trails which integrate into strategic locations in people’s lives. The wider the appeal and suitability of the network, the more opportunities it can provide a broad diversity of users. A well designed and managed network will cater equally well for those entering the sport or continuing into their retirement, as well as those at the top of their game. The ability of trails to progress a riders’ skills and offer the opportunity to return for future challenges is essential to maintain appeal, both in the venue and the sport.

By focussing on riding for fun and improving the access to trails from home, mountain biking can help increase overall cycling participation figures by changing the motivational driver from “I suppose I should ride” to “I want to ride”. We hope this will help increase the number of people travelling by bike, bringing the secondary benefits of urban traffic reduction, reduced pollution and improved health to the nation.

Quote

Trail Association one-to-one interview, Summer 2024

“Fostering a sense of community and encouraging social interactions among users creates a positive and engaging environment.”

4.2
Benefits of Well-Managed Trail Networks

A well-managed trail network that meets the three pillars of sustainability (environmental, social, economic) is more likely to be appreciated by users, resulting in more visiting riders, and a greater number of return visits.



A well-planned trail system connects riders with the communities. *Image Credit: Bike Corris Ltd.*

Environmental sustainability can be achieved by working within established land management plans to take account of habitats and conservation areas, and to avoid areas earmarked for planned forest operations. Good management of how people enter and use a site is also critical to avoid users causing damage, for example by shortcutting through protected areas.

Good social sustainability considers how the trail is designed and maintained. If a voluntary model is used, there must be enough volunteers to keep up with the workload the design and rider numbers dictate. In addition, if the venue is likely to attract visitors, proper parking provision must be planned to avoid creating tensions with local community.

Economic sustainability plans how the trail will be paid for, both in construction cost and operational revenue. Careful integration with local community facilities such as housing, cafés and parks can build can help build an income stream from both local users of and benefactors from the trail.

Except for trail centres and private bike parks, the UK trail network has mostly evolved without dedicated planning and design. This is particularly true of wild trails constructed in the Covid19 lockdown era, when restrictions forced amateur trail developers to create lines on hillsides and woodland that would not have been found suitable for development had the full process taken place. The fact people have taken trail building into their own hands demonstrates the demand and social value of networks to a community.

Across the UK volunteers have engaged with land managers to try and protect these networks by achieving some type of agreement. The efforts the volunteers and land managers who have pioneered this work must be recognised and applauded. However, positive results have been reported to take many years to achieve, and many more volunteers reported that initial successful progress had become thwarted by the lack of approved process and resource in the land management body.

One-to-one interviews revealed volunteers who have not received any agreement for their trails feel there is currently a high risk of dwindling enthusiasm for formal engagement. This project is making land management partners aware of this risk and providing assistance to create the processes needed to allow land managers and trail associations to harness enthusiasm and direct volunteers' efforts to positive solutions.

Quote

Professional Trail Developer interview, Summer 2024

"Trail networks can bring significant economic benefits to local communities. Promoting these benefits helps build support for the trails."

The Three Pillars of Sustainability

In the ideal world, a well-planned trail system should be designed and built around the three pillars of sustainability:

- Environmental sustainability involves managing resources and ensuring the trail system sits in harmony with its host environment.
- Social sustainability focuses on the balance of wellbeing and benefit to the intended user group while not creating a negative impact on other users. It also includes integration with community facilities.
- Economic sustainability requires the system to have a funding pathway to ensure it remains fit for purpose and does not deteriorate over time, becoming dangerous to users or hazardous to the environment. It must include correct assessment of the maintenance required against the resource (funding and volunteers) available.

By understanding why the trails are needed, who will use them and what kind of experience is to be provided, the designer and land manager can collaborate to determine how the network fits alongside their operational and statutory obligations.

What Good Looks Like

Trail builders and land mangers interviewed cited several themes as essential in the ideal trail network. For the best chance of success and sustainability, both parties agreed the network should:

- Be designed and constructed in harmony with the landscape and environment.
- Offer a range of trail-grade choices with opportunities to progress a rider's skills.
- Integrate and engage with the local community.
- Meet the needs of local riders and/or the intended visitor group.
- Have good supporting infrastructure and connectivity.
- Have a planned resilient maintenance model.
- Be able to evolve to meet future needs.

Although it is easiest to start designing a new trail network, existing networks can be assessed and improved using this approach retrospectively.

Controlling Liability

It is essential that land managers control their exposure to liability from those using their land. By using good planning and applying best safety practice, risks can be mitigated without spoiling users' enjoyment or the natural feel of the environment.

For example:

- Risk of riders colliding with walkers at footpath crossings can be reduced by designing in speed control features and improving visibility.

Quote

Land Manager, Summer 2024

"The more similar trail associations are to our systems, the happier we are."

Landscape Limitations

While we recognise the need for greater trail provision across the UK, we must be realistic in what can be achieved where. While it is possible to provide entry to mid-grade trails in many landscapes, top end trail provision across UK is mostly dictated by the topography of the area. For instance, mountainous regions such as North Wales and Scotland are renowned for their long and technical trails, whereas regions with less total elevation can still provide short and steep downhill tracks, or dirt jumps, to challenge the more highly skilled rider. As technical preferences vary by region, it is essential to listen to the opinions of skilled riders to ensure provision meets the needs of the geography and community of each area.

Trail associations and land managers rightly pointed out that not all sites are topographically suitable for all users (and trail types), and there are safety benefits to separating more technically challenging trails from more family orientated areas.

Addressing the Grade Imbalance

Analysis of Trailforks data and informal discussions at workshops across the UK revealed intriguing examples of grade imbalance across the country.

For example:

- Sites with good beginner and intermediate trails were found lacking in options for riders to progress their skills any further.
- Other areas renowned for mountain biking had a wide variety of trails at the hardest grades making for a great visitor destination, but no easier provision to enable local newcomers to the sport.

Whilst it is not possible to build trails of every grade at every location, it would be advantageous for more areas around the UK to offer the variety and progress that riders value.

4.3
The Full Trail Development Process

When starting a new project, the full trail development process gives designers and land managers a framework to discuss requirements, desires and constraints, before groundwork starts. The full process can take over a year and can require input from a wide range of people and professions including forest operations teams, habitat assessment and expert trail designers.

Following the developing process can produce more robust and sustainable trails, but is costly and time consuming compared with a more ad hoc approach. Requirements vary by country and are too complex to condense into this report. Indeed, the complexity and sometimes conflicting requirements of the full design and planning process can be overwhelming for volunteer organisations, especially if applied heavy handedly. Greater standardisation of processes could help to achieve consistent, manageable workloads in this area.

Organisations such as The Association of Trail Builders, DIRTT, IMBA and DMBinS are recognised as experts in this field, and established trail building companies can provide the consultancy services required for a turn-key project.

Recommended reading:

IMBA – Trail Building: Sculpting for Success

DMBinS – Unauthorised MTB Trails Guidance



Image Credit: Campbell Coaching

4.4
What Support Is Required

Applying management plans retrospectively is challenging, but possible.

Looking at responses to surveys by land managers and trail association, the table shows both groups stating they needed extra support in common areas. The themes of communication and understanding, and building relationships were raised as essential foundations for any project to be successful. The need for additional knowledge and standardised process was also repeated, both in surveys and individual interviews.

Although the "trail association" model has been widely successful, as interviews progressed, we soon found a wider range of management approaches could provide greater flexibility for all involved. The model appropriate for a large world-class destination, for example, would be excessive for a small woodland used only by local riders.

The use of existing management systems was preferred by land managers, who need cost (and time) effective solutions which they trust to provide adequate legal protection. However, those running trail associations pointed out that a manageable workload is critical to encourage buy-in from volunteers, and to maintain support for taking a formal approach to trail management.

Riders recognised the value in forming legitimate organisations and strongly requested guidance on how to go about this, and what form the organisation should take. Land managers reflected this need, stating they would expect the NGB of a sport to take a lead role in this organisation. Underpinning the application of all management methods is the need to improve communication and understanding between all parties. This foundation work will have its own work package as we will see in chapter 5.

Deciding how to provide help to the wide range of management models available appeared daunting at first, but when feedback from land managers and trail associations was broken down common themes emerged. The Trail Management Support Table shows examples of what work is required at each level. This framework will drive the work packages in the second phase of this project, outlined in Chapter 5.

4.4.A The Top 5 Areas Needing Additional Support

	Land Managers	Trail Associations
1	Guidance on conveying your concerns regarding trail locations in relation to core activities and conservation constraint to the MTB community	Education to help improve relationships between riders and other trail users.
2	Education to help improve relations between riders and other trail users	Assistance and clarification regarding process to officialise the trails
3	Training on trail management, volunteer management, insurance, risk assessments etc.	Mentoring on designing, securing permissions and funding and construction of new trails
4	Signposting to sources of additional information to increase knowledge (ie meeting the needs of the local MTB population)	Signposting to sources of funding to facilitate an organisation
5	Guidance and templates to simplify the processes of documentation, insurance, risk assessments etc.	Education to improve behaviour and image of riders using the location

While support is required at all trail management levels, it is important to remember the the level chosen must be appropriate to the site. An organisation with multiple sites could have many management levels, where appropriate.

4.4.B Support Required at All Trail Management Levels

Management Method	Support	Benefit
All Levels	Influence key decision makers on top level benefits of MTBing.	Increase support for mountain bike provision and support at national and local governance levels, and with potential funders outside of the sport.
All Levels	Inform decision makers' perception of the sport.	Increase acceptance of the sport by moving attention away from the minority "extreme" and into the benefits provided by the middle ground.
All Levels	Facilitate reliable points of contact for MTB community.	Reliable communications builds trust between land managers and the MTB community, allowing discussion to move the whole management process forward.
Site Ownership	Experienced staff to provide guidance and lessons from past work.	Enabling businesses to invest in the sport and help develop thriving MTB economies.
Lease of Site	Experienced staff to facilitate negotiations and provide guidance on what land managers require.	Ease lease agreement process and help understand contracts.
Adoption by Volunteers	Agree and standardise adoption process, , set up and constitution of the group / organisation and legal requirements.	Reduced replication of effort. Increase confidence from land managers. Standardise template for insurers to quote for cover against.
Stewardship by Volunteers	Agree and standardise Stewardship agreement or Memorandum of Understanding.	Create an understanding of boundaries and thresholds in which this template can operate.
Partnership with other organisations at site	Work with other NGBs / Land Managers to determine how mountain bike provision fits positively within a shared space. Provide templates for use in such spaces.	Raises the professional image of mountain biking. Reduces replication of effort. Brings MTB to the table as "equal" among site users.
Permission	Create communication pathways to bring mountain biking into discussions on countryside management.	Raises the public image of mountain biking. Opens dialogue to gain local trail network improvements such as completing bridleway routes without trespass (outside Scotland). Deliverable in a shorter timescale than changing access legislation.
Tolerance	Create communication pathways to listen to land manager's constraints and concerns. Create education programme to improve MTBers and MTB industry's understanding of the countryside. Build trust between the land management and mountain bike communities at top level.	Improved tolerance of mountain bikers as countryside user groups. Reduced user conflict. Increased opportunities for moving up the trail management ladder and improving trail provision.
Do nothing	NA	NA
Bad Things	Raise awareness on areas such as wildlife crime or criminal damage of which riders may not be aware.	Reduce instances of environmental damage improves MTB's image with landowners and other site users.

4.5
Inspiring International Trail Networks

Looking around the globe, we found many inspiring examples of trail design. Here are just three. Great designs from the UK will be highlighted the project's second phase.

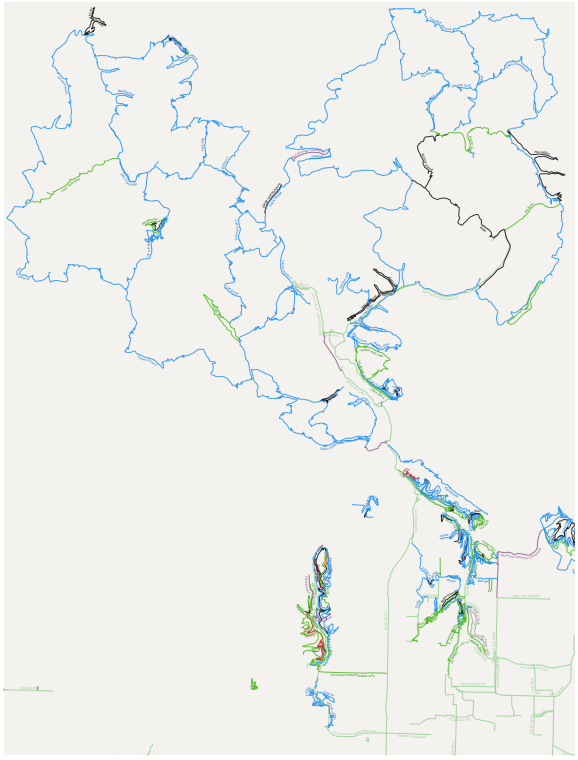
Urban & Peri Urban: Bentonville, AR, USA

Summary:
- Bentonville is world class example of a planned trail system encompassing urban and rural settings.
- Linked by a centre vehicle-free Greenway, the system comprises seven separate zones which can be ridden individually, or linked to make larger routes.
- Each zone has a range of trail grades, with zones nearest to residential areas offering more introductory and progressive options.
- Family focus is high, with bike-play grounds, coffee stops and art installations adding to the experience.
- Bentonville is highly regarded as an MTB destination and place to live, with its rapidly increasing* population linked directly to the quality of the trail network.

*US Census Data: 36k in 2010 – 58k in 2022

Advantages:
- Well planned zones.
- Centred around greenway as transport.
- Progressive.
- Serves both locals and as a destination.

Disadvantages:
- Massive investment facilitated by private funding may be difficult to replicate elsewhere.
- Lacks “sandbox” areas for un-structured trail building, especially valued by teens.

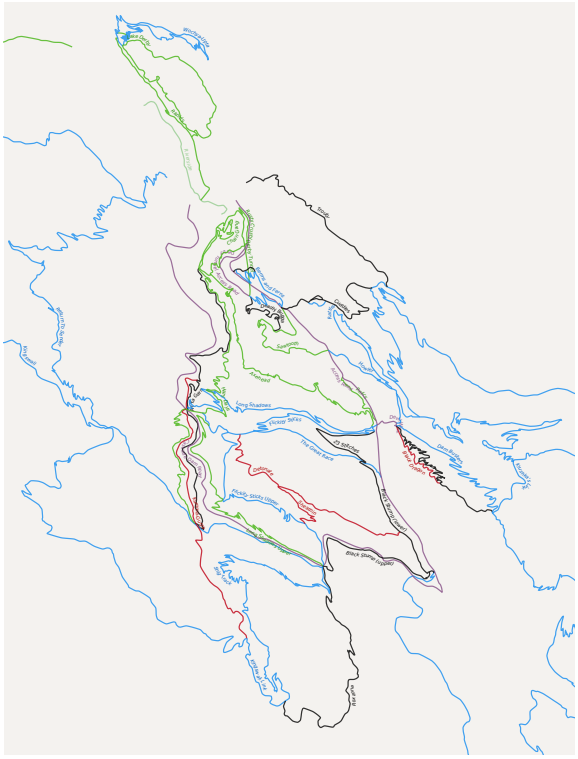


Rural: Blue Derby, TAS, AUS

Summary:
- Derby is a former tin mining community in Tasmania. Depopulated after mine closure, investment in mountain biking was used to drive community redevelopment of a rapidly depopulating area.
- Launched in 2015
- Hosted Enduro World Series in 2017 and 3x since.
- Trails are free at point of use and well-integrated into the local community.
- Highly regarded as an MTB tourism destination, the network has built a thriving symbiotic community of related businesses.

Advantages:
- Revitalised rural community
- Trails free at point of use

Disadvantages:
- Distant from centre of population



Urban: Trailcenter Aesch, Switzerland

Summary:

- An urban trail centre constructed within the boundaries of a disused football pitch.
- Part of the Trailnet Nordwestschweiz volunteer trails group, this urban bike park caters for all levels from beginners to professionals.
- Funded by membership and sponsorship from local business, this model packs a lot of riding into a small space.

Advantages:

- Trails for all levels.
- Based on concept of play and progression.
- Facilities include parking, camping and social areas.
- Has vibrant clubs and social scene.
- Can be replicated in the UK as shown by Wythenshawe Bike Park, developed as part of British Cycling's Places to Ride scheme.

Disadvantages:

- Being based on the concept of technical riding, rather than journey, may alienate some riders.
- Volunteer organisation structure could be at risk from external factors such as lack of funding.





Riders value both short rides on their doorstep, and travelling to visit new locations. *Image Credit: Bike Corris Ltd*

Recommendations and Actions

Although the conclusions and outputs from this report may be of primary focus, the benefits of this project taking the initiative to integrate with stakeholders cannot be understated. Many land managers were impressed by mountain biking continuing to improve its integration with the environment and find its place.

Quote

Land Manager, Summer 2024

"We welcome this engagement. It has been needed for a long time."



Forward thinking volunteers and land managers have produced highly successful results, which can shape best practice. *Image Credit: Bike Corris Ltd*

5.1
Recommendations Across UK

The core theme revealed across the UK by this Project's engagement and research was the need for greater understanding and trust between mountain bikers, land managers and other stakeholders in the shared spaces that mountain biking occupies.

Analysis of workshop, surveys and one-to-one interview revealed further key area which must be addressed in order improve the sustainability, security and suitability of the UK Trail Network.

Project observations of where assistance is required:

Policy:
- Educate decision makers on the benefits of mountain biking.
- Explain that mountain biking covers a wide range of risk levels, and the actual risk exposure is worthwhile in terms of socioeconomic benefits of the sport.
- Demonstrate the social and economic value of mountain biking to increase motivation to invest.

Process:
- Continue to develop trust between land managers and the mountain bike community.
- Create and support reliable communication channels between the parties.
- Explore a range of management models (Lease, Adopt, Stewardship, Tolerance).
- Standardise the process for selection and implementation of chosen model.

Practical:
- Educate the mountain bike population, press and industry on the need for improved rider responsibility.
- Recognising that land managers are under increasing work pressure with fewer resources, and that volunteers have restrictions on time and capacity.
- Reduce replication of effort for land managers and volunteers.
- Establish common processes to aid creating the appropriate organisation for the given management model.
- Carry out detailed studies of successful sites and different management levels to capture and share best practice and lessons learned.
- Consult with the mountain bike industry to investigate national and local mechanisms to fund trail maintenance and development.

Several levels on the management ladder are already well understood, but others, such as stewardship and partnership working, are still in early days. As mountain biking re-evaluates its values and relationships with other users, there is a growing professional expertise within the sport which can offer guidance and expertise. This project will develop pathways to connect experts within the industry with external stakeholders to increase knowledge and understanding.



The mountain bike industry and media need to provide greater support to provide more sustainable trails.

5.2
Key Recommendations by Country

By engaging with all four home nations individually, the project has gained awareness of the different challenges and opportunities with each country and can recommend key priorities for each:

England:

- Publish country specific mini-report showing survey and one-to-one analysis specific to England.
- Explore creating greater opportunities for people to ride closer to home in urban areas.
- Work with British Cycling to see if/how practices from Places to Ride and other areas such as BMX Freestyle Facilities or Community Groups can be applied to MTB facilities
- Work with Forestry England and volunteer organisations to develop frameworks and template documents to allow volunteer organisations to work more effectively with the land manager.

Northern Ireland

- Publish country specific mini-report showing survey and one-to-one analysis specific to Northern Ireland
- Explore the potential for formal collaboration between land managers, NGBs and other MTB representatives within NI.
- Present a UK wide range of case studies and toolkits and help explore suitability of these options for application in Northern Ireland.
- Continue to engage to improve and grow access for mountain biking where appropriate within the public estate – including assessing existing provision and presenting a range of access agreement models used across the UK for NI stakeholders to consider.

Scotland

- Publish country specific mini-report showing survey and one-to-one analysis specific to Scotland.
- Continued investigation of the stewardship/adoption/lease management concepts to feed into Sustainable Trail Plans and develop these plans beyond the current pilot area.
- Explore creating greater opportunities for people to ride closer to home in urban areas, including investigating how mountain bike trails can be integrated into active travel networks.
- Work with Scottish Cycling, DMBinS and sportscotland to understand the need for a Cycling Facilities Fund 2 with further support for strategic projects and community led trail developments.

Wales:

- Publish country specific mini-report showing survey and one-to-one analysis specific to Wales.
- Engage with Beicio Cymru to support the creation of a “Developing Mountain Biking in Wales” organisation.
- Work with NRW and volunteer organisations to develop frameworks and template documents to allow volunteer organisations to work more smoothly with the land manager.
- Provide advice to NRW to ensure the value of the trail network on its estate is fully realised in the forthcoming reorganisation.

5.3
Work Packages for Phase 2

To help achieve the changes needed in each country, the UK Trails Project will work with partners to deliver work packages that are feasible, affordable and have positive impact. The Steering Group have determined that current resource dictates areas able to make the greatest difference must be prioritised.

Work packages to be delivered in Phase 2 are:

WP1	
Title	Mini Report for each home nation
Aim	Analyse survey data and one-to-one interviews by country to provide greater insight for stakeholders in each home nation. Issue follow up reports in PDF form for public use.

WP2	
Title	Definition of Management Levels (Lease, Adoption, Stewardship and Tolerance), their requirements and method for selection.
Aim	Delivery of Case Studies at each management level to understand successes and lessons learned. Creation of a "management framework" into which regional and landowner specific processes and boundaries can be dropped. Creation of tool to aid land managers and MTB groups in selecting the most appropriate model for their site.

WP3	
Title	"Forming a Trail Organisation" starter pack
Aim	Create a short guidance for mountain bikers that explains what is needed to create a valid group that takes responsibility for its trails at the management level required.

WP4	
Title	Provide training for trail associations
Aim	Provide assurance that Trail Associations are competent through improved training that meets the requirements of the land management community.

WP5	
Title	"What is MTB" Information Document
Aim	Create a one-page document to educate decision makers on the culture & societal value of mountain biking to help establish effective partnerships to secure the sport's future.

WP6	
Title	"What is Land Management" Information Pack
Aim	To explain a land manager's constraints, concerns and other responsibilities in a way that will assist MTB professionals and media in understanding how the sport provides the best opportunities within the landscape.

WP7	
Title	MTB Education Programme
Aim	Improve understanding and acceptance of mountain biking in shared spaces by creating positive behaviour change. Potential themes include: "Do one lap for the trails"; "Be nice. Say hi." ; "Don't be a dick!"

WP8	
Title	Connection of MTB NGBs and learning from Others
Aim	Create a short study of NGBs from other outdoor sports to learn good examples of governance, negotiation and communication with land managers. Facilitate a meeting of all NGBs in the MTB governance space to discuss priorities and determine who is focusing on which parts of the sport.

WP9	
Title	Insurance
Aim	Use output from WP2 to determine what work will be undertaken at each level so insurers have a solid description of the cover required.

WP10	
Title	Provide assistance to NRW
Aim	Assist NRW to realise the full value of its trail network to the organisation, site leaseholders, riders and local communities alike.

Conclusion

The UK Trails project arrived at a critical time in mountain biking's history. For over thirty years, the sport thrived as a counterculture, providing racing and relaxation, escape and adventure.

During the Covid lockdowns, more people than ever benefited from mountain biking, but this highlighted the need for better trail management to reduce conflict with other users and to prevent trails being loved to death.

Across the UK, volunteers and professionals have worked hard to address these challenges and successful pockets of understanding and compromise have emerged. Greater support is now needed to make the whole trail network more sustainable, secure and suitable for future generations.

Engagement with riders through a 2,500 strong survey revealed that while almost all valued the physical and mental benefits of riding, only around a quarter were actively engaged in looking after their trails. A further quarter were interested in helping to support their trails, but reported lacking time to achieve this, or opportunities to get involved.

Trail associations were also surveyed and key figures in the trail building community interviewed. Their responses echoed the feelings of riders – despite heavy investment of time and effort by volunteers willing to take the lead, positive engagement from land managers was inconsistent. Some areas in the UK reported excellent success stories , due in part to land managers being willing to take a risk. Other organisations had been operating for nearly a decade on little more than goodwill. With much of the UK trail network resting on the work of a small number of volunteers, more support is required.

The land management community has been criticised for restricting trail associations, however the vast and challenging demands a land manager must balance are highlighted in this report. Land managers must reach a compromise between operating their core business, meeting ever increasing legal constraints and dealing with recreation on their sites. After 14 years of funding cuts to public sector forestry bodies, management time has been dramatically reduced, and investment in recreation, however desirable, must be seen to add value to be viable.

The need to invest in trails is clearer than ever, but who should pay?

Over the past 25 years, significant public sector investment in the trail network has produced a lot of good in terms of improvement to health, strengthening rural economies and enabling athletic performance. In difficult financial times the value of mountain biking to the UK needs to be recognised as investing public money for public benefit.

However, there is also the opportunity to use private finance to increase benefit through match funding or direct development of trails.

In 2024 UK cycle sales rose by 12%, making the industry worth just short of £1bn / yr (REF. MINTEL / Cycling Industry News). MTB's make up approximately a third of this market, but despite selling bikes for use on un-managed trails, and using those trails in advertising, the UK Cycle Industry (with some exceptions) is yet to make a serious financial contribution to cover the costs involved in trail management.

Riders themselves understand that trails maintenance needs funding, with 75% of those surveyed stating they would be willing to make a financial contribution to maintaining the trails they enjoy.

By combining public funding, bike industry support and rider contribution, we can make a strong case for greater investment into the future trail network. We must take the opportunity to enable contributions from public funds, the UK cycle industry and riders to contribute to trail development more widely. Private operations and joint ventures must also be encouraged and assisted.

This project strives for a future where mountain biking can provide the same joy of freedom and adventure that the earlier pioneers experienced, but which can coexist with other users and make a positive contribution to protect the shared spaces it enjoys.

By creating pathways to allow the right people to develop and manage the right trails in the right time and place, mountain biking can improve the nation's health and wellbeing by reducing car use and the associated pollution and carbon footprint. It can also unite communities, both through economic redevelopment of post-industrial areas and by fostering a sense of identity and belonging in rural communities.

Moving into Phase Two, we shall introduce work packages to:

- Foster open communication between land managers and the MTB community,
- Educate Ministers, Councillors and other key decisions makers on the essential elements of mountain biking and the benefits it brings.
- Work with land managers to develop management models appropriate to different site uses.
- Work with NGBs and other organisations to create pathways and processes to develop and apply these models.
- Ease workloads for all involved by reduction of duplication and increasing the standardisation.
- Assist volunteers with training to increase professionalism and trust from land managers.
- Educate the MTB community on how best to promote the sport through their actions and interactions with other trail users.
- Impress upon the cycle industry on the vunerable and deteriorating state the UK trail network is in.
- Explore opportunities for business engagement and financial support.

In a commercial forest, a tree has a lifespan of 80 years. In half that time, mountain biking has evolved from a niche pastime to a global sporting phenomenon. Previously seen as the rebellious child of the cycling world, mountain biking has traded on its anti-establishment love of freedom and adventure.

Now entering maturity, the sport has started to accept its complex identity and began to address its naive relationship with others in the spaces it shares. This project will continue to build the collaboration needed to let mountain biking demonstrate it can take responsibility for its actions and work with others toward a shared goal of improving society.



By working together, the next generation can continue to enjoy our love of trails. *Image Credit: Forestry England*



This landmark document presents the results of project manager, David Evans's, engagement with members of the mountain bike and land management communities over the last year, with over 2000 survey responses, 8 public workshops, and 30 interviews with key stakeholders across the UK.

It paints a broad picture of mountain biking, explaining how mountain biking benefits individuals and communities while outlining the challenges to the trail network. It also introduces the work packages the UK Trails Project will deliver to help develop a more sustainable and secure future for the sport.

'The Trail' provides an interesting and informative read for everyone with an interest mountain bike trail provision.