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Rights of Way Circular 1/09 Guidance for Local Authorities. Version : 1

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Deletion or downgrading of ways shown on the definitive map and statement

4.30 The procedures for identifying and recording public rights of way are comprehensive and thorough. Authorities will be aware of the need to maintain a map and statement of the highest attainable accuracy. Whilst the procedures do not preclude the possibility that rights of way may need to be downgraded or deleted, particularly where recent research has uncovered previously unknown evidence or where the review procedures have never been implemented, it is unlikely that such a situation would have lain undiscovered over, what is in most cases, many decades without having been previously brought to light.

4.31 Once prepared, and until subsequently revised, the definitive map and statement is conclusive evidence in rights of way disputes. Authorities are under a duty to make an order modifying the definitive map and statement where they have evidence that a public right of way should be downgraded or deleted. They may discover evidence themselves or evidence may be presented with an application to modify the map and statement.

4.32 Notwithstanding the clear starting point in relation to the possible deletion or downgrading of ways described in paragraphs 4.30 and 4.31, the powers in section 53(3) of the 1981 Act include the making of orders to delete or downgrade rights of way shown on the definitive map and statement in cases where evidence shows that rights did not exist at the time when they were first shown on the map. In making an order the authority must be able to say, in accordance with Section 53(3) (c) (ii) or (iii), that a highway of a particular description ought to be shown on the map and statement as a highway of a different description; or that there is no public right of way over land shown in the map and statement as a highway of any description.

4.33 The evidence needed to remove what is shown as a public right from such an authoritative record as the definitive map and statement – and this would equally apply to the downgrading of a way with “higher” rights to a way with “lower” rights, as well as complete deletion – will need to fulfill certain stringent requirements.

These are that:

- the evidence must be new – an order to remove a right of way cannot be founded simply on the re-examination of evidence known at the time the definitive map was surveyed and made.
- the evidence must be of sufficient substance to displace the presumption that the definitive map is correct;
- the evidence must be cogent.

While all three conditions must be met they will be assessed in the order listed. Before deciding to make an order, authorities must take into consideration all other relevant evidence available to them concerning the status of the right of way and they must be satisfied that the evidence shows on the balance of probability that the map or statement should be modified.

4.34 Applications may be made to an authority under section 53(5) of the 1981 Act to make an order to delete or downgrade a right of way. Where there is such an application, it will be for those who contend that there is no right of way or that a right of way is of a lower status than that shown, to prove that the map requires amendment due to the discovery of evidence, which when considered with all other relevant evidence clearly shows that the right of way should be downgraded or deleted. The authority is required, by paragraph 3 of Schedule 14 to the Act, to investigate the matters stated in the application; however it is not for the authority to demonstrate that the map reflects the true rights, but for the applicant to show that the definitive map and statement should be revised to delete or downgrade the way.

4.35 In the case of deletions, earlier guidance indicated that a case for presumed dedication could be established on a way that had previously been recorded on the definitive map but which was found, subsequently, to have been recorded in error. This was based on the belief that user, between the time of the first recording of the way on the definitive map and statement and the time when it was determined that an error had been made could give rise to presumed dedication. The date of first recording means either the date of the original publication of the first definitive map; the date of publication of a review; or the relevant date of an order adding the path to the definitive map, whichever was appropriate. The date of first recording would have been the first point in time at which it could have been legally recognised that rights over the way were recorded in the form being challenged. Defra believes that this advice was wrong. Defra's view is that use of the way in such circumstances cannot be seen to be as of right, as rights that cannot be prevented cannot be acquired. It is not possible for a right of way to be dedicated for the purposes of section 31 of the Highways Act 1980 when use of the way is by virtue of it having been shown on the definitive map but subsequently removed.